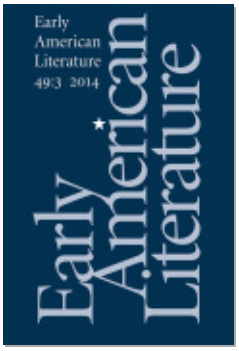
Poverty, Providence, and the State of Welfare: Plotting Parabolic Social Mobility in the Early Nineteenth-Century American Novel



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Plotting Parabolic Social Mobility in the Early Nineteenth-Century American Novel

> There appears to be a certain limit of endurance where we are allotted to pause; after which we rise in the scale of existence, until the balance of prosperity once more preponderates. I found myself by an accident in an eminent degree . . . placed in the lap of wealth, and sheltered from the howlings of want and indigence.
> —George Watterston, *Glencarn; or, The Disappointments of Youth* (1810)

Toward the end of *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness* (1799), Charles Brockden Brown's heroine, Constantia Dudley, receives a generous bequest in the will of a friend. For most of the novel Constantia has been struggling to maintain a state of "bare subsistence" (67). Reduced to penury by a wealthy father's bankruptcy and illness at the close of the first chapter, she has had to endure numerous trials, including food rationing, exposure to yellow fever, and the sale of treasured possessions. But the sudden accession to "exclusive property of a house and its furniture . . . with funds adequate to her plentiful maintenance" that takes place in the final part of the book finds her "once more seated in the bosom of affluence" (177). As if to underscore the cyclical nature of this narrative the "rural retreat" inherited by Constantia used, in fact, to belong to her father (177). Having been sold off to Stephen Dudley's creditors it has traveled through the hands of the eponymous Ormond to his mistress, Helena, who upon her suicide bequeathes it to the Dudley family in recognition of Constantia's beneficence. In this respect, Constantia's economic rehabilitation may be unforeseen but it is decidedly not unearned. Her sympathetic treatment of the sexually compromised Helena, as well as her more general fortitude under trying circumstances, is tendered by the novel as an essential qualification for her restoration to "leisure and independence" (177). Like the other tales of financial ruin and redemption that I discuss here, Brown's *Ormond* ultimately remedies the problem of poverty through the rhetoric of moral virtue.

Such tales constitute a neglected early nineteenth-century subgenre that can be dubbed the "parabolic social mobility narrative." Of the forty or so novels published by American writers between 1799 and 1812, more than a dozen fit the template discernible in *Ormond*. Although it is almost the only one of these texts to have attracted sustained critical attention, then, Brown's novel is far from unique. Books such as Helena Wells's *Constantia Neville; or, The West Indian* (1800), S. S. B. K. Wood's *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron* (1800), and Martha Meredith Read's *Margaretta; or, The Intricacies of the Heart* (1807) also begin with a (typically female) protagonist who has been set adrift on a journey down the social scale through the death or insolvency of a father figure. Either literally or figuratively orphaned, the lead characters in the "parabolic mobility narrative" must confront imminent destitution despite their best efforts to fend for themselves, and on a romantic plane must often struggle with the multiple complications arising from their thwarted love for someone who is better off than them. These economic and emotional challenges are invariably compounded, meanwhile, by an affluent relative or suitor who persecutes the protagonist in various ways, ranging from slander to kidnap. Yet just as the protagonist seems to be reaching a nadir of indigence or isolation these novels enact a miraculous restitution. Characteristically, after all the tribulation of the preceding pages, a key figure in the narrative is abruptly revealed to be a long-lost relation of the principal, and with this delayed recognition comes a restoration of the protagonists' former status and a reconciliation with their true love. Chastened by their experience of poverty, the protagonists of the parabolic mobility narrative are finally posited as bringing a worthiness and merit to their recovered property, which the wealthy villains of the story conspicuously lack. To borrow some lines from *Ormond*, they are "now cured of those prejudices which . . . early prosperity had instilled, and which had flowed from luxurious indulgences" and have "learned to estimate [themselves] at [their] true value, and to sympathize with sufferings which [they] had partaken of" (178). Each of the novels I will be considering here works its own variation on this general plot, of course, but to the extent that they all share the same fantasy of recouped prosperity they accord with Fredric Jameson's definition of a genre as "a formal conjuncture" that serves "the function of inventing imaginary . . . 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (85, 64).

If the texts I discuss do form an aesthetically coherent group, how-

ever, and if they do speak to a culturally important circle of anxieties, then why has the parabolic mobility narrative been overlooked until now? The answer, perhaps, lies in the abiding concern these texts display for the anatomization of social class. "As a mode of historical analysis of early North America and the Atlantic world, class is dead—or so it has been reported for the last two decades," Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith have recently noted. "A combination of scholarly critiques and global structural changes has enervated a once vigorous historiography relating to class formation and struggles in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries" (1). But the rise of postmodernism and deindustrialization notwithstanding, class has always been a problematic category in the American setting. Partly fueled by a selective reading of Revolutionary-era writers like Franklin and Crèvecoeur, a deeply ingrained exceptionalist tradition in US historiography sees the nation as free from the social inequalities of the Old World. Denied explanatory purchase by figures ranging from Francis Bowen to Louis Hartz, the concept of "class" has thus tended to be subsumed within other categories. As Amy Schrager Lang has put it, "however 'real' the structure of class in America, Americans have no 'native discourse' of class in which to render their experience of that structure. Lacking a vocabulary, as it were, in which to express the experience of class . . . and deeply committed, moreover, to liberal individualism and the promise of open mobility, Americans displace the reality of class into discourses of race, gender, [and] ethnicity" (6).

This pattern of displacement has undoubtedly done a disservice to novels like *Constantia Neville* and *Margaretta*, which, for all their fabulizing of upward mobility, and all their fostering of feminine discourses, also insist on conveying the harrowing experience of poverty. To the degree that they attempt an unfamiliar articulation of downward mobility, in other words, these novels present bourgeois values as exclusionary and unstable rather than egalitarian and hegemonic. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the parabolic mobility narrative emerges at the very historical moment when the myth of America as a classless society was still coming together out of the ashes of a pre-Revolutionary order wherein epistemological distinctions between the "great" and the "few" took precedence over economically inflected delineations of social status.

Importantly, situating the literary culture of the post-Revolutionary period in this context can help to complicate the axiomatic but undertheo-

rized contention that "the nineteenth-century novel is quintessentially the genre of the middle class" (Jehlen 49). Thanks to its wider emphasis on the middle class as a "set of competing interests, which . . . changes shape and density, rather than a static, homogenous category," Stephen Shapiro's *The Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel* (2008), for one, offers an impressively nuanced account of "the links between a period's infra-class competition and cross-class struggle and [the] cycles of the novel's relative expansion and decline or generic alterations" (7). Yet strikingly, Shapiro—like most students of the early American novel—fails to include fiction from the first two decades of the nineteenth century in his analytical purview. Seeking to delineate "the presence of a social transformation during the 1790s that remains poorly articulated in existing narratives of American cultural history," he advances his case for the significance of this period by arguing that "the early American novel sprang . . . unexpectedly into published existence during the 1790s only to fall into a long decline after 1800 until its resuscitation in the 1820s" (4, 2). In fact, this empirical claim is misleading, since more American novels were actually published between 1800 and 1810 than in the previous decade. But it is a claim that has nonetheless commonly served to reinforce a conception of the last decade of the eighteenth century as the early Republic's literary high point. Though Shapiro may be preoccupied with the relation of the early American novel to a "circumatlantic world-system" (4), while previous critical studies have largely focused on the form's relation to a burgeoning nation-state, in both cases the 1790s function as a metonym for the American novelist's dynamic interrogation of the Revolution and its consequences. When set against the pressing ideological tensions that seem to be analogized in the empathetic sentimentalism of Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) or the terrifying gothicism of Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), the concerns of the early nineteenth-century novel have thus tended to pale by comparison.

As Duncan Faherty has astutely observed, the "canonical interregnum" of 1800 to 1820 arises, at least in part, from the difficulty of reading these later texts, and their "socially conservative attempts to manage . . . the radical possibilities of an emerging democracy," as "reflections of familiar historical flashpoints" (16, 5). Indeed, the paradigmatic pull of the 1790s can be felt even in those critical works that do make an effort to stretch their chronological frame into the 1800s. Karen Weyler's *Intricate*

Relations (2004), for instance, contains some powerful analysis of the way in which novels like *Dorval* (1801) and *Moreland Vale* (1801) "synthesized the sexual and economic anxieties associated with the rise of bourgeois consciousness," but her treatment of these books as generically continuous with earlier texts like *The Coquette* also leads to a degree of misinterpretation (2). Her argument that the need "to be sexually and emotionally chaste" is the "primary challenge" faced by female characters in the early American novel, while "the challenge male characters face is to be economically virtuous," to take one example, obscures the economic virtue demanded of heroines in post-1800 fiction by overlaying them with a seduction paradigm more pertinent to previous novels. My intent in positioning novels like *Dorval* and *Moreland Vale* as part of a generically discrete body of parabolic mobility narratives is, of course, to avoid such blurring. For by granting these texts a measure of thematic and contextual integrity we can begin to see their exploration of what Weyler calls "the extended *absence* of capital" as more pervasive and distinctive than she recognizes (185).[1]

In gathering these texts under the rubric of the parabolic mobility narrative, this essay attempts to recover their shared and very specific contextual resonance, but in following Ralph Cohen's suggestion that "genre concepts in theory and practice arise, change, and decline for historical reasons" we must also consider what resonance this particular genre may have for our own critical moment (204). In this respect, as well as sharing Faherty's desire to complicate "[our] thinking about the development of early American literature" by filling in the gaps of the canonical interregnum, this essay seeks to plot the key traits of the parabolic mobility narrative as a means of asserting class as a dominant concern of this literature, rather than a peripheral or intermittent one (18). When set against the ongoing turmoil caused by the economic slump of 2008, and the anxious debate about deteriorating social mobility it has engendered, the extravagant financial crashes and ascents contained in the texts analyzed here perhaps begin to seem less easy to overlook. Most certainly, these texts become recognizable as part of a long and continuing tradition of claiming, commiserating with, and delimiting the category of the middle class. More specifically, as I will argue below, the parabolic mobility narrative plots a complex moral rhetoric around class identity, which serves to underline the degree to which social formations in the United States have often veiled structural inequality in the language of personal virtue. Picking up

on this sleight of hand in the first part of my essay, I consider the connections between the parabolic mobility narrative and the ideal of "industrious poverty" that social reformers were formulating at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The following section then looks more closely at how the bourgeois self-discipline being modeled in these narratives strategically privileges the spiritual value of industriousness over its material benefit through a recursion to Providence. By focusing on how this fortuitous realignment of wealth and virtue in the parabolic mobility narrative operates through a logic of familial recognition, my third section argues that the nation's emergent welfare institutions were subtly contested by middle-class individualism. And finally, in a brief coda I consider the ebbing of the parabolic mobility narrative in the mid-1810s and its later recalibration in other generic forms.

PARABOLIC SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE INDUSTRIOUS POOR

An all too brief synopsis of the lesson that the parabolic mobility narrative teaches might state that after having to "descend from the costly abodes where she holds her court, to the humble shed of industry," the heroine of such novels is ultimately grateful to be "placed . . . in that moderate sphere of life, which makes it incumbent on [her] to keep [her] passions under perpetual restraint" (Wells 2: 24, 2: 416). Incrementally stripped of the vanity of riches by their experience of privation, the protagonists of texts like *Constantia Neville*, from which these lines are borrowed, enact a journey toward bourgeois values; they gain by accretion a new respect for middle-class mores, which have to a certain extent always been immanent in their earlier selves. While we can usefully gloss the parabolic mobility narrative as a lesson in class formation, however, its construction of a bourgeois identity remains strikingly disconnected from any organized model of political action. By folding the needs of the lower orders into the interests of the bourgeoisie through the protagonist's climactic rise from poverty to ease, these novels effectively forgo a constitutive understanding of social conflict. Instead, they exhibit something closer to the ideological configuration that Anthony Giddens has labeled "class awareness" (111). "'Class awareness,' . . . does *not* . . . signify a particular class affiliation, or the recognition that there exist other classes, characterized by different attitudes, beliefs, and styles of life," Giddens writes. "The difference between

class awareness and class consciousness is a fundamental one, because class awareness may take the form of *a denial of the existence or reality of classes*. . . . The class awareness of the middle class, insofar as it involves beliefs which place a premium upon individual responsibility and achievement, is of this order" (111).

Though it may skirt over national variations in the influence of "class awareness," this theoretical rubric, as historians such as Stuart Blumin have noted, is peculiarly relevant to the American scene, wherein "the concept of the middle class, historically and in the present, is both pervasive and elusive; indeed, . . . elusive precisely because it is pervasive" (2). The parabolic mobility narrative, for example, tends to universalize the authority of the bourgeoisie through two complementary strategies. On one hand, those aristocrats or plebeians who continue to resist the appeal of middle-class sobriety are typically removed, either by death or exile, from American society by the end of the story. And on another hand, those suprabourgeois characters who remain are typically assimilated into the benevolent paternalism of the middle-class family unit; like the protagonists of these novels, they are revealed as possessing an inner core of moral temperance. Taking Giddens's dictum that "the greater the degree of 'closure' of mobility chances . . . the more this facilitates the formation of identifiable classes" as our guide, we can thus see that parabolic mobility narratives offer an impression of a classless social fluidity, when in fact their characters simply return, or acquiesce, to a dominant middling strata (107). Indeed, the historical data on social mobility that we have from the early nineteenth century echoes this underlying pattern of stasis, for despite the chances for material gain opened up by an emerging capitalist economy, a range of occupational and proprietorial constraints checked, and even worsened, the possibility of betterment for the majority of Americans. As Allen Kulikoff has noted: "While social mobility may have been relatively easy for a few immediately after the Revolution, these extraordinary opportunities tended to disappear as population returned to its pre-Revolutionary size. . . . Wealth was less evenly distributed than before the war, and the proportion of wealth held by the poor and middling classes declined" (409).

The parabolic mobility narrative, then, might be understood as offering a form of imaginary compensation for these frustrated ambitions. With its moral certitude and its miraculous incursions of wealth, this fictional

genre seems to speak to the social anxieties of its moment in a particularly intense fashion. Such a reading certainly accords with Richard Brodhead's persuasive claim that "at a time when it was in no sense socially normal the new middle-class world undertook to propagate itself as American 'normality'" through the "creation of a newly central place *for* literature among its organizing habits and concerns" (27, 44). But while Brodhead sees this program of middle-class consolidation as being inaugurated in the "feminine domesticity" of sentimental novels and educational tracts from the 1830s, I would argue that it was launched a couple of decades earlier, in the texts I am considering here (32). As *Constantia Neville*'s approving reference to the "moderate sphere of life" as a place where "passions" are kept "under perpetual restraint" might suggest, by the 1800s the encrypted status anxiety of the seduction novel and picaresque fiction was already giving way to a more assertive codification of middle-class values. This earlier form of self-definition, as I see it, has much in common with the "disciplinary intimacy" that Brodhead identifies as a key to "the thinking of the American middle class . . . in the antebellum decades" (17). For in a characteristic oscillation between the recognition of class and its denial, the parabolic mobility narrative offers a sympathetic rendering of "virtuous poverty" that also functions as a chastening behavioral norm (Wells 2: 22).

In order to see more clearly how this edict of "virtuous poverty" was laid down we first need to pursue Brodhead's suggestion that "middle-class disciplinary imaginings . . . helped shape and empower the actual institutions through which that group could impress its ways on others" (26). The parabolic mobility narrative, after all, bears a potentially constitutive similarity to the punitive account of lower-class shiftlessness that had emerged among social reformers by the start of the nineteenth century. The propensity to institutionalize those who could not support themselves financially was, as Robert E. Cray has noted, "virtually non-existent" in seventeenth-century America (35). Drawing on the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601, the early colonies established a "parish" system wherein municipal authorities had an obligation to care for the least affluent members of the community. Poor relief was a temporary and informal process, delivered through friends, families, and congregations, and the most stringent regulations pertaining to it were intended to prevent vagrants and indigent strangers from claiming such localized assistance. All this began to change in the

early eighteenth century, however, as rapid demographic growth, general economic recession, and a range of public health crises propelled more and more people into destitution, with ever larger numbers of able-bodied men now to be found among the traditionally vulnerable ranks of single women, orphaned children, and the infirm.

Before the mid-eighteenth century, Americans had tended to hold to the belief that poverty was the divinely ordained lot of the many, and that it helped to knit the social order together through its stimulus to charity and obligation. By the eve of the Revolution, though, the self-disciplining imperatives of capitalism had initiated a growing trend toward blaming the poor themselves for their misfortune. In this respect, the system of "outdoor" (noninstitutional) relief went into decline not only because communal ties lost their earlier purchase but because social reformers began to see "outrelief" as rewarding failure rather than encouraging hard work. As Benjamin Franklin succinctly put the point in 1766, "the best way of doing good to the poor, is not making them easy *in* poverty, but leading or driving them *out* of it" (279). Concomitantly, then, the language that Americans used to describe the poor became more discriminating, a move in line with the ambition of reformers to better categorize the destitute, and the desire of the modern almshouse to better regiment its charges. "Increasingly," Karin Wulf argues, "authorities and philanthropists contrasted a shocking inclination to 'live in Sloth and Idleness' with 'industrious' poverty, finding the poor exhibiting more of the former and less of the latter as the eighteenth century advanced" (173). Thus by 1796 the managers of Philadelphia's Blockley Almshouse could declare that their wards "have only fallen into poverty from habits of Idleness, which it is possible with due attention to turn into those of industry" (qtd. in Alexander 119). Indigence, in short, was the result of a moral deficiency that required pedagogical rectification.

The post-Revolutionary almshouse is a particularly obvious instantiation of this pedagogy, of course. Social reformers like those who ran the Blockley viewed "indoor" (institutional) relief as a means of educating its recipients about the impropriety of their previous conduct, and attempted to make their wards economically productive by getting them to work at various tasks designed to defray the cost of their maintenance. But we can also see a more subtle and complex variation on this pedagogy at play in the parabolic mobility narrative. In directing themselves toward, and de-

picting, individuals from the same social strata responsible for the renovation of the welfare system, these novels offer an internal articulation cum illustration of industrious poverty's ideological valence. Consider, for example, the lesson imparted by Constantia Dudley in *Ormond*. Constantia's slide into penury is a direct consequence of her father's failure to maintain an appropriate work ethic. In a quest to avoid "the imaginary indignity which attended . . . mechanical employments," Stephen Dudley hands the running of his apothecary over to an apprentice, who subsequently absconds with the business's profits (40). With Stephen waylaid by a bout of blindness that symbolically denotes his inattention to the family's finances, it then falls to his daughter to begin their reascent up the social scale. Having observed at first hand "the fascination of wealth, and the delusiveness of self-confidence," Constantia is determined to foment a humbler and more conscientious attitude toward labor: "She refused no personal exertion to the common benefit. She incited her father to diligence, as well by her example as by her exhortations; suggested plans, and superintended or assisted in the execution of them" (53). To this extent *Ormond* accords entirely with groups like New York's Society for the Relief of Poor Widows, which can be found, a year later, issuing edicts about how the lower sort "must now learn economy from adversity" (qtd. in Mohl 165). But importantly Brown's novel also situates this edict at the turning point in a transition from a negative model of bourgeois ease to a more positive one. Foregrounding the influence of paradigmatic behavior in a way that its nonfictional counterparts do not, the parabolic mobility narrative insists on the value of middle-class as well as lower-class self-discipline. Thus even when Constantia is restored to prosperity, and "enjoyed opportunities of extending as far as she pleased her connections with the gay and opulent," we are told that "her life was still eminently distinguished by love of privacy and habits of seclusion" (185).[2]

Indeed, Brown makes the volitional adaptation of industrious poverty to middle-class virtue that characterizes the parabolic mobility narrative clearer still in his later novel *Jane Talbot* (1801). There the eponymous heroine is left without the "decent independence" she expects to inherit from her father when her brother Frank loses the family fortune in "gaming, sensuality and the lowest vices" (40, 19). But rather than being plunged straight into a downward spiral, Jane is confronted with a morally loaded choice between wealth and penury. Her dead mother's friend Mrs. Fielder,

who has "a considerable fortune and no family," offers to adopt her, though only on condition that she break all ties with her suitor, Henry Colden (7). What follows is an extended meditation on "the rewards of self-denial" (4). For much of the novel Jane struggles to reconcile the different sacrifices determining between love and duty would impose on her. In the wake of Mrs. Fielder's increasingly authoritarian behavior, however, she finally decides to reconcile herself to a lower position on the social scale. "I look forward to poverty without dismay," she writes to her former guardian. "So sanguine am I that I even cherish the belief that the privation of much of that ease which I have hitherto enjoyed, will strengthen my mind" (95). This confident embrace of hardship is significant, not only because when Jane earlier "pondered on the evils of poverty" she "contracted a terror of it not easily controlled" but because it points to the spiritualization of concepts of prosperity the novel is attempting to engender (32). Just as Colden refuses the money that Mrs. Fielder offers him to leave Jane alone, in favor of "other moral goods," so Jane comes to understand that "splendor and abundance . . . contribute less to [our] happiness, [than] that industry and frugality which supplies their place" (87, 99). What she realizes, in effect, is that Colden's ability to detach himself from "all corporeal passions" is not a marker of the Godwinian rationalism that Mrs. Fielder has negatively imputed to him; it is evidence of the self-discipline required to face pauperism with dignity (177). Accordingly then, when Mrs. Fielder recants on her deathbed at the end of the novel and wills her fortune to Jane and Colden, the happy couple are able to bring a "fortitude and ingenuity" to their new middle-class status that purifies it of any excessive materialism (174).

In fact, *Jane Talbot*'s emphasis on the happiness to be found in privation is one shared by the parabolic mobility genre as a whole. Helena Wells's *Constantia Neville*, for example, confirms that "[t]hough virtue is oftentimes forced to retire to humble obscurity, there to labour for a scanty pittance, even in the lowly shed may be found *health*, *peace* and *contentment*" (3: 379). The case for this "fruit of honest labor" is then further developed through the corresponding stress of such narratives on the misery and corruption of the idle rich (3: 371). Thus *Constantia Neville* offers numerous "proofs of the inefficacy of riches to procure contentment" (2: 2). Having been reduced to a state of dependence by her father's bankruptcy, Wells's heroine spends much of the first part of the novel working as a governess in the house of an old friend. Following the opposite path to Constantia,

this friend, Amelia Darlington, who is the daughter of a lowly clerk, has married the extremely wealthy Mr. Rochford. But while the Rochfords enjoy all the external trappings of prosperity, their inner lives are broken. Amelia becomes a "cold-blooded woman of fashion" who cannot express love for her children, and her husband turns out to be a lonely "slave of passion" who cannot "govern the little kingdom within" (1: 201, 2: 296). As the Countess de Launa succinctly reiterates of her own situation, in Wood's *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron*, "riches cannot bestow content, and nobility cannot confer happiness" (19).

In this respect, then, the parabolic mobility narrative would seem to accord with John K. Alexander's argument that post-Revolutionary commentators sought to placate the dissatisfactions of the poor by relentlessly contrasting their situation with that of the "unfortunate rich" (53). This disciplinary agenda is somewhat complicated in the parabolic mobility narrative, however, by the initial class status of its typical protagonist. For the theme of the "unfortunate rich" in these texts can be seen as a means of placating middle-class fears about downward mobility as much as a means of assuaging plebeian envy. Indeed, there is a sense in which the parabolic mobility narrative violates the terms of what Alexander describes as a "sophisticated and systematic . . . public crusade to teach . . . all members of the lower classes to accept their lot deferentially" by proposing happiness in poverty as a prerequisite for the protagonist's return to and redemption of wealth (59). "Without such deprivation of comforts," Constantia Neville reflects when her fortune begins to improve, "we were not able to set a true value on the advantages attendant on our respective situations" (Wells 2: 385).

In another sense, though, the parabolic mobility narrative is simply reinforcing status inertia from a different angle through its tendency to restrict such social ascents to those who have already enjoyed the comforts of a middle-class life. Tellingly these texts rarely show the born poor rising to a happy affluence, as opposed to Amelia Rochford's forlorn opulence, unless it is with the direct assistance of the socially reinstated protagonist. In fact, there is even an insinuation in many parabolic mobility narratives that only those characters who have already experienced a degree of virtuous prosperity are qualified to claim redemption from a position of penury. Just as Jane Talbot's "presentiment that I should one day be poor" leads her to "bus[y] my thoughts in imagining the most lucrative and decent means

of employing my ingenuity," so too do other heroines of the parabolic mobility narrative cultivate the traits that will socially rehabilitate them before their fall occurs (Brown, *Jane Talbot* 22).

In Sally Wood's *Dorval*, for instance, Aurelia Morely is shielded from the danger that the "indulgence" of her wealthy family "would eventually spoil her" through the early guidance of her prudent aunt (11). Unlike Aurelia's mother, who is devoted to "every fashionable amusement" in town, Mary Woodly seeks to "fix upon her [niece's] young mind a habit of industry, and . . . useful employment," which she argues will be vital in the event of "adversity or change of situation" (20, 14). Thus when Colonel Morely's "mad ambition of being the richest man in America" eventually results in the family's wealth being lost on a fraudulent land deal, Aurelia is already prepared to "meet our bad fortune with a good grace" (50, 111). Utilizing her "unimpaired talents" for courage and hard work she is able to keep her father's creditors at bay for much of the book (102). The lesson imparted by Aurelia's farsighted industriousness is then, as Martha Meredith Read's *Monima* (1802) puts it, that "in every family, however rich, it is necessary to practice economy" (92). But in the undertow of this moral is also a suggestion that it is exclusively the rich who have practiced economy who are capable of uncorrupted prosperity. For the heroine of the parabolic mobility narrative invariably possesses an innate virtuousness that the experience of poverty both animates and is ameliorated by. In being "taught to labor" at a young age, Sally Wood asserts, well-off women like Aurelia have developed the "habit of industry" to the point where it "become[s] almost nature" (*Dorval* 14).

In theory it is, of course, not impossible for a connate industriousness to be fostered in the born poor too. The parabolic mobility narrative, however, generally depicts the existing moral environment of the lower classes as deficient. Not unusually, for example, George Watterston's *Glencarn* stresses that the vices of the protagonist's now-wealthy stepmother stem from her having been "brought up in the capacity of a servant"—like many of this background "her mind had been brutified by vulgarity, and rendered torpid by inexertion" (7). Thanks to such characterizations, as well as more fleeting references to the "rude and boisterous behavior" of the lower orders, the parabolic mobility narrative can thus be read as an attempt to expose the failure of industrious habits in the contemporary poor, and a means of redressing that failure through the positive example of its pro-

tagonists (Wood, *Dorval* 207). Yet the potential to model one's own fate on the protagonist's career trajectory is also oddly circumscribed in these texts. For while they repeatedly portray hard work as the prerequisite for an ascent out of poverty, the final acquisition of prosperity by their central characters almost uniformly takes place via fortuitous or accidental means.

Hence, while Aurelia's "fortitude and good sense" sustains her through the death of her parents, estrangement from her beloved, and the constant ebbing of her funds in *Dorval*, her ultimate return to financial security is the result not of her "savings of economy and industry" but of a chance meeting with a man who turns out to be her real father (144, 249). Overhearing a disturbance between Aurelia and the novel's eponymous villain from an adjoining room, a visitor to Philadelphia rescues her from Dorval's murderous intent, and is subsequently identified by Aurelia's friends as Major Seymore, the biological parent whose existence she has only just learned of. Overjoyed at his reunion with the long-lost daughter he has been desperately seeking, Seymore immediately pledges to "make such arrangements, as will afford you the relief you need," and so Aurelia is miraculously elevated in the final pages of the book to a "handsome and independent fortune" (266). In essence, the money which Aurelia has doggedly earned across the course of the novel is abruptly translated in these concluding chapters into a birthright. Tellingly, for example, she recognizes Major Seymore's son as the mysterious "young benefactor" who a little earlier saved her from the clutches of two robbers before recompensing her for the cash lost during this incident (260). Here, as in other parabolic mobility narratives, then, the aid the protagonist receives upon the final exhaustion of "all her treasures" is retrospectively revealed to be an advance on what is effectively her own money (250).

PARABOLIC SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE WAYS OF PROVIDENCE

I will return in due course to the intriguing way in which such a turn of events both undermines the value of industriousness and nullifies the acceptance of charity, but for these contradictions to make sense we first need to address the theological underpinnings of the parabolic mobility narrative. Through the adventitious rediscovery of her father, Wood notes, Aurelia is "led to realize the continual presence of that power, who is the guardian protector and friend of the helpless" (*Dorval* 258), and this em-

phasis on the need to trust in "the Good Disposer of all things" (*Moreland* 48) and "acquiesce with a cheerful resignation to the will of Providence" (Wood, *Julia* 240) similarly runs through the other novels under consideration here. "The object for which [this] history is presented to the public," Helena Wells unequivocally declares in *Constantia Neville*, "[is] that of shewing the ways of Providence to man" (1: 157). Thus the parabolic mobility narrative offers more than just a window into the burgeoning rhetoric of "industrious poverty," it also points to the way in which this concept was affecting religious discussions of social inequality during the early nineteenth century.[3] Crucially, for seventeenth-century Calvinist theologians like John Winthrop and Cotton Mather economic inequality was divinely ordained and impervious to human endeavor, yet also communally binding in its instigation of charitable behavior. As the eighteenth century dawned, however, the social atomization and endemic poverty that attended rapid urbanization increasingly problematized arguments for God's direct intervention in the public sphere. Seeking to diminish God's responsibility for the destitution that they saw around them, religious thinkers pursued a direction that the new science was already pushing them along in regard to the material sphere, and began to stress a greater role for human agency in earthly affairs.

In the case of the economic realm this led to some slightly uneasy arguments in the 1730s for the market as an indirect means of allocating divinely approved stations, before figures like Charles Chauncy in the second half of the century found a way around the impersonality and unpredictability of a market-oriented Providence by claiming that individual industriousness was God's means of ordering society. As Richard J. Olivas has written, sermons such as Chauncy's "The Idle-Poor Secluded from the Bread of Charity by Christian Law" (1752) were used to "forge a new and enduring explanation of poverty that joined providence with a moral theory of labor. In essence, [they] argued that God provisioned humankind through its willingness to work" (277). Extrapolating on the cosmic ramifications of industriousness in the same way, the parabolic mobility narrative too finds self-exertion accounting for one's celestially appointed place in the world. When Margaretta receives the well-earned "offspring of my industry" and is returned to riches at the end of Martha Meredith Read's novel, for example, it serves as confirmation of the fact that "Providence generally places us in such situations, as we are best adapted to move in" (*Margaretta*

141, 29). Playing on the etymological root both words share with the Latin verb *providere* ("foresee, attend to"), parabolic mobility narratives repeatedly align the economically *provident* with the divinely *providential*.

While Providence compensates the provident in the parabolic mobility narrative, however, the way in which these novels resolve themselves also introduces a rift into the alignment between these two concepts. In essence, the moral gains made by the protagonists during their time in poverty are seen to pay off, but the material gains made during the same time are abruptly truncated. In a characteristic narrative move, for example, Helena Wells effectively undercuts her heroine's dogged efforts to "employ her needle" as a means of support by turning to the fortuitous reunion of Constantia Neville with her mother as the answer to the former's financial difficulties (3:3). Despite Constantia's dedication to "fabricating various ornaments for dress, the disposal of which articles . . . help to maintain her," then, her modeling of an "industrious poverty" stops short of portraying industriousness as a practical solution *to* poverty, for in the end we are informed that Constantia's "advancement . . . proceeded only from her own intrinsic merit" (3: 3; 1: 198; 3: 355). The achievement of middle-class affluence in the parabolic mobility narrative is thus oddly displaced from the realm of concrete economic structures and forces. Ultimately, the diligence of the poor actually seems to matter little since however hard the protagonists work in these novels they're rewarded by a divine restoration of former wealth rather than the benefits of a gradually accumulated fortune.

This paradoxically static conception of social mobility is perhaps at its most obvious, and its most problematic, in a novel like Martha Meredith Read's *Monima; or, The Beggar Girl*. Of all the tales under consideration here it is *Monima* that provides the most harrowing account of life within poverty, and thanks to the eponymous heroine's constantly thwarted attempts to transcend her extreme deprivation, *Monima* is also the one parabolic mobility narrative most critical of the social factors that prevent the amelioration of poverty. Yet while Read relentlessly emphasizes how Monima's "unremitting industry [is] not recompensed according to its merit" the novel, once again, unravels its heroine's predicament by reuniting her with several misplaced friends and relatives who bring with them some previously lost riches (438).[4]

Such a contradiction may well just be a consequence of the unavoidable "tension between freedom and universal necessity" that Genevieve Lloyd has identified as central to "the very idea of providence" within a Platonic philosophical tradition (133). But it also seems to be indicative of an ideologically conservative tendency within early American understandings of poverty that assuages social problems through theological quiescence, and which even afflicts texts otherwise as radical as *Monima*. Importantly, the parabolic mobility narrative not only attempts to wed material bounty to spiritual humility at the personal level, it also endeavors to position the selflessness of faith in Providence against the corrupt self-interest of a market culture gone awry. This sociopolitically critical dimension to Providence is evident, for example, in the regular contrast that the parabolic mobility narrative draws between the honest toil of its protagonist and the more dubious economic activities of other characters. Lured by the prospect of unearned wealth, both misguided fathers and husbands, and outright villains, in these novels tend to put their faith in "chance . . . rather [than] Providence" (Warren 95). Thus in Caroline Warren's *The Gamesters* (1805) the heroine's weak-willed husband ignores numerous warnings about the "capricious" nature of "fortune's favors" until finally this "fickle mistress of the affairs of men suddenly shifted ideas, and the return of the final dye gave the death blow" (50, 252). Gambling and speculation are, in this way, symptomatic of the "new forms of uncertainty and insecurity—the freaks of fortune" that, as Jonathan Levy has argued, accompanied "the emerging world of capitalism and risk in America" (20), while the diligent self-denial of the main character looks back to an older, classical republican tradition that, in the words of J. G. A. Pocock, encouraged "the individual to pit his virtue *against* fortune as a condition of his political being" (350; emphasis added). Given the sheer unpredictability of the economic realm as it is represented in parabolic mobility narratives, the just and ordered disposal of riches at their end may seem even more miraculous than it really is, but such authorial thaumaturgy is perhaps part of the theological point, and certainly part of the ideological appeal, of these texts. For while they were "now buffeted, [and] undermined, by another external power . . . Providentialist explanations of future change persisted within nineteenth-century American economic culture," Levy writes, as a means to "naturalize" the outcomes of a "competitive market economy" (84, 17).[5]

On the one hand, providential discourse could be used to legitimize the triumph of those who had succeeded in mastering the complexities of this competitive market economy. "Gain all you can . . . by using in your business all the understanding which God has given you," Andrew Carnegie advised his fellow millionaires in 1891. "The fundamental idea of the gospel of wealth is that surplus wealth should be considered as a sacred trust to be administered by those into whose hands it falls . . . for the good of the community" (76, 54). Because they emerged at a historical moment when the hegemony of capitalism was still in doubt, however, parabolic mobility narratives are able to use Providence to point toward a different outcome, namely, the reinstatement of traditional social hierarchies. While latching onto the providential undertones of Adam Smith's "invisible hand" in the same way as later writers, early nineteenth-century novelists nonetheless dispute his faith in the beneficent effects of "self-love" and are wary of the unrestrained social mobility that attends it. The protagonists of these texts triumph over, rather than within, the free market. In effect, what singles them out as vessels of divine approval is their forbearance of poverty and not their facility with riches. The process of maturation in the parabolic mobility narrative is one in which the lead character invariably comes to accept her tribulation as a necessary, if often inscrutable, part of the cosmic order.

Though "bending under the weight of reiterated disappointment," Constantia Neville, for example, learns to think early on that she may be "marked out for a peculiarity of destiny, and that it was not for a vain purpose that she so soon acquired habits of reflection, and a proneness to trace causes to their effects" (Wells 1: 83). Moreover, this sense of mysterious distinction is also acknowledged by many of those around the protagonist. In Helena Wells's view, we may be "so much the creatures of habit, and so prone to follow the example of those with whom we live" that later alterations in status "can never yield the same harvest," yet what is remarkable about Constantia, and her fellow heroines, is the degree to which nature transcends nurture (1: 60). Thus in the very first chapter of Read's *Margaretta* the title character, who has been raised by a pair of humble villagers, is identified by the woman who will later turn out to be her aunt as possessing "superior intelligence to the common person of her class" (2). It may take several hundred more pages to be confirmed but this initial moment of intrabourgeois cognizance is accurate. As is so often the case in

parabolic mobility narratives the recognition of a protagonist's inner virtue early in the novel prefigures a consanguineous recognition, and reconciliation, at the end of the tale.

Significantly, the recurrence of this motif in the parabolic mobility narrative accords with Christopher Lukasik's argument that the dissolution of traditional class structures in the post-Revolutionary era led to the assertion of a new "logic of physiognomic distinction" designed to solve the "problem of the invisible aristocrat—that is, the illegibility of superior social status within the social space of democracy" (16, 20). As Lukasik puts it in his incisive study of Johann Caspar Lavater's influence on late eighteenth-century American culture: "For those whose economic and social capital were most at risk in such a fluid social world . . . physiognomic distinction offered a means to establish moral character, embody social origin, and restrain the mobility enabled by the cultural capital of civility alone" (53). Echoing this emergent discourse of corporealized virtue, which Lukasik sees the seduction novel as inaugurating in the United States, the parabolic mobility narrative is similarly invested in what *Ormond* calls "the language of features and looks" (97). Indeed, within this subgenre of the early American novel, one might argue, there is a positive modeling of the logic of physiognomy that articulates the value of moral discernment more attractively than the seduction novel, wherein the emphasis is on the failure of the heroines to detect vice or maintain virtue, and the tragic consequences that result. The material signs of inner worth may be manipulated by libertines and fraudsters in the parabolic mobility narrative, or misread by those who cannot "connect other characteristics than low and illiteral ones with beggars," but here the irresistible legibility of the heroine's true identity ultimately vanquishes these threatening figures (Read, *Monima* v).

Coming at the end of a long series of moments in which the protagonist's "superior intelligence" is apprehended by those willing to aid her, the recognition of a familial tie that occurs in the final chapter of the parabolic mobility narrative effectively restores a stable social order. Precisely because a character like Sally Wood's Julia is "unpracticed in the ways of deceit," her adoptive mother's early wish to "see you acknowledged as what you really are" can come true (*Julia* 20, 17). And so, as in *Margaretta*, the wealthy visitor who remarks in the first chapter on how Julia's "simple garb" cannot "veil the elegance of her person" is revealed to be her aunt, and as

such is the means for Julia to "repay every favor she had received" while ensuring that "the mean and little-minded, regretted that they had been wanting in generosity" (14, 271, 273).[6] Just as the inner value of the protagonist ultimately finds recognition in the public arena, so too do the hidden mechanisms of Providence bear fruit in the form of material enrichment.

PARABOLIC SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE STATE OF WELFARE

This terminal leap "from the lowest rank in life . . . to one of great distinction" taints the logic of physiognomy with the logic of fantasy, of course, but given the pressing cultural anxieties that the parabolic mobility narrative is addressing we can understand its appeal (Read, *Margaretta* 343). At a time when it seemed to many as if the "universal Gangrene of avarice" had left "our country . . . in masquerade," figures like John Adams were increasingly asking themselves whether it was possible to "penetrate the views, designs, or objects of . . . any individual" (110). The answer that the parabolic mobility narrative offers to this dilemma is that we can identify a person's true disposition through the close reading of her or his behavior for its underlying coherence. The protagonists of these novels may shed their youthful naïveté through contact with corruption but their moral compass never wavers. As Constantia Neville succinctly puts it, "what I know to be a right action at one time would be so at another" (Wells 2: 8).

What is more problematic about the logic of physiognomy in these texts is the implication, however unintentional, that the protagonist's final transition to a rank of "great distinction" is a necessary corollary of her virtue. "Country bumpkin or lady, it's all the same, she is the true stuff of nature," we are told of Margaretta, but the seemingly inevitable indemnification of such heroines with wealth and status potentially undermines the parabolic mobility narrative's preceding insistence that worthiness can be judged outside of one's socioeconomic position (Read, *Margaretta* 378). After all, if the protagonist is shown to have been of genteel stock, as well as merely righteous, throughout her penury, then that experience of poverty can seem like a superficial detour, marked more by a change of clothes and habitation than a revolution in class consciousness. In this respect, we might contend, the parabolic mobility narrative anticipates a later literary genre that Eric Schocket has dubbed the "class-transvestite narrative" (118). Discussing the early twentieth-century slumming stories of writers

like Jack London and Cornelia Stratton Parker, Schocket argues that unlike in other American treatments of the urban proletariat, here "the middle-class subject does not maintain the boundaries of subjectivity by ostracizing the Other but, rather, performs a subjectivity which is sufficiently plastic to momentarily embody the Other" (108). The descent into destitution that takes place in the parabolic mobility narrative is neither voluntary in nature nor journalistic in its depiction, but in these works too "sociological authority emerges out of the ability to have an authentic experience of poverty while retaining a supposedly middle-class ability for objective assessment. . . . The class transvestite's journey 'down' thus ultimately serves to echo and circumvent other journeys 'up,' reducing mobility to a mere play of cultural signs" (122, 109)

For Schocket the class transvestism of the Progressive Era arises from the desire of the bourgeoisie to monitor and maintain the period's "recently inaugurated sites of reform, such as the settlement house and the lodging house" (115). Given the early nineteenth-century concern of the middle class with the rapidly expanding institution of the almshouse, which I have discussed above, the class transvestism of the Jeffersonian era can be seen as stemming from similar roots. But in order to get to the heart of the contradictions generated by the parabolic mobility narrative, we must consider how the middle-class protagonists' fugacious experience of poverty also serves to negate the public charity they are exposed to. In this regard, it is useful to turn to Bruce Robbins's recent discussion of the role that the "upward mobility story" has played in Anglo-American culture since the turn of the nineteenth century (x). Seeking to view these narratives as "something other . . . than peddling simple wish-fulfillment fantasies or the shopworn ideology of individual self-reliance we have come to associate with them," Robbins alights on the recurring presence of "a patron, mentor, or benefactor, a figure who stands between two worlds," at the "emotional center of [the] upward mobility story" (2, xv). Because of the disinterested assistance that this figure offers to the protagonist, he argues, we must rethink "the ubiquitous opposition between upward mobility and the welfare state" (11):

> Welfare institutions, however imperfectly they have delivered on their promises, offer [a] version of the common good within which . . . most of the upward mobility genre makes most sense. . . . Claims to hardy in-

> dependence . . . turn out to be stories of reliance on others, stories that reach out to others, and thus an unexpected part of our society's unfinished education in how to pay heed to the common good. (xiv, xvi)

If we apprehend selfless benefactors through this lens, then, we might take their frequent appearance in the parabolic mobility narrative as evidence that these texts are intended to school their readers in the social utility of the almshouse. Indeed, it is often said of characters like Edward Montjoy in *Glencarn*, who has secretly been "keeping an eye" on the hero's "every action," that they also "extend the sphere of the general good" by "visiting occasionally the abodes of wretchedness, and contributing to the support and comfort of their inhabitants" (Watterston 254, 167, 257).

What problematizes this reading of the parabolic mobility narrative, however, is the way in which the revelation in these texts of a blood tie to the patron figure potentially drives a wedge between the private good and the public good. According to Robbins, the relationship between patron and protegee in the upward mobility story is typically "less familial than collegial" because a welfare state "could come into existence only by taking over some of the functions and responsibilities that used to be seen as natural to . . . the family" (4, xiv), but in the parabolic mobility narrative the rationale for compassion is ultimately pushed back into the obligations of consanguinity. Just as Aurelia's mysterious "young benefactor" in *Dorval* turns out to be her brother, so Montjoy in *Glencarn* is revealed to be the protagonist's father, who has been tending his heir's unknown wealth "that I might have the gratification of presenting it to you, should fortune cast you once more my way" (Watterston 257). What is more, even those patrons in the parabolic mobility narrative who don't have an existing kinship with their socially ascending charges are often granted a symbolic one in the plot's dying turns. In *Monima*, for example, the heroine's frequent means of financial support, Monsieur Sontine, finally realizes that she is the daughter of a man he regards "in the light of a parent"; having become "sole master of fifty thousand pounds" through his adopted father's auspices, Sontine then effectively restores this fortune to the family line by marrying Monima (Read, *Monima* 213, 212). Thus the parabolic mobility narrative must lead us to ask, as Robbins does, whether "the very concept of an upward mobility story is misleading and misguided, [when] no rises who does not already belong to the higher class" (37).

The most obvious answer is that the parabolic mobility narrative does delimit the egalitarian potential of social climbing through its climactic reassertion of former stations. As in those eighteenth-century "variant[s] on the motif of the noble foundling" like *Tom Jones*, which Robbins distinguishes from the modern novel of upward mobility, the "threat to social order" represented in those characters "permitted to transgress class boundaries . . . is dissipated when the plot reveals, in a formulaic flourish of tokens and recognitions, that these figures were of noble birth all along" (36). From the perspective of their conclusions, then, parabolic mobility narratives embody the fantasy of a return to those familial networks of financial support that had been replaced by the comparative anonymity of indoor relief. At the same time, though, a slightly more generous conception of upward mobility does emerge if we pay attention to the dominant action of these texts, wherein the fledgling institutions of the welfare state are not so much circumvented as reformed, and excised, from within. In order to understand this process we must look at how the protagonists of parabolic mobility narratives themselves regard public charity, and what is most striking here is the extent to which they refuse it.

Despite her eponymous designation, for example, the heroine of Read's *Monima; or, The Beggar Girl* never actually becomes a mendicant. Convinced that begging is "the last refuge of the wretched," she makes "several attempts to claim charity, but the cool contempt, with which she . . . regarded [it], repulsed her voice, and instead of telling her woe-fraught tale . . . she only asked for work" (85). Constantia Dudley also "disdains to *beg*" in Brown's *Ormond*: "She herself would have died before she would have condescended to [it]. It was not worth prolonging a life which must subsist upon alms" (122, 107). Fortunately, for such proud heroines, at the point when the choice between supplication and death becomes a reality, Providence always seems to intervene. Telling her father that "begging has now become the only alternative to save themselves," Monima, for instance, heads out to solicit aid early in Read's novel, only to find that a mysterious benefactor has "provided the family with the necessaries of life" by leaving a "banknote of ten dollars" on the doorstep (*Monima* 48).

Characteristically, such anonymous benefactors are later revealed to be related to their wards. But if the parabolic mobility narrative reroutes the social ascent of its characters away from the "common good" by transforming the figure of the patron into a scion of familial wealth, then at

times it also reroutes the ethical direction of this ascent by attempting to dispense with patrons altogether. For the strain of "industrious poverty" being promoted in these texts is one whose ethical imperatives are ultimately designed to make the need for municipal poor relief redundant. The reluctance of a character like Constantia Dudley to accept public aid not only reflects a shift away from earlier conceptions of charity as a form of beneficial mutual dependence toward an understanding of economic dependence as shameful, it also signals a conviction that hard work is enough to rescind the need for assistance. Indeed, one of the striking things about the parabolic mobility narrative is the pervasive absence of welfare institutions from their pages. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, American cities were, as Raymond Mohl has put it, "saturated . . . [with] a bewildering variety of charities and relief organizations for every imaginable purpose," yet the urban environments through which the penniless protagonists of these novels move are largely bereft of such groups (20). For most of these protagonists if they receive help beyond that of their mysterious (but related or soon to be related) benefactors, it comes from fellow exemplars of the virtuous poor. Hence when Amelia Stanhope is temporarily rendered homeless in *The Gamesters*, she is taken in by the family of "an honest, well-meaning, industrious labourer" who "behold their more wealthy neighbours rolling by in their carriages, without even a sigh of discontent" (Warren 165).

For those few protagonists who do come into contact with charitable institutions, meanwhile, the experience is typically represented as a negative one. In Read's *Monima*, for example, the heroine ends up in both the "city Workhouse" and "the Hospital" at separate points in the novel, but in each case she is forcibly sent through the machinations of the tale's villain (31, 272). These brief excursions onto the poor roll then serve to underscore Monima's worthiness by contrasting her with the other inhabitants of these institutions ("the wretches of her own sex, who are a disgrace to human nature"), and at the same time they teach a more general lesson about how to distinguish between the industrious and the idle poor (31). In this respect, if the parabolic mobility narrative is concerned with probing the stark equation between immorality and poverty it is not in order to refute it but in order to ensure that it is better applied. The very fact that Monima can be confined to an almshouse and an asylum is not because these institutions are in league with the novel's villain, but because their "humane

attendants" mistakenly interpret her inability to "speak one word in her own defence" as evidence of ignorant sloth or sudden insanity rather than a marker of virtue in distress (274, 31). Accordingly, even when the heroine of the parabolic mobility narrative voluntarily decides to fall back on public assistance, this has less to do with her personal moral failings than with a flawed social order that does not allow her to exercise her talents. Construed in this light, welfare institutions in these novels are a consequence of the failure of the values of "industrious poverty" to receive recognition in the wider community.

In a series of major scenes in *Monima*, for instance, the industrious heroine's desperate quest for subsistence is blocked by a range of potential employers and benefactors who fail to see beyond her shabby raiment. "Labour of the hand she would have thought a providential bounty, but the rags in which she was wrapped, and which alone should have been a call upon the charity of *christians*, were the very means of debarring her from an honest support," Read writes of her protagonist's predicament (251). Thus *Monima* succinctly delineates the public barriers to poverty alleviation that arise from a confused perception of virtue. Yet by so stridently emphasizing the inability of its protagonists to make a living the parabolic mobility narrative ironically destabilizes the very ideal of industriousness it is dedicated to upholding. For all the commitment that a character like Monima expresses to seeking paid work, sometimes the parabolic mobility narrative's concern with articulating a positive distinction between worthiness and wealth leads it to fetishize the protagonist's virtue under duress to a point where the prospect of financial recompense entirely slips from view.

The resulting implication that industriousness cannot, or need not, be materially remunerated is ostensibly countered by the affluence that comes to the protagonists at the end of their journey, but the invariably Providential nature of this reward makes it difficult to reconcile with a labor theory of value. Instead, through its exchange for a long-standing familial estate, the toil of the heroine is tied to a model of primitive accumulation that antedates the commodification of labor power within the capitalist marketplace. When a poor seamstress named Caty remarks of one of the sudden gifts that Monima receives from Sontine, "you can earn money quicker than I can, for dearest knows how long I must work ere I can earn such a handful of money," she is unintentionally apprehending this un-

equal access to economic power (229). The overall effect of this reversion to unearned wealth is then to further erode the ethical ground on which welfare institutions might be built. As I have already noted, although *Monima* is probably the one parabolic mobility narrative most critical of the social factors that prevent the amelioration of poverty, like its siblings it resolves itself by freezing the class ladder. Reiterating this point in light of the other contradictions I have been outlining here, I might add that *Monima* also shares with its generic counterparts a desire to resolve the limited opportunities of the poor in America through the fantastical intercession of a "providential bounty" rather than through the expansion of public charity.

In this respect, the hermetic kinship groups that come into being at the end of the average parabolic mobility narrative effectively serve to restore the traditional pattern of outdoor relief, which was rapidly dying out in the early nineteenth century. It is striking, for example, that even those parabolic mobility narratives that present the most favourable picture of charitable institutions end up locating the efficacious disbursement of alms in individual households. Thus in Wood's *Dorval* we get a detailed account from the unfortunate Eliza Dunbar of how the keeper of the asylum she has been confined to, following a genuine bout of madness, exhibited a "benevolence [that] did not abate. He lessened my task, gave me an apartment for my own use, and furnished me with books" (218). While this institution functions in a more productive fashion than those depicted in a novel like *Monima*, though, it ultimately remains subordinate to an altruism born of personal ties. For Mr. Lawson, the superintendent of Eliza's refuge, is soon revealed to be in love with his ward, having already met her many years before. The subsequent marriage of Lawson to Eliza then effectively transfers his "unbounded philanthropy" from the public realm into the private sphere of the family, at the same time it enacts a miniparabola within the novel's larger narrative of regained wealth through the financial recompense Lawson offers to Eliza's indebted father, who once "set [him] up in business, and supported [his] credit" (225, 223). Just as Aurelia Morely learns that the concern of her "young benefactor" is based in fraternal feeling, so too does Eliza experience a beneficence that it is difficult to unentangle from more intimate motives.

The underlying desire of the parabolic mobility narrative to retreat from impersonal forms of poor relief is then further confirmed in the limited disbursement of that wealth which the protagonists of these novels come

into via these recovered parents and friends. Those characters whose distresses are relieved at the end of the story tend to be the ones who have previously recognized the protagonist's inner goodness and responded to it in a selfless fashion. In this regard, the parabolic mobility narrative's repeated warning that one should "connect other characteristics than low and illiteral ones with beggars" finds its sanction in the benefits that ultimately accrue to those who heed this advice. "The wealth of her father put in her power, to repay every favor she had received; to assist the poor [and] to comfort," Sally Wood writes of Julia. "The rewards were . . . ample to all that had been kind to the late suffering, now wealthy . . . Julia" (*Julia* 271, 273). Crucially, this model of philanthropy is not only circumscribed by personal indebtedness of the emotional variety, it is circumscribed in space. Those fellow indigents who have lent the protagonist a hand earlier in the novel invariably relocate to the protagonist's new country estate (or a nearby one) at the end of the action where, alongside the servants and tenants with existing ties to the family line, they continue to serve as a kind of surrogate kin group. Thus, in contrast to the urban scenes of the parabolic mobility narrative, where social identity is ambiguous and in flux, the rural setting establishes a tightly knit communal structure wherein the poor are now clearly identifiable and are fixed in a subordinate position.[7] For all the criticism that they may level at the obstacles confronting the industrious poor, these novels finally articulate a moral economy closed to the competitive or self-achieved redistribution of wealth. As the protagonist of *Glencarn* puts it in a neat summary of this insular pattern: "Virtue never creates a desire, that virtue cannot reward" (Watterston 86).

CODA

If one were looking for a final instance of the ideological tensions at play in the parabolic mobility narrative it would not be inappropriate to venture the argument that the miraculous speed with which wealth is reinherited in its closing pages is akin to the miraculous speed with which wealth is won or lost through speculation earlier in the story. For the authors of these narratives any suggestion of the lingering instability of the protagonist's social position is negated by the concluding retreat of the virtuous to an estate "not liable to concussions, like those which affect the property of persons engaged in commerce" (Wells 3: 46). But as Monique Bourque has

rightly noted of the broader reform agenda of which the parabolic mobility narrative is a part:

> Poor relief in antebellum America was never as simple as . . . controlling the poor and establishing the moral authority of an expanding middle class. . . . Ambivalence about the administration of assistance was inherent in . . . the disjunction between poor relief policy, as outlined in . . . almshouse rules and regulations, and actual practice at the local level . . . [where] officials struggled to balance Christian charity with fiscal prudence, to separate the 'virtuous' and unlucky from the lazy and 'vicious,' and to understand what poverty meant in a changing society. (190)

In the case of the parabolic mobility narrative this disjunction between fantasy and reality is apparent not only in the contrast between these texts' providential rewarding of industry and the expanding need for welfare institutions in the early 1800s but in their failure to provide a convincing solution to the economic shocks that hit the United States as it advanced further into the nineteenth century. In this regard, we might say that the first wave of American parabolic mobility narratives broke upon the rock of the bourgeoisie's evident vulnerability to recurring booms and busts. The 1807–09 Embargo, for example, led to widespread hardship and discontent among the eastern mercantile classes, which was only partially leavened by Congress's insistence on the patriotism of economic austerity, and it was soon followed by the catastrophic financial panic of 1819.

The shift these "nationalized" instances of downward mobility would prompt in the genre that I have been examining here can perhaps first be marked in Sarah Savage's *The Factory Girl* (1814), a novel that tweaks the message of *Constantia Neville* or *Dorval* in intriguing ways. At first glance, Savage's book closely follows the pattern set out by its predecessors. The unremittingly virtuous heroine, Mary, loses her "little snug house, and the clever bit of land around it" following the death of her father, and is eventually beset by debt despite her industriousness, before finding that her "readiness to oblige and assist the sick, and those more indigent than herself" pays off in a fortunate marriage and a return to domestic comfort (4, 89). What is different about *The Factory Girl*, however, is the much greater faith that it displays in public institutions as means of relieving the worst aspects of poverty. One of these institutions is the eponymous cotton factory, which enables Mary to maintain her grandmother in their

newly "humble station," until illness finally forces her to leave (40). Thus notwithstanding the suspicion earlier parabolic mobility narratives exhibit toward the characteristic structures of urban capitalism, Savage identifies at least some of them (most notably wage labor and industrial employment) as sources for self-sustenance by the hard-working poor. The other key institution in *The Factory Girl*, meanwhile, is the Sunday school that Mary helps set up in the second half of the novel. Here Mary is able to impart to the children of the working class those "spring[s] of moral action" she has found lacking in some of her more frivolous colleagues at the cotton mill (32).

The essential lesson Mary teaches in both her introduction to scripture and the example of her own life—that "Providence . . . orders, for the best good, the most minute incidents which are beyond our control"—is wholly familiar from novels like *Constantia Neville* and *Dorval*, of course (82). But what is striking about *The Factory Girl* is how closely allied to the structures of an emergent welfare system its theological precepts are, for even the most pious parabolic mobility narrative of the 1800s entirely eschews religious organizations, let alone churches and ministers. In this alliance, *The Factory Girl* points toward the new front in poor relief that was opening up during the mid-1810s when, as Mohl has put it, "the heightened evangelical fervor of the time . . . [began] to generate interest and enthusiasm in the Sunday School idea" and "religious education became an influential element in the moral attack on . . . pauperism" (185). Overall, the effect of this transitional moment on Savage's novel can be seen in its blunting of the more dramatic and improbable workings of Providence common to preceding parabolic mobility narratives. Consigning the sudden reappearance of a rich family member "supposed to have been lost on a voyage to the East Indies" to a subplot involving Mary's neighbors, *The Factory Girl* emphasizes the everyday comforts of faith over radical transformations of status (Savage 91). Mary may ultimately find herself back on a "fertile farm" but the really telling possession she comes into is the "handsome Bible" she receives from her new stepchildren on the book's final page (62, 112).

In the longer term, as narratives of parabolic mobility readjusted to their social context, the trope of fortuitous reunion would certainly creep back in, but in ways that are indicative of a slightly different set of moral priorities. While Maria Cummins's 1854 best seller *The Lamplighter* ends with

the unveiling of the poor heroine's prosperous and long-presumed-dead father, for instance, it is more recognizably in the vein of *The Factory Girl* than *Constantia Neville* in its idealization of the joys to be found in a "well-lit, warm and pleasantly furnished parlor" (520). Like her early nineteenth-century predecessors, Cummins's "orphan girl"—Gerty—is one of "those who, in the severest afflictions, see the hand of a loving Father, and, obedient to his will, kiss the chastening rod" (113, 134). Instead of proving that "she was no beggar in spirit" through her unflagging industriousness, however, Gerty earns her redemption through a devout commitment to religious instruction and to the happiness of her adopted family (138). The conjoined consolation of home and Bible that comes to stand in for other forms of poor relief at the end of *The Factory Girl* here takes center stage.

When Cummins's novel is set alongside *Constantia Neville*, we can see, in short, how the mid-nineteenth-century formulation of middle-class domesticity as a buffer against economic uncertainty leads *The Lamplighter* to position of familial contentment as the cause rather than the consequence of its protagonist's rise up the social scale. Thus the parabolic mobility narrative reinvented itself in response to the sentimental discourses of the late antebellum period, just as it would reinvent itself—in a less feminine and more secular form—in response to the documentary impulses of the Progressive Era, when it took on the mantle of the "class-transvestite narrative." If Cummins's *The Lamplighter* or Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1902) have not traditionally been recognized as part of a continuous literary tradition in the United States, it is not merely because the urtexts of the parabolic mobility genre from the 1800s have been ignored, it is because of the way in which the category of class itself is obscured both inside and outside these works. As Schocket puts it, "the class-transvestite's . . . journey through the lives of . . . the poor produces a translation that creates the discursive space for a fictitious resolution of material class conflicts," in the same way that American culture more generally has "successfully colonized and utilized [the poor] within the production and vitalization of new forms of middle-class authority" (140, 142). In order to begin to dissolve this opacity, one significant route lies through the early nineteenth-century texts I have been discussing here, and their characteristic imbrication of industriousness, Providence, and welfare.

NOTES

1. While seduction novels like Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) can be viewed as having instituted a concern with downward mobility, any straight reading of class categories into these texts is complicated by the way in which they systematically fold status anxiety into sexual anxiety. Unlike the parabolic mobility narrative, which explicitly ties the downfall of its protagonists to economic failure, the seduction novel posits romantic transgression as the primary trigger for a loss of standing. It is precisely because of her untainted virtue that the heroine of the parabolic mobility narrative is allowed to reascend the social scale; a positive modeling of upward mobility that also contrasts with picaresque novels like Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1798) or H. H. Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792–1815), where the socially aspirant are either ethically suspect or savagely uncouth. The most direct precedents for the parabolic mobility narrative are to be found, I would argue, in the British literary tradition. Most of the key traits of the parabolic mobility narrative, for example, from the dramatic trigger of a financial disaster to the intervention of the disguised benefactor, are present in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), which also shares with its American heirs an explicit emphasis on the "middle order of mankind" as embodying "all the arts, wisdom, and virtues of society" (117). The popularity of *Wakefield* can be gauged by the fact that it was reprinted seven times in the United States between 1800 and 1810, a period during which that perennial favorite *Pamela* was reprinted only once. Part of the appeal of Goldsmith's novel seems to have stemmed from the comfort that economically insecure readers found in its portrayal of a bankrupt but determinedly benevolent and optimistic hero. In 1806, for example, when the former speculator John Pintard began working his way back to respectability following a spell in debtors' prison one of the first things he transcribed into his commonplace book was a well-known line from *Wakefield*: "Man little knows what calamities are beyond his patience to bear 'till he tries them" (qtd. in Mann 117).
2. From one perspective, of course, Constantia's final position in the novel may be prosperous but it is definitely not happy, since she is attacked by Ormond in her reinherited home and after killing him flees in guilt to Europe. This conclusion is not incompatible with the moral lesson the parabolic mobility narrative is designed to teach, however, since most of the protagonists in these novels experience some form of physical danger (especially kidnapping and attempted rape) as the precursor to a chastened but virtuous withdrawal to a new home. The character of Ormond is, in this sense, at one with other apparently benevolent but actually vengeful figures in the genre such as Sally Wood's eponymous Dorval. For a fuller account of the class dynamics in *Ormond* and their resolution see Pethers.
3. It is perhaps worth stressing here that the parabolic mobility narrative's understanding of Providence is distinct from the historical-national discourse of Providence that had reached an apogee during the Revolution. There are several able surveys of the latter tradition (e.g., Guyatt) but they typically pay very little at-

tention to the persistence and development of a personal-economic discourse of Providence in North America.

4. Importantly, *Monima* is one of many parabolic mobility narratives that send the protagonist and her family and fortune on a transatlantic journey (in this case from France through Haiti to the United States). I do not have space here to treat the significance of this global dimension; instead I will consider it in more detail in the longer version of this essay that forms part of my current book project, "Social Mobility, Transatlantic Circulation, and the Making of Middle-Class Identity in the American Novel, 1700–1840." For incisive readings of both *Monima* and *Margaretta* through a transatlantic lens see Faherty, which also makes the important point that the decline of a "consolidated cultural nationalism" and turn "toward the circum-Atlantic, the imperial, and the hemispheric" in post-1800 fiction helps to account for its previous neglect (2). Parabolic mobility narratives, which were published on both sides of the Atlantic, themselves represent a later iteration of the transoceanic cultural exchange whose class dimension is explored in Bannet.
5. For a full account of how the spread of market capitalism in the nineteenth century generated probabilistic theories that began to contest Providence, and eventually overtook it, see Levy 60–103.
6. For a rare, but very perceptive, reading of *Margaretta* that expands on the relationship between moral transparency and economic status in this novel see Fichtelberg 83–92.
7. This successful relocation to the country following an unexpected inheritance interestingly contrasts with the more tragic playing out of a similar narrative trajectory in novels like Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy* (1812). Although I would exclude *Kelroy* from the parabolic mobility genre on account of its fatalistic conclusion, Klimasmith's recent analysis of this novel suggests how other works of the period were dealing with issues similar to those I treat here (class formation, urban space, economic chance) in their own way.

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