# The Face of Poverty: Physiognomics, Social Mobility, and the Politics of Recognition in the Early Nineteenth-Century American Novel

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Across the mid-nineteenth century, representations of encounters with the poor in the American novel repeatedly emphasize the necessity of a personal witnessing of their domestic conditions and a related assumption that collective social experiences are recorded on their individual visages. Whether it is George Lippard demanding that we "read the full volume of wrong and want, which the oppressors of this world write on the faces of the poor" in *The Quaker City* (1847) or Rebecca Harding Davis imploring that we take a "glimpse of the under-life of America" and "look in [the] faces" of those who inhabit it in *Margaret Howth: A Story of Today* (1862), American social fiction of this period is frequently structured around scenes of optical revelation and shock.[1] These moments of sympathetic visual apprehension – which I will be calling "scenes of recognition" – have typically been linked, from the end of the nineteenth century until well into our own time, to the pervasive influence of the work of Charles Dickens on antebellum U.S. culture. Surveying the development of American literature from the vantage point of 1895, for example, William Dean Howells concluded of Dickens, and the impact of novels like *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) and *Nicholas Nickelby* (1838-39) on U.S. readers, that: "He was more truly democratic than any American who had yet written fiction."[2] Tellingly, Howells goes on to add that the essential power of Dickens's approach to imagining the lives of the socially marginal is crystallized in the way that he "caught the look" of the indigent, within which lies "the strong drift of a genuine emotion, a sympathy, deep and sincere, with the poor, the lowly, the unfortunate."[3] Dickens's belief that "there is nothing truer than

physiognomy" was undoubtedly widely shared by subsequent American novelists, even as they adapted his distinctive ability to connect vivid physical and linguistic characterizations of those at the bottom of the social ladder with realistic urban settings and compelling plot twists in the direction of the more sensational and politically confrontational city-mysteries genre or the more pessimistic and thesis-driven industrial novel in the mid nineteenth century.[4] But it is one of the goals of the present essay to shift our critical attention away from this familiar lineage to a home-grown set of precedents for the physiognomic discourses of the mid-century American social novel, wherein the ideological presumptions and evasions of "scenes of recognition" also become newly and revealingly apparent.

Although their production during what Duncan Faherty has described as American literary history's "canonical interregnum" – the years between 1800 and 1820 – has often helped to obscure their importance, the early nineteenth-century novels that constitute the corpus for my argument were the first American works to explicitly and consistently assimilate the two conceptual linchpins of Enlightenment thought – sympathy and physiognomy – that would come to typify scopic representations of poverty.[5] Drawing equally on Adam Smith's ground-breaking account of the dynamics of compassion in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and Johann Caspar Lavater's enormously influential taxonomy of the relations between inner character and external features in his *Essays on Physiognomy* (1775-78), works like Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond* (1799), Sarah Wood's *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron* (1800) and Martha Meredith Read's *Margaretta* (1807) effectively inaugurated the trope of facial recognition whose long afterlife can be traced down through Lippard and Davis to Jacob Riis's pioneering photo-book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and beyond.[6] They establish this trope, moreover, through a distinctive series of plot points that not only enable us to mark these novels off as constituting a coherent subgenre of social fiction, but that help us to see

more clearly how the ideological blindspots which haunt later American treatments of poverty came into being.

For all their inevitable variations, the early nineteenth-century novels that I will be examining here share a common narrative structure that revolves around an experience of what we can denote as "parabolic social mobility."[7] Typically they open with a female protagonist finding themselves thrust out of a life of relative material comfort into an increasingly desperate struggle for subsistence. Bereft of paternal protection and beset by dubious men who offer false assurances of protection, these heroines nonetheless preserve their native virtue and dignity even as they slide down the social scale into poverty. And then, just when it seems as if they have reached their lowest point, a key figure in the story is revealed to be a long-lost parent or family member, bringing with them a restitution of the protagonist to their former wealthy status. As has already been shown elsewhere, the parabolic mobility novel seeks to establish a general model for the behaviour of the poor in the form of its long-suffering yet industrious heroine, works to soften the bite of capitalism by stressing the role of providence in the allocation of social positions, and tries to circumvent the need for charitable institutions by imagining various reconfigurations of the traditional family unit.[8] What I would like to concentrate on here, then, is the slightly narrower dynamic of physiognomized sympathy that is at play in these novels, and how their specific articulation of the "face of poverty" instantiates some of the problems with seeing the dispossessed that we are still struggling with.

In the next section of the essay I will begin to lay out this genealogy in greater detail by considering some of the challenges that contemporary literary criticism encounters when attempting to handle the cultural representation of poverty. After beginning to unpack the constitutive intellectual and social dynamics of the facial trope, this section concludes with a consideration of the concept of "recognition," which I analyse here as it was formulated in the lineage of Smithian/Lavaterian assertions of reciprocal similarity rather than in an alternative

Enlightenment vein of acknowledging the difference of the Other. The following section of the essay then examines this physiognomic logic as it plays out across the characteristic narrative beats and arcs of the parabolic mobility novel, paying particular attention to these texts' representation of portraiture, dress, and familial bloodlines, and to their complicated veiling of economic insecurity behind ostensibly durable registers of physical and mental identity. Finally, a brief conclusion delineates the waning of the parabolic mobility novel's popularity in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a process which saw its vision of poverty both seeding and adapting to modern social structures and their modes of optical rhetoric. Here, as in the preceding sections, my central concern is with considering the "face of poverty" as a revealing metaphorical nexus for the critical challenges of handling economic privation, as a form of structuring absence that renders its victims invisible even when we endeavour to place them in the spotlight.

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Gavin Jones, who has done more than anyone to chart the long history of American poverty as "a dynamic category that develops structurally and thematically across textual space," offers what is probably the most detailed account of the recurring disjunction between poverty's hermeneutic theorization and its narrative content in *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945*.[9] There he incisively lays out the various ways in which post-sixties literary criticism, with its dominant emphasis on de-essentializing power relations in order to affirm marginalized identities, fails to provide a means of addressing the poor since they are a group whose existence *is* inseparable from its physical determiners (of illness and starvation) and whose identity *cannot* be recuperated for a progressive agenda through the assertion of its repressed vitality (only transcended entirely). In this respect, as Jones points out, the degree to which poverty is most fundamentally "defined by the lack—or by the threat of the lack—of the resources necessary for subsistence, for life itself, or for health"

presents as much of a challenge to class-oriented interpretations of literature as it does to the more familiar interpretations along the lines of race and gender that recent scholarship has typically concerned itself with (*AH* 3). All three of the models of class-oriented literary criticism that Jones identifies – which he says "can be broadly termed the *affirmative,* the *deconstructive,* and the *composite*" – are largely unable "to focus sharply on what poverty means as a social category," he concludes, because they respectively: obscure the very different economic and cultural resources of the poor beneath those of the working class so as to celebrate the latter; neglect the stringent material realities of poverty in order to emphasize performative notions of class identity; or elide the qualities unique to the experience of poverty with other important but distinct personal characteristics and identity types (*AH* 9, 8).[10] This diagnosis is, I think, correct – but I also want to take a step back from it to suggest that the obstructions poverty presents to literary analysis are more pervasive and more deeply-rooted than Jones acknowledges.

Importantly, Jones – like other contemporary observers of poverty-in-fiction – is alert to the ideological tensions of literary narration in a way that many of his predecessors were not. For a good number of mid-twentieth century commentators it seemed self-evident that a novelistic approach to "the other America" could render the reality of poverty in an authentic and politically efficacious fashion.[11] Yet as scores of more recent readers have gone on to remark, the attempt to delineate a "culture of poverty" that sociologists such as Michael Harrington and Oscar Lewis initiated in the 1960s – with its emphasis on the autonomy and distinctiveness of "a language of the poor, a psychology of the poor, [and] a world view of the poor" – effectively veiled the social structures that generated impoverishment and opened the door for conservative thinkers to impute the persistence of poverty in certain communities to their moral failure rather than their material conditions.[12] Seeking to avoid this trap, Jones instead emphasizes the idea that poverty is a form of "*socioeconomic suffering*" which is

always dialectically balanced "between material and nonmaterial, objective and subjective criteria" (*AH* 3).

This approach to the "culture of poverty" clearly has the advantage of opening literary representations of the poor up to a consideration of their economic subtexts, and is productively used by Jones to trace the political fault-lines in the work of writers like Herman Melville, Edith Wharton, and Richard Wright who are ostensibly sympathetic toward the indigent. While Jones's assertion that poverty constitutes "a specific state of social being" is a necessary move in reclaiming it from the concealments of class, race or gender, however, in this essay I want to venture the argument that any such reclamation remains hampered by the way the category of "poverty" tends to veil its own structuring conditions even when shorn of these external frameworks of interpretation (*AH* 3). For Jones the dialectical constitution of poverty is grounded, per Marxist tradition, in a base and a superstructure. "As a condition of socioeconomic suffering, poverty is primarily material and economic," he writes. "It rests on levels of possession and power, and is physical at its extreme, returning ultimately to the body as the site that bears the marks, the damage, of being poor" (*AH* 3). But as I intend to show in what follows literary representations of poverty consistently confuse this distinction by suggesting that bodies precede and determine economic status rather than vice versa. Indeed, by turning to a novelistic subgenre that dates from a period before Jones's study begins, and more particularly from a period when modern conceptions of poverty were initially being formulated, we can see that American understandings of the poor effectively originated out of the "nonmaterial" and "subjective" apprehension of economic status that Jones hopes to temper.

My fundamental aim in this essay, then, is to take up Jones's point that poverty is "the categorical blind spot" in American literary studies, but not in order to repair our critical vision so much as to establish some additional tests our eyes will have to pass by stressing how issues

of physical integrity and perceptual absence are paradigmatically ingrained in any cultural representation of the dispossessed (*AH* 15). The late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century genre of the parabolic mobility novel is a particularly useful and revealing resource for contemplating the blindspots poverty has generated in American literature for a number of reasons. For these texts are not just temporally proximate to the philosophical discourses that forged the optical metaphors through which we now view the poor, as I have already suggested; they were written at a time when the major categories of status differentiation through which we now understand modern societies were only just coming into being. Living in a world still transitioning away from conceptions of social relations structured along a vertical axis of dependence and obligation rather than the horizontal consolidation of similar occupations and economic resources, and writing at a time before the onset of mass industrialization, the novelists I examine here would have been hard pressed to recognize the idea of "class" as someone like Marx would later theorize it.[13] The notion that God "hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich some poor," as John Winthrop put it in 1630, was certainly fraying considerably by the end of the eighteenth century, but there was still a strong residual pull to the claim that variant economic statuses were "natural" and not the result of individual actions or amendable conditions. Hence a novel like *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron* can straight-facedly counsel its straitened protagonist to "acquiesce with a cheerful resignation to the will of Providence."[14]

Where the parabolic mobility novel does move toward the acknowledgment that poverty might be socially rather than divinely constituted, meanwhile, it helps us to see how programs of intervention on behalf of the poor privileged moral rhetoric over material necessity right from the start. As Michael Katz notes, if there is "one theme that has run through [the] American response to poverty" it is "the idea that some poor people are undeserving of help because they brought their poverty on themselves."[15] Rather than following Katz in tying the

formulation of this idea to those efforts to restrain the cost of poor relief and those increasing demands for a disciplined labor force that became visible in the 1820s, though, I would locate its origins in the late eighteenth-century attempt by American novelists to contain the dissolution of "natural" social distinctions through a fusion of morality and appearance borrowed from Smith and Lavater. It is important, in this respect, to stress that the parabolic mobility novel emerged at a point when there was very little of the reformist campaigning or sociological analysis around the problem of poverty that invariably accompanied later literary treatments of the "other America."[16] The fact that American poverty was primarily conceptualized through works of fiction, and in the absence of a fixed interpretation of "class," during the late eighteenth century means then that the blending of poverty into other sociological categories that Jones has identified as a significant obstacle to its apprehension is less pressing when we approach the parabolic mobility novel than when we try to contextualize other novels that depict poverty.[17]

Indeed, the same, it is worth stressing here, goes for the relationship between poverty and the category of "race" at this point. As the growing scholarship over recent years on the "epidermalization of … inferiority" in antebellum culture has compellingly shown, visual signs of social status were intensely monitored and highly elaborate in regard to Black Americans by the mid nineteenth century, as stringent interpretations of skin color and cranial size took hold among pro-slavery thinkers and images of riven flesh and tearful countenances became popular among abolitionists.[18] A fully articulated correspondence between Blackness and poverty was still in the works when the parabolic mobility novel had its heyday, however, at least in part because the general absence of an ideology of Black free labor and Black upward mobility meant that all African Americans were deemed to be characteristically propertyless, and so their poverty required little theoretical justification or analysis. But also because the semantic

valence of Black faces and bodies had not yet been extensively detached from representations of the white experience of penury.[19]

In one of the few explicit invocations of race in a parabolic mobility novel, for example, the titular villain of Brown's *Ormond* is at one stage revealed to "exchange his complexion and habiliments for those of a negro and a chimney-sweep, and to call at certain doors for employment" unbeknownst to his acquaintances, a process of temporary self-privation that serves as a kind of mirror to the heroine Constantia's similar descent into an invisible state of poverty that is redeemed by the stability of her underlying qualities.[20] Since the parabolic mobility novel is fundamentally concerned with the economic status of white women like Constantia the relation of that group to poverty, and its legacy, is the one that I will be concentrating on in this essay, though as this odd episode of blackface masquerading suggests there are evident, if tangled, through-lines from the logics of physiognomy and empathy at work in these texts to those in the slave narratives and white supremacist tracts of the 1850s too. In neither case, however, are the later dynamics of the "face of poverty" fully or firmly embedded, nor are they as tightly veiled by larger and more abstract historical categories as they later became.

Instead, in my view, the parabolic mobility novel lets us see how modern definitions of class, race, and gender were initially interleaved with poverty as a "specific state of social being" at a moment when it did not have to automatically struggle to achieve an explanatory priority of its own. In texts like *Ormond* and *Margaretta*, a "culture of poverty" thesis is refuted not because these novels acknowledge and celebrate non-bourgeois values, nor because they expose the socio-economic institutions that really determine the persistence of inequality, but because they effectively assert that the poor do not have a distinctive "language," "psychology" or "world-view" of their own. The parabolic mobility novel is, in this sense, more naively conservative than its later fictional heirs, since the still ongoing development of class identities

and market behaviors in the early nineteenth century meant that it could appropriate poverty for proto-middle class readers in a way that was more fluid and less controversial than it would be once these structures hardened.

A useful point of comparison here is what Eric Schocket has dubbed the "class-transvestite narrative" – a subgenre of Progressive Era journalism in which writers like Stephen Crane, Jack London and Cornelia Stratton recounted their experiences of living among the urban poor.[21] By actually adopting the clothing, the food, and the housing of slum-dwellers these participant-observers sought to show that beneath the "habits of the economic Other lies an essential sameness, a common humanity that requires only recognition and understanding for an inevitable amalgamation," Schocket states: "In such acts of apprehension, 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."[22] The parabolic mobility novel offers exactly this kind of empathetic frisson to its middle-class reader, of course, who is encouraged to imagine themselves in the same position as the impoverished individuals that are being described to them, but crucially the internal protagonist in the parabolic mobility novel is, unlike Crane, London or Stratton, not simply pretending to be poor. That is to say, novels such as *Ormond* and *Margaretta* suggest not that the existential values of the poor are fundamentally comparable to those of the middle classes but that the existential values of the poor are fundamentally *identical* to those of the middle classes. This ideological claim paradoxically emerges at its strongest precisely at the moment when the protagonist of the parabolic mobility novel seems most distant from the poor: the moment when they are recognized as being their former selves and are lifted back into material comfort.

These "recognition scenes," which serve as a dominant and distinguishing motif in all the novels I consider in this essay, are – as should already be evident by now – very much not

in the liberal tradition of the "politics of recognition" as it has been influentially charted by Charles Taylor.[23] For Taylor the "demand for recognition" issued by marginalized social groups during the second half of the twentieth century is a key way in which negatively gendered, classed, or racialized identities have come to achieve a degree of theoretical equality with white, middle-class, masculine norms under the aegis of multiculturalism (*PR* 25). This emphasis on a "politics of difference, [where] what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of [an] individual or group" has its deep roots in the Enlightenment, Taylor shows, which saw thinkers like Rousseau and Kant initially formulating the grounds for how a democratic society could be predicated upon mutual respect and equal dignity (*PR* 38). The Enlightenment also gave birth, though, to the two philosophical arbiters of the parabolic mobility novel, Smith and Lavater, and it is the alternative, "homogenizing demand for recognition" operating in their work that underpins the political commitments of these narratives (*PR* 72).

More specifically, parabolic mobility novels foreground the etymology of the word "recognition" – which meant "to know again" in its original Latin – by fusing the theoretical models of sameness that haunt Smithian sympathy and Lavaterian physiognomy with the narrative models of sameness that underpin the Aristotelian tradition of anagnorisis. "'Anagnorisis,' like 're-cognition,' … implies a recovery of something once known rather than merely a shift from ignorance to knowledge," Terence Cave points out, and up until the end of the eighteenth century literary plots that deployed this structure fell "for the most part within the orbit of the archetypal 'recognition of persons'" established by the conclusions of Homer's *Odyssey* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in turning on "separated twins, foundlings, characters in disguise who are unmasked for good or ill by poetic logic."[24] Such moments of coincidental familial reunion were coming to seem blatantly contrived and ridiculous to many commentators by the time the parabolic mobility novel emerged, just as the ability of the better-off to inhabit

the subjectivity of the poor was increasingly being restricted by the articulation of empirical standards of social observation, but crucially the parabolic mobility novel is not just some arcane relic of a pre-Enlightenment world.[25] For the development of realist treatments of poverty in the novel and anthropological treatments of poverty in the press both extend, in a more veiled and frequently unintentional fashion, the parabolic mobility novel's assertion that what external viewers tend to recognize in the poor are ultimately versions of themselves.

If, as Eric Schocket puts it, "sociological authority emerges out of the ability to have an authentic experience of poverty while retaining a supposedly middle-class ability for objective assessment," that authority did not have to wait for Foucauldian critiques of the relativism of scientific knowledge to be found wanting, for it originated out of a set of eighteenth-century discourses within which the subjective appropriation of the poor was presumed to be superior to the "percentages and numbers" that might impose a rational framework on their experiences.[26] As Terence Cave remarks of anagnoristic narratives, "the recovery of personal identity (an individual discovering who he is) appears to be tautologous – like saying that something is like itself," but for many early nineteenth-century Americans this kind of tautology was very much the key to establishing viable modes of secular response to the issues of human suffering and social disenfranchisement.[27] The basic theoretical framework of "sympathy," for example, as it was formulated by Adam Smith in the 1750s, revolved around a similar tautology to that which we find in how characters of feeling apprehend the impoverished protagonists in parabolic mobility novels. However inherently selfish "man" can be shown to be, Smith remarks, "there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others," and one principle of "this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner."[28] Yet – having seemingly detached "sympathy" from self-interest – Smith then goes on to observe that since "we have no immediate experience of what other

men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. … We enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him."[29] This model for apprehending the face of the poor, which Julia Stern has neatly characterized as a "reciprocal ocular exchange … in which the object of compassion and the viewing subject exchange interiorities," is the one that is repeatedly dramatized in the parabolic mobility novel, and the one too that continues to reappear in the writing of later observers of the dispossessed, who are ostensibly trying to describe the otherness of the poor but can seemingly do so only by rendering them in the shades of a now fully functioning middle-class morality.[30]

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In this respect, the critique of middle-class philanthropy that the parabolic mobility novel offers is aimed not at those who bring their own values to the improvement of the poor but at those who bring the *wrong* values to this enterprise. Martha Meredith Read's condemnation of the "ostentatious charity of the naturally contracted and cringing hypocrite" in *Monima; or, The Beggar Girl* (1802) is echoed, for instance, in the lament from Helena Wells's *Constantia Neville* (1800) that "by far the greater part of mankind [are] led to do benevolent actions for the sake of gratifying themselves, rather than from purity of intention, or a desire to help others."[31] Thus, arrayed against the protagonists of the parabolic mobility novel and those benefactors who genuinely help lift them from destitution are the many self-righteous and Machiavellian altruists who populate these narratives. This critical conception of certain American attitudes toward the poor is particularly evident in a novel like *Monima*, which repeatedly challenges those who take the title character's "garb of beggary" to mean that "the movements of her soul were correspondent to her appearance" (*MBG* 301). Such superficial explications of moral character essentially represent a perversion of the logic of physiognomy, wherein clothing rather than mien is erroneously taken as a measure of rectitude.

"Patches and darns make women look horrid … but Monima [is] charming even in the garb of beggary," Read insists. "Poverty had not diminished the natural graces of her person, but had added an interesting dejection to her lovely countenance, which spoke to every feeling heart" (*MBG* 386, 86). When set against the protagonist's characteristic final leap "from the lowest rank in life … to one of great distinction" this strict construction of physiognomic evidence helps to pre-emptively defuse any suggestion that wealth and worthiness are reciprocal.[32] Since providence sometimes shuffles people's social position, but does not alter their basic personality, the material trappings of an individual can be deemed accidental, while the moral qualities of that individual can be deemed "natural."

Crucially, the recurrence in the parabolic mobility novel of the motif of the heroine's "lovely countenance, which spoke to every feeling heart" accords with Christopher Lukasik's argument that the social turbulence of the post-Revolutionary period saw a shift away from an earlier model in which "social mobility was not a product of [a] particular body, but of … personal performances" toward a "conflation of social performance and corporeality."[33] As Lukasik puts it in his wide-ranging study of Johann Caspar Lavater's influence on late eighteenth-century seduction fiction: "For those whose economic and social capital were most threatened by dissimulation – particularly the genteel elite – the logic … of physiognomic distinction offered a means to establish moral character, embody social origin, and restrain the mobility enabled by the cultural capital of civility alone."[34] And this logic, we might add, also holds true in early nineteenth-century novels like *Constantia Neville* and *Margaretta*. In the latter, for instance, the kindly Mr Vernon is so convinced that the heroine is a "lady of birth and fortune" despite her poverty that he explicitly invokes "Lavater's doctrine of physiognomy" to refute the idea that "the countenance of such an angel could deceive him" (*M* 239).

Parabolic mobility novels are replete, in this vein, with what Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond* calls "the language of features and looks" (*O* 97). More particularly, they tend to read the corporeal qualities of their protagonists, such as beauty and poise, as direct correlates for their internal probity. Whether through physical fainting or verbal outburst the women in these novels exhibit an almost involuntary defiance in the face of sexual vice and social oppression. There is a kind of moral transparency to their behavior which extends the belief in a "coincidence between mental and external qualities" to the point where it is possible to base one's "estimate of good and evil on … terrestrial and visible consequences" (*O* 97, 182). Thus while a rain-sodden and dishevelled Constantia Neville "tremble[s] with apprehension" at "being obliged to appear among total strangers" in "garb so equivocal," Helena Wells reassures us that: "The modest demeanor of a truly virtuous woman … will always ensure her respect" (*CN* 2:362). Indeed, poverty in the parabolic mobility novel sometimes seems little more than a superficial condition, marked by clothes or habitation, which cannot obscure incarnate worth. Just as the hidden mechanisms of providence ultimately bear fruit in the form of material enrichment, so too do the personal merits of the protagonist ultimately find recognition in the public arena. The "unaffected simplicity" of a character like Read's Margaretta, which reflects a "heart [that is] unadulterated, honest, and open," in the end overrides the social and economic difficulties they are confronted with (*M* 24, 307).

Physiognomy in these novels is, in short, the site where sympathy operates and through which it constructs its model of social relations. Indeed, physiognomic theory as it was initiated by Lavater construed the human countenance along very similar structural lines: each face is individually distinct yet expressive of various standardized moral qualities, just as sympathy extends out from self-interest into a potentially universal response to suffering, and in both cases what allows the translation from the particular to the general is the observer's imaginative identification with the observed. As Lavater puts it of the physiognomist's practice: "No one

can comprehend the expression of generosity, can distinguish the signs which announce great quality, unless he himself is generous, animated with noble sentiments, and capable of performing great actions."[35] That much being said, however, for all its systematic elaboration in the work of Lavater and those who followed him this model of legible virtue is by no means unambiguous. "The face … would be a deceiving index indeed, if your heart be not the seat of every better passion," Margaretta is told at one point, yet the speaker of these lines, the ostensibly benevolent Lord Orman, turns out to have seduced a poor curate's daughter (*M* 333).

A key part of the protagonist's maturation in the parabolic mobility novel, then, lies in their discovery that outward appearance can in fact be a "deceiving index" to morality. Though themselves "influenced by no motives but what were avowed," these protagonists undergo a series of narrative trials which lead them to dispense with their naïve belief that "all with whom [they] associated [are] equally sincere" (*CN* 1:202). As the example of Lord Orman might suggest, one particularly obvious trial of the logic of physiognomy comes in the form of sexual duplicity. "The heart of the libertine is composed of materials totally different from humanity," Caroline Warren declares in *The Gamesters* (1805). "Insensible to the charms of innocence, and seeking only sensual gratification, he employs all the artifice that genius can devise, to seduce unguarded virtue. … Deception [is] his trade; he [can] assume a soft and soothing accent, while his heart [is] meditating destruction."[36] Thus the trope of the "honest" and "open" heart which the parabolic mobility novel attaches to its heroines acquires a direct antithesis in the figure of the seducer. Indeed, in an ironic sense, the unpretentious beauty of these heroines invites not just the fascinated gaze of well-wishers but also the sinister attention of the debauched. Part of the attraction for the latter lies precisely in the same juxtaposition between inner refinement and outward poverty which appeals to the former, for more often than not the libertine in these novels sees such disjunction as a means to his end. While the character of the worthy suitor in these texts invariably finds his romantic ambition stymied by financial

difficulties, the character of the villainous suitor, who is frequently marked as an aristocrat, attempts to use his wealth as a tool of seduction. In typical fashion, for example, the corrupt Count de Launa in *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron* promises the eponymous lead a life of "ease and affluence … if you content to make me happy" (*JIB* 88). Recognizing the unequal social dynamics at play here, the heroines of parabolic mobility novels, for their part, scorn such a "provision which will secure you from future ills" as "an insult … to virtuous poverty" (*CN* 2:17, 22). Despite their sexual and economic vulnerability they crucially refuse to acknowledge any tension between morality and privation.

In fact, even before the libertine makes his move the heroine has usually identified him as a threat. For in learning the value of behavioral transparency through the poverty which they undergo, these women are able to extend this clarity into a facility to penetrate the faces of others. Subordinate characters certainly fall prey to seduction and its dire consequences in the parabolic mobility novel, but the inability of these women to master the "inquietudes of … passion" (*O* 134) serves to sharply differentiate them from the protagonist and align them instead with the ill-fated central characters of earlier novels like Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797).[37] Seen from the perspective of the parabolic mobility novel's main action at least, the questions which the figure of the libertine may raise about the "vanity of physiognomy" are safely answered by the end of a narrative like *Margaretta* or *Julia* (*O* 116). Given the unwavering chastity of those eponymous heroines, frequent kidnappings and attempted rapes notwithstanding, one might even suggest that there is little dramatic mileage for parabolic mobility novels in the potential of seduction. Indeed, through their "unaffected simplicity" the heroines of these texts are more likely to transform a would-be-seducer into "a votary to virtue," as is the case with Read's Margaretta and her eventual husband William de Burling (*M* 24).

Instead, it is indicative of the more socially-oriented *mise-en-scène* of the parabolic mobility novel, when compared to the seduction novel, that the greater threat to the protagonist's integrity in the former comes through scenes of public misrecognition. The characteristic resolution of the parabolic mobility novel always involves a re-coordination of countenance and apparel as veracious social markers. But, alongside the libertinism of wealthy men, another more basic obstacle which the protagonist of these novels must overcome is a tendency to misunderstand the relationship between fashion and physiognomy. Indeed, this is a tension which lingered at the heart of the modern physiognomic tradition as it came into being during the late eighteenth century. "Dress [and] position … betray the physiognomist into a false judgment on the true qualities of the countenance and character!" Lavater warned in an 1800 edition of his *Essays on Physiognomy*. "How easily may these occasion him to overlook the essential traits of character, and form his judgment on what is wholly accidental!"[38] Yet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who was a close collaborator of Lavater for a time, took a more semiotically expansive approach within which the body's meaning was inevitably shaped by its social context. "We can draw sure conclusions about a man's character from his clothes and household effects," he argued in his contribution to Lavater's four volumes of *Physiognomic Fragments* (1775). "Nature forms human beings, but they in turn transform themselves, and these transformations are once again natural."[39] Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its emphasis on the mutability and precariousness of one's social standing, the parabolic mobility novel leans toward Lavater's position in the debate over whether costume is an "accidental" or a "natural" sign of personality. There is clearly a strain of critique in these novels directed toward the idea that clothes can represent the morality of an impoverished character in the same way that faces supposedly can.

In this regard, it is no coincidence that *Julia*, *Margaretta* and *Constantia Neville* all share extended episodes set in and around masquerade balls, for these events perfectly capture

the combination of wastefulness and dissimulation which such novels associate with the aristocracy. Rendering literal a metaphor of concealment frequently applied to seducers, the "mask" here once again functions as a threat to the physiognomic logic which should guarantee the recognition of the heroine's virtue. Having been drawn into the orbit of a wealthy patron who is planning a masquerade, Margaretta accordingly derides it as "a scene of folly, and a thing subversive of morality, … totally opposed to the true dignity of human nature" (*M* 384), while Sarah Wood's Julia similarly declares that it is "highly inconsistent, with the true dignity of a young woman, to appear in a borrowed character" (*JIB* 142). It is true, of course, that there is a latent irony in such pronouncements, for while a figure like Julia may appear to be a penniless dependant she is actually beneficiary to a fortune. But crucially the parabolic mobility novel sees no deeper contradiction in this instance of "a borrowed character" because the protagonist remains true to themselves whatever raiment they wear. Hence it is appropriate that Margaretta rejects her initial plan to "personate a stripling cottage girl" at the masquerade, not because she is really an heiress but because she cannot imitate what she ineluctably feels herself to be (*M* 383). "I cannot act in a character, that providence has not given me; [and] it has … allotted me a very plain and easy part," Julia similarly explains when she is urged to "disguise herself" for a ball: "I do not mean to be above myself, and I do not mean to descend" (*JIB* 142). Julia's own status as a "humble cottage girl," like Margaretta's, is in this sense congruent with (though not determinative of) her ethical being because, as the latter lines from Wood's novel imply, the medial principles of virtue and industry can transcend their bourgeois origins and be assimilated into other social categories (*JIB* 143). Since the protagonist's basic character is immune to change, however much providence moves them around the social scale, the material effects of poverty on them can be seen as contingent, while the moral qualities that the novels want to propagate remain universally obtainable. Set against this classless conception of physiognomic evidence, *Margaretta*'s warning that anything "mysterious in the conduct of a

young woman … depreciates her worth" neatly indicates how the parabolic mobility novel envisages the masquerade ball as polluting spiritual conceptions of value with monetary ones (*M* 207).

Running parallel to this emphasis, meanwhile, the parabolic mobility novel is also preoccupied, as I have already suggested, with the potential misreadings which can arise from the dress of the poor. Although the trope of the masquerade ball shows the protagonists of these narratives as resisting the presumptive livery of others, they themselves are deeply susceptible to moral judgments which arise from their penurious appearance. Indeed, the post-Revolutionary period witnessed a growing desire for some palpable means of class distinction, with the method of physiognomy as just one instance among several that would increasingly be exploited for this purpose. The colonial tradition of badging, which involved sewing marks of identification onto the garments of those claiming poor relief, may have died out by the middle of the eighteenth century, but even as the poor were increasingly removed from the public gaze through institutionalization the ongoing reconfiguration of traditional social hierarchies and the progressive uniformity of clothing styles in the early 1800s focused new attention on the semiotics of impoverishment. As Simon Newman has recently argued, "embodied characterisations of the deserving poor" were a key weapon in the armoury of social reformers and workhouse administrators: "In early national [America], clothing provided vital markers of status, race, gender, and class, thus helping to establish the wearer's sense of social identity. … Civic authorities and more prosperous citizens judged their poorer neighbors by their appearance, embodying a whole host of social problems … in the absence of clothing, or the wearing of little more than rags."[40] What is intriguing about the parabolic mobility novel, however, is the persistent critique which it levels at this vestmental brand of philanthropic discernment.

This critique is partly a reflection of the parabolic mobility novel's underlying scepticism toward institutionalized welfare, and it is partly the reflection of a related impulse toward a more narrowly physiognomic understanding of worthiness.[41] Once again, as in their depiction of wealthy libertines or aristocratic soirees, the concern of these texts is with detaching moral virtue from material indicators of status or civility. In a series of major scenes in *Monima*, for example, the industrious title character's quest for employment is blocked by those 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," Martha Meredith Read writes of her protagonist's predicament. "No one could trust the 'mean-looking creature' with work; and yet each one exclaimed against her indolence, in … claiming charity, when she looked great and able enough to work" (*MBG* 251). Thus *Monima* astutely skewers the confused perception of virtue which can arise when different means of reading for inner traits come together.

For Read, as for her fellow parabolists, it is incontrovertibly in translating the "language of features and looks" that reliable evidence of character can be found. The only problem with this common resolution to the parabolic mobility novel is that it could be seen to compromise the anti-material definition of moral worth articulated in the earlier parts of such texts. The conclusive bearing away of the protagonist "to the seats of affluence" clearly follows an acknowledgment of virtue attained while in poverty, and so it functions as a reward rather than a right, but there is nonetheless a lingering implication that such virtue can only be secured by such material assets (*MBG* 459). In this sense, the "large estate" and "valuable silks, muslins, laces and … millinery" which the heroine tends to inherit in the final chapter of these narratives can seem uncomfortably like natural rather than accidental attributes.[42] The way parabolic mobility novels typically seek to overcome this ambiguity then becomes evident if we turn to

a particular material asset which repeatedly triggers the process of social re-ascent in these texts – the portrait miniature. Importantly, virtually all of the novels which can be fitted into the parabolic mobility genre feature miniatures as an anagnoristic plot device. Either inherited or gifted at the beginning of the story these treasured objects ultimately prove to be the key to the protagonist's recognition by a lost relative.

In *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron*, for example, the heroine at one point meets a "dying penitent" named Leonora who bequeaths her "a miniature of my sister, whom you so much resemble" (*JIB* 172). Tacitly carried by Julia through a whole host of subsequent travails this strangely mirror-like portrait then comes back into narrative prominence at the end of the book when its new owner hits rock bottom. Having lost all her remaining money and clothing in a house fire, and with a lecherous suitor and an avaricious landlord breathing down her neck, Julia suddenly recalls the "miniature picture" and determines to sell it, whereupon the first person it is offered to recognizes the image as one of her former mistress and reunites Julia with her wealthy father, the Marquis Alvada (*JIB* 259). Thus the portrait miniature serves as a vital catalyst for imparting the lesson that one must trust to the ways of providence. "Remember the vicissitude of human things, and the usual course of providence," the influential Scottish-American philosopher John Witherspoon had advised his readers in 1777. "How often has a just cause been reduced to the lowest ebb, and yet when firmly adhered to, has finally become triumphant?"[43] And similarly, the parabolic mobility novel too locates divine redemption in the moment of greatest crisis. It is precisely through Julia's willingness to sacrifice the last and most prized of her possessions that she is redeemed.

In relation to the facializing of poverty that I have been delineating thus far it is obviously significant that the portrait miniature triggers the protagonist's final accession to the "seats of affluence," because such objects inherently serve to uphold the logic of physiognomy. Like their real-world counterparts, the miniatures in parabolic mobility novels symbolically

emphasize a privileged countenance within a materially lavish frame (the image of "female decorum" which Julia receives from Leonora is, for example, "richly set in gold and surrounded by two rows of diamonds") [*JIB* 259]. As Robin Frank puts it in her definitive study of the American portrait miniature, these objects "not only satisfied a superficial desire for valuable goods but also expressed a deeper wish to carry a picture of a loved one … [that] resonates with the greater value placed upon sentiment in an era newly enthralled with family life."[44] As the fountainhead for claims to a wider range of possessions, the miniature in the parabolic mobility novel therefore helps to anchor these tangible riches in a more abstract and more ethically-oriented understanding of worth. Indeed, in many parabolic mobility novels the circuitous journey which a miniaturized face has experienced can be seen as analogous to the circuitous journey which the protagonist's lost fortune undergoes.

This use of the miniature as a metonym for economic deprivation and recovery can be briefly illustrated by considering the "rural retreat" which Constantia Dudley inherits toward the end of *Ormond*, which used to belong to her father before being sold off to the title character, who then gave it to his mistress (*O* 177). One of the first moments at which a newly impoverished Constantia has "thoroughly conceived the extent of her calamity" comes in the book's eighth chapter, when she is forced to pawn a cherished miniature of her friend Sophia to her landlord in order to avoid homelessness (*O* 96). Like her father's country house, this token of a former happiness is then passed through multiple hands (here those a goldsmith and a mysterious stranger named Martynne) before being fortuitously returned to Constantia at a critical juncture in her economic decline. What differs in the similar trajectory of house and miniature, however, is the perepeteian function the latter plays in restoring the former, thanks to its fundamentally anagnoristic role in the narrative. For as in other parabolic mobility tales, Constantia's decision to give up a miniature which she regards as an "inestimable relic" is the mark of a selfless virtue which is providentially rewarded by the appearance of a character

bearing property which she had no choice in surrendering (*O* 96). In effect, Constantia's portrait of her friend is transformed from a "precious … substitute for sympathy and intercourse with the original" into the conduit for a physical reunion, as Sophia serendipitously arrives in Philadelphia at the end of the book in time to rescue Constantia from the clutches of the murderous Ormond (*O* 96).

Unlike clothes, which are shown to distort the perceptions of those observing the poor, faces – at least as they are appear in the form of the miniature – reassert inner value as they change hands. It is not merely the case that the miniature symbolically purifies other items of valuable property inherited by the protagonist; the "amazing resemblance" between the protagonist and a portrait of a loved one which certain key characters detect serves as proof of moral virtue (*JIB* 57). Thus the miniaturized face's recovery at the end of a novel like *Ormond* mirrors the recovered reputation of the lead character, who has also circulated widely - through America's urban underbelly and even the Atlantic hemisphere - before being assimilated back into their rightful place. Indeed, there is a sense in which the miniature's distinctive fusion of physiognomic and economic understandings of value is simply an extension of the language of abstracted materialism used elsewhere in the parabolic mobility novel.

This metaphorical equivalence between money and self can often be seen as evidence of reification, especially when the unequal dynamics of gender are involved. The libertine's determination to "make a prize" of the heroine, for example, is indicative for a writer like Martha Meredith Read of a corrupt sexual code within which women are forced to make a "market of themselves" (*M* 12, 268). Just as frequently, however, parabolic mobility novels attempt to reverse this process of commodification by emphasizing how the protagonist's concrete labor underpins their figurative worth. The dutifully industrious heroine of such stories, we are told in Leonora Sansay's *Laura* (1809), "though poor, was in herself a treasure."[45] As this line's ironic disjunction between economic and spiritual status might

suggest, part of the problem with capitalism for these novels is its inefficient alignment of effort and reward, but at the same time the semantic mutability of words like "treasure" allows the parabolic mobility novel to circumvent crudely material definitions of worth, just as the miniature - with its handcrafted rendering of an esteemed individual – is able to hold straightforwardly financial evaluations of its value at bay. When seen in this light, the circulation of the miniature in parabolic mobility novels arguably begins to edge away from being analogous to the circulation of the protagonist's lost wealth and toward functioning as an alternative to that circulation.

The trajectory of the miniature in parabolic mobility novels can be seen, more precisely, as a substitute for the frequently inscrutable and intangible economic exchanges which take place in these novels. As it passes, in a novel like *Ormond*, from hand to hand, and is bought and sold, it clearly parallels the dissemination of the protagonist's other property, which we often only hear about at the end of the story and then fleetingly. But while houses and clothes have an essentially fungible quality, somewhat akin to the pure representation of a monetary sum found in a coin or a note, miniatures function rather differently. These objects may possess a certain convertibility - they are rightly depicted as markers of social status which are expensive to commission and which have valuable gold or gilt frames – but they also possess an inalienable personal meaning which transcends the determinations of the market. As Constantia Dudley puts it to the man from whom she finally retrieves her portrait of Sophia, it is "valuable to me, because it had been the property of one whom I loved," and as such is worth a "price … at least double its value as a mere article of traffic" (*O* 234). The fact that Sophia's image resembles Constantia herself with the "utmost accuracy" only serves to confirm the intimate kinship between sitter and beholder (*O* 95). Indeed, unlike *Ormond*, most parabolic mobility novels actually represent the miniature as circulating between blood relatives, rather than among strangers. "Whereas easel portraits present a public self meant to face outward,

portrait miniatures reveal a private self meant to face inward," Robin Frank observes. "A miniature usually descended in the family of the sitter: after the person who first held and wore it died, the miniature would be inherited, perpetuating family continuity and testifying to [a] devotion that by this means outlasted a lifetime."[46] However accidentally or unconsciously it takes place, this is exactly what happens for the heroine of *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron*, who receives a portrait of her mother from her aunt as a precursor to reunion with her father. The similarly fortuitous familial exchange of miniatures in other parabolic mobility novels thus points to the way the circulation of wealth in these novels is subtly limited to a homogeneous group.

Perhaps the most striking indication of the parabolic mobility novel's commitment to social homogeneity lies in its representation of incest. As numerous critics have pointed out, incest is a recurring motif in the early American novel, running from William Hill Brown's paradigmatic seduction novel *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) through to Susanna Rowson's *Lucy Temple* (1828). This fascination with incest, as some of these scholars have noted, "expressed deep anxieties about class upheaval" in the wake of the American Revolution – "in other words, the violation of the basic rules of kinship might be seen as a result of dislocation and loss of structure, an effect of the loss of a kinship system and an increase in social mobility."[47] I would certainly agree with this line of interpretation. But while it is evident that the delineation of endogamous sexuality in the parabolic mobility novel is tied to modernity's emerging definition of social class, it is important to note that the treatment of incest in the seduction genre of the early American novel is also distinct from that which we find elsewhere.

Consider, for instance, the contrast between Brown's *Power of Sympathy* and his much later, parabolic mobility novel, *Ira and Isabella* (1807). In the former, the performance of an act of unwitting incest results from the wealthy protagonist's attraction to a "daughter of the democratick empire" who lacks "kindred of any degree who claim any kind of relationship to

her."[48] The eventual revelation that this lowly orphan girl is the protagonist's sister, and the shame and death which quickly follow, then serves as a veiled warning for those bourgeois readers who would "wed any person of this class."[49] In *Ira and Isabella*, however, the tragic consequences of incest are intriguingly defused. The two title characters both begin the novel as orphans, who are "not independent, and though guarded from penury by the hand of patronage, [are] circumscribed by the curtain of obscurity" in relation to the "elevated and important sphere" in which their employers move.[50] Finding a substitute for the "tender charities of … [a] parent" in each other, Ira and Isabella determine to marry, only for this plan to be demolished when Isabella is suddenly reunited with her father, the "stately … and majestick" Doctor Joseph, who tells her that Ira may be his illegitimate son (*II* 16, 46). Thus far at least, Brown's second novel broadly follows the template of his first, with incest rearing its head in response to the possibility of a cross-class romance. But in *Ira and Isabella* the moral crisis experienced, and presented, by the protagonists is resolved less punitively. For after various intervening challenges Ira, who has broken from Isabella in order to "seek redress in the bosom of the mercantile world," finally learns that his father is really one of Doctor Joseph's friends, the genteel Mr. Savage; a discovery which leaves him free to wed his beloved on the novel's final page (*II* 69).

In the parabolic mobility novel then, it would appear that the charge of incest is no longer a symptom of class disorder but a sign of class coherence. Since Ira and Isabella both begin and end the novel sharing the same social status their curious similitude ultimately becomes reassuring, and helps to make evident the degree to which sympathy is predicated upon a dynamic of psychological equivalence. Thus the potential danger encoded in the fact that "they looked alike, and … were inspired with one soul" is dissipated when this is revealed to be a compatability of caste rather than of consanguinity (*II* 34). As in other examples of the parabolic mobility novel, Ira's possession of sufficient "industry to augment … the cave of

poverty" triggers the arrival of a "guardian angel" who inducts him into the conjoined security of an enclosed family unit and an intra-group marriage (*II* 53, 42). In *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron,* for instance, the threat posed to Julia by the lecherous Count de Launa - who turns out to be her half-brother - is balanced by the instinctive protectiveness of the Marquis Alvada, who having already told Julia that he will act as "a father to you" is revealed to bear that relation in fact (*JIB* 64). Read's *Margaretta,* meanwhile, pushes even closer to the realization of an "incestuous union" (when it is discovered that the heroine's elderly fiance, who sees in her the "very counterpart" of his dead wife, is actually her paterfamilias) only for this prospect to safely dissipate when Margaretta's father is reunited with her now-revealed-to-be-alive mother, and she is left free to marry the courageous William de Burling (*M* 340, 186).

The fact that de Burling has earlier told Margaretta that he wants to "be to you what the most affectionate brother can be" serves, in this novel, as an indication of a kinship system which is being expanded instead of violated (*M* 75). For unlike its late eighteenth-century antecedents, the parabolic mobility novel uses the incest motif to prefigure harmonious familial units rather than the death-dealing breakdown of paternal or fraternal authority. More precisely, the terminal recognition scenes in parabolic mobility novels transform the figurative relations of the "adopted daughter[s]" which litter their pages into a biological reality, at the same time as decisively desexualizing these new bonds by allowing the protagonist to claim a romantic substitute who is physically exogamous (though financially and metaphorically endogamous) [*CN* 3:185]. On a structural level, then, the moment of anagnorisis in the parabolic mobility novel refuses to kickstart the gloomy peripeteia of Oedipal tragedy, even while on an ideological level these same texts steer clear of a paradigm of social relations devoid of patrimonial dependence. Here is further evidence, if it were needed, that because sympathy "relies on likeness and thereby enforces homogeneity" it has a "dangerous capacity to

undermine the … principles it ostensibly means to reinforce," in this case by "displacing a democratic model that values diversity with a familial model that seeks to elide it."[51]

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Ultimately, the positive valuation of incest in the parabolic mobility novel offers a telling analogy for the way these novels view the poor: a view which is similarly predicated upon a simultaneous desire for and repulsion towards a subject that threatens to be identical to ourselves. There is evidently also something irresistible yet taboo in the way that American writers have long wanted to appropriate the experiences of the poor while maintaining that these experiences are at the same time somehow alien to a middle-class sensibility, a fantasy of sameness-in-difference that effectively disables the liberal model of a politics of recognition. The parabolic mobility novel, for its part, seems to have proved too willing to explicitly entertain the violation of personal and social distinctions that is crystallized in its concluding motif of familial reunion. Recognition, in its anagnoristic sense, "is a scandal," Terence Cave notes: "The word may seem excessive, but it is appropriate even in its most ordinary, venial sense, since recognition plots are frequently *about* scandal – incest, adultery, murder in the dark, goings-on that characters ought to know about but usually don't until it's too late. … The most fundamental of the ordering structures of life – the difference between individuals – is at least temporarily shaken."[52] Precisely because the destabilization of identity they play with by moving characters down the social scale is only resolved by the miraculous intervention of providence, parabolic mobility novels always leave open the possibility that the poor are in practical terms indistinguishable from the middle classes. This potential inference, which partly draws on a mythology of American classlessness that has typically been used to punish the poor for their perceived failings rather than to make claims for their equal humanity, was clearly unhelpful for both subsequent social reformers and social novelists, who found it more

productive to insist upon a less ambiguous, if still deeply conservative, relationship between the poor and their observers.

Thus, beginning with Sarah Savage's *The Factory Girl* (1814), the paradigm of sympathetic physiognomics initiated in the parabolic mobility novel was gradually shorn of its anagnoristic resonances, opened out to emerging industrial settings, and then symbolically contained within stable, complementary but not overlapping household units in ways that gave birth to the domestic novel.[53] As the title of one of the most popular examples of this new genre, Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *The Poor Rich Man, and the Rich Poor Man* (1836), might suggest, the parabolic mobility novel's evasion of questions of material economic status through an emphasis on moral "wealth" remained prominent in these later texts. As did the physiognomic signalling of the possession of such spiritual riches – Sedgwick accordingly encourages the reader in "fixing his eyes compassionately" on her heroine's "face, where, though the cheek was pale, and the eye was sunken, the health of the soul was apparent" in the opening chapter of *The Poor Rich Man*, before going on to contrast this compellingly transparent visage with that of the novel's wealthy villain Morris Finley, whose "face looks to me like an account-book, written over with dollars and cents, as if he had coined them into his soul."[54] But whereas the parabolic mobility novel asserts some degree of interchangeability between the virtuous poor and the virtuous bourgeoisie, the domestic novel erects a very clear class barrier between these two groups, one that in plot terms prevents any inaugural or culminating shifting of characters across social positions. "Has not … Providence made inequality the necessary result of the human condition," Sedgwick declares. "If there were a perfect community of goods, where would be the opportunity for the exercise of the virtues, of justice, and mercy, humility, fidelity, and gratitude?"[55] Recasting Puritan conceptions of social difference as "natural" within the more densely stratified and economically complex world of Jacksonian America, the domestic novel thus positions the poor more clearly and more rigidly

than the parabolic mobility novel does as subjects who should *be like* the middle class *without becoming* middle class.

A perverse combination of wanting and not wanting to be like the poor, of seeing them only when we see ourselves, has such deep roots in American culture that it has been strikingly difficult to dislodge despite the exposure of various forms of ideological blindness that a liberal politics of recognition has increasingly brought into the domain of literary criticism since the 1960s. Because poverty is, as I proposed at the start of this essay, defined most fundamentally by a *lack* of physical, material, and epistemological resources questions of class, race and gender have all too frequently been used to fill that identitarian void in ways that tend to obscure the fundamental challenge which poverty poses for determinations of cultural identity. I am not suggesting, of course, that we ignore or abandon those questions. The previous scholarship that has dwelt on the instances of servant rebellion, blackface performance, or female cross-dressing in *Ormond*, to take an example from the most critically-discussed of the texts I have tackled here, is undeniably necessary.[56] But trying to look the poverty of Brown's heroine square in the face, as I have sought to do in this essay, can show us how economic dispossession often precedes or facilitates other categories of social being.

By placing a novel like *Ormond* within the wider purview of the parabolic mobility novel, and the way that genre served as a testing ground for the structural dividing lines of modern American society, I hope to have pinned down some of the reasons why poverty is such an elusive analytical concept, while not conveying the impression that I have recovered some kind of authentic "face of poverty." As part of her argument for the importance of middle-class sympathy toward the poor as a means of ensuring harmony between the different social orders, Catharine Maria Sedgwick states that: "If the rights of the poor … were universally acknowledged, if intellectual and moral education were what they should be, ... the blind would see."[57] Whether in the parabolic mobility novel, domestic fiction, the class-transvestite report

or the sociological study, this attitude toward the other America is a common one, echoed by conservatives and progressives alike. But as this essay has attempted to show, the rhetoric of visual insight is always dogged by blindspots when it comes to recognizing poverty.

**Notes**

[1] George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall* (Philadelphia: George Lippard, 1847), 341; Rebecca Harding Davis, *Margaret Howth: A Story of Today* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1862), 152, 151.

[2] William Dean Howells, *My Literary Passions: Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper, 1895), 76. Similar assertions of Dickens's determining influence in later works of criticism run from Robert H. Bremner's *The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1956) to Frank Christianson's *Philanthropy in British and American Fiction: Dickens, Hawthorne, Eliot, and Howells* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

[3] Howells, *My Literary Passions*, 77, 76.

[4] Charles Dickens, *The Lamplighter's Story, and Other Nouvelettes* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 1861), 21.

[5] See Duncan Faherty, "Remapping the Canonical Interregnum: Periodization, Canonization, and the American Novel, 1800-1820," in *A Companion to American Literature: Volume 1 – Origins to 1820,* ed. Theresa Strouth Gaul (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 478-94.

[6] For perceptive analyses of the photographic documentation of poverty during the Gilded Age and the Depression and the longer literary and visual traditions they drew on which echo the concerns of this essay see Keith Gandal, *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Winfried Fluck, "Poor Like Us: Poverty and Recognition in American Photography," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 55, no. 1 (2010): 63-93.

[7] Of the sixty or so American novels published between 1800 and 1820 a third fall into this subgenre. Alongside those mentioned in this essay other notable examples include S. S. B. K. Wood's *Dorval; or, The Speculator* (Portsmouth: Nutting and Whitelock, 1801), Charles Brockden Brown's *Jane Talbot* (Philadelphia: John Conrad, 1801), and George Watterston's *Glencarn; or, The Disappointments of Youth* (Alexandria: Cottom and Stewart, 1810).

[8] See Matthew Pethers, "Poverty, Providence, and the State of Welfare: Plotting Parabolic Social Mobility in the Early Nineteenth-Century American Novel," *Early American Literature* 49, no.3 (2014): 707-40.

[9] Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), xiii (hereafter cited as *AH*).

[10] For a useful articulation of some of these arguments from a more sociological perspective see Vivyan Adair, "U.S. Working-Class/Poverty-Class Divides." *Sociology* 39, no.5 (2005): 817-34.

[11] Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 6. Asserting his desire "to describe the faces behind the statistics, to tell a little of the 'thickness' of personal life in the other America," Harrington concludes that the poor "need an American Dickens to record the smell and texture and quality of their lives" (17).

[12] Ibid., 15, 17. For an early but still penetrating critique of the "culture of poverty" thesis see Charles Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critiques and Counter-Proposals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). For a more recent survey of its influence and limitations see Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[13] For useful discussions of the uneven transformation away from feudal/monarchical social structures that the newly formed United States underwent see: Gordon S. Wood, *The*

*Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1993); Lawrence Peskin, "Class, Discourse, and Industrialization in the New American Republic," in *Class Matters: Early North America and the Atlantic World*, eds. Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 138-55; and Michael Zuckerman, "The Polite and the Plebeian," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Revolution*, eds. Edward G. Gray and Jane Kamensky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 47-63.

[14] John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in *The American Intellectual Tradition: 1630-1865*, eds. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7; Sarah Wood, *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Peirce, 1800), 240 (hereafter cited as *JIB*).

[15] Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), x.

[16] For a detailed overview of institutional responses to poverty in early America, most of which were still wedded to assumptions and structures inherited from British Poor Laws of the seventeenth century see the essays in Billy G. Smith, ed. *Down and Out in Early America* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2004).

[17] Class is, in this sense, not irrelevant or alien to the parabolic mobility novel but it is much more inchoate in these literary treatments of poverty than it would subsequently become. It is for this reason that I am sceptical of the effort critics like Joe Shapiro and Joseph Fichtelberg have made to position a handful of the texts I also consider in this essay as portraying poverty in a way that "*includes* the representation of ... class struggle" (*The Illiberal Imagination: Class and the Rise of the U.S. Novel* [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017], 3) or involves "an important level of *conscious* articulation" of "market relations at [their] most crucial historical moments" (*Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market, 1780-1870* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003], 5).

[18] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 1986), 13. See, for example: Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Michael A. Chaney, *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); and Samantha Pinto, "On the Skin: Mary Prince and the Narration of Black Feeling in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Early American Literature* 56, no.2 (2021): 499-529. As the discussion of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, 210-22, would suggest the visual apprehension of Black identity from the mid nineteenth century on can be linked to another philosophical model of "recognition" formulated during the Enlightenment which I am not dealing with in this essay.

[19] On the incorporation of African Americans into the category of the "poor" in the mid nineteenth century see Gunja SenGupta, *From Slavery to Poverty: The Racial Origins of Welfare in New York, 1840-1918* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). On the fluidity of the category of "race" in early American thought and culture see Katy L. Chiles, *Transformable Race: Surprising Metamorphoses in the Literature of Early America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014). As Christopher Lukasik points out in *Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) the foundational, Lavaterian conception of physiognomy did not privilege race as a defining characteristic – this trend only emerged in the 1830s (17-26, 186-230).

[20] Charles Brockden Brown, *Ormond; or, The Secret Witness*, ed. Mary Chapman (Peterborough: Broadview, 1999), 145 (hereafter cited as *O*). For a fuller discussion of this episode which ties it to the dynamics of Smithian self-identification I am also interested in see Julia Stern, *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 211-21.

[21] Eric Schocket, *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 118.

[22] Ibid., 109, 108.

[23] See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-74 (hereafter cited as *PR*).

[24] Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 33, 83.

[25] On the decline of anagnorisis's critical respectability at the start of the nineteenth century see Cave's *Recognitions*, 84-180. On the early development of the social sciences in the United States see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3-21.

[26] Schocket, *Vanishing Moments*, 122.

[27] Cave, *Recognitions*, 244.

[28] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Stern, *The Plight of Feeling*, 24.

[31] Martha Meredith Read, *Monima; or, The Beggar Girl* (New York: Johnson, 1802), 434 (hereafter cited as *MBG*); Helena Wells, *Constantia Neville: or, The West Indian*, 3 vols. (London: Whittingham, 1800), 2:340 (hereafter cited as *CN*).

[32] Martha Meredith Read, *Margaretta; or, The Intricacies of the Heart* (Charleston: Morford, 1807), 343 (hereafter cited as *M*).

[33] Lukasik, *Discerning Characters*, 5, 7.

[34] Ibid., 12.

[35] Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy, Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Henry Hunter. 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1789), 1:126.

[36] Caroline Warren, *The Gamesters; or, Ruins of Innocence* (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1805), 126, 100.

[37] For a fuller account of how and why the American novel begins to shift toward economic concerns during its transition from eighteenth-century sentimentalism to Jacksonian domesticity see Karen A. Weyler, *Intricate Relations: Sexual and Economic Desire in American Fiction, 1789-1814* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 105-39.

[38] Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy, Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1800), 19.

[39] Qtd. in Alexander Todorov, *Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 261.

[40] Simon Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 18, 27, 6.

[41] For more on the genre's relationship to institutionalized welfare see Pethers, "Poverty, Providence," 726-33.

[42] Anon., *Moreland Vale; or, The Fugitive Fair* (New York: Campbell, 1801), 177.

[43] John Witherspoon, "The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men," in *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*, ed. Thomas P. Miller (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), 32.

[44] Robin Frank, *Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 5.

[45] Leonora Sansay, *Laura*, in *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo and Laura*, ed. Michael Drexler (Peterborough: Broadview, 2007), 161.

[46] Frank, *Love and Loss*, 1, 34.

[47] Anne Dalke, "Original Vice: The Political Implications of Incest in the Early American Novel," *Early American Literature* 23, no.2 (1988): 197; Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, "The Original American Novel, or, The American Origin of the Novel," in *A Companion to the Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture*, eds. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 248.

[48] William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy*, in *The Power of Sympathy and The Coquette*, ed. Carla Mulford (London: Penguin, 1996), 11.

[49] Ibid.

[50] William Hill Brown, *Ira and Isabella; or, The Natural Children* (Boston: Belcher and Armstrong, 1807), 17 (hereafter cited as *II*).

[51] Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 4.

[52] Cave, *Recognitions*, 1, 13. As Cave adds, to contemporary scholars: "From the critical angle, recognition is [also] a scandal in the stronger sense preserved in the French *scandale*: it is a stumbling block, an obstacle to belief; it disturbs the decorum which makes it possible for rational readers and critics to talk about literature" (1).

[53] For a brief reading of the role that Savage's novel played in transforming the parabolic mobility novel see Pethers, "Poverty, Providence," 734-36.

[54] Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *The Poor Rich Man, and the Rich Poor Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836), 14, 114.

[55] Ibid., 39.

[56] See respectively for examples of such readings: Matthew Pethers, "The Secret Witness: Thinking, and Not Thinking, About Servants in the Early American Novel," in *Class and the Making of American Literature*, ed. Andrew Lawson (New York: Routledge, 2014), 40-55; Stern, *The Plight of Feeling*, 153-238; and Heather Smyth, "'Imperfect Disclosures': Cross-

Dressing and Containment in Charles Brockden Brown's *Ormond*," in *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*, ed. Merril D. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 240-61.

[57] Sedgwick, *The Poor Rich Man*, 40.