Fictions of commodity culture: from the Victorian to the postmodern

Christoph Lindner.

# Fictions of Commodity Culture

From the Victorian to the Postmodern

In memory of W. H. Lindner who always said it was no trip to Hollywood

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## FICTIONS OF COMMODITY CULTURE

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# Chapter 1

# Can't Get No Satisfaction: The World of Commodities

When I die, I don't want to go to Heaven, I want to go shopping in America.

- Julian Barnes, A History of the World in 101/2 Chapters

What is retail therapy? Why is shopping fun? Where does desire end and ideology begin in a world of mass consumption? Engaging with such questions, this book draws on recent thinking in critical and cultural theory to examine the representation of commodity culture in a selected body of nineteenth and twentieth-century fiction. In so doing, it explains how the commodity, as capitalism's representational agent, created and sustained a culture of its own in the nineteenth century, and how that culture, still with us today, has persisted and evolved since then. It follows the commodity and the cultural forms it generates through their historical development. And it considers how fiction, from realism through modernism and into postmodernism, accommodates and responds to the commodity's colonization of the social imagination and its desires.

The study begins by examining responses to the rise of commodity culture in Victorian social novels before moving on to explore how key issues raised in nineteenth-century writing resurface and are reshaped in first early modernist and then postmodernist fiction. Focusing in this way on the early days of commodity culture provides an important historical backdrop to today's mass media consumer world which, in its immediacy and affinity for instant gratification, all too easily erases any sense of a history. To end the discussion in the transitional years of the early twentieth century, however, would mean missing out on the more fantastic forms that the commodity assumes over the course of the twentieth century. Nowhere, as we will see, does the commodity jump

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through more hoops, perform more tricks, or assume a more garish and made-up appearance than in the fiction of postmodernity.

Accordingly, the book divides loosely into two parts: the nineteenth and early twentieth-century excursions that form the next four chapters and the late twentieth-century excursion that forms the last. Each chapter takes the commodity as its starting point, pairing off key moments in the development of commodity culture with representative texts. So a quick word about the novels considered here. In approaching this study, I faced a choice between making a broad, surveying sweep across almost two centuries of fiction writing, or pinpointing representative texts that bring into focus turning points in commodity culture and its literary representation. So rather than say a little about a lot of writing, I have opted to say a lot about a small but strategically selected body of fiction. Because the selected texts register various critical moments in the rise and development of commodity culture, the chapters, taken together, do tell a full story about the tensions of consumerism - at least as far as such a project is possible when dealing with cultural events, trends, and phenomena that receive representation across the full range of cultural production, and that belong to shifting cultural practices that run from the early nineteenth century through to today.

The first excursion begins roughly in the middle of the nineteenth century, ends shortly after its close, and examines literary responses to commodity culture from its heyday in the Victorian period through to its eventual decay in the transitional years of the early modernist period. The chapters focus respectively on the casualties of industrialism in Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1855), carnivals of consumption in Thackeray's Vanity Fair (1848), constructions of the 'material girl' in Trollope's The Eustace Diamonds (1873), and decay in Conrad's The Secret Agent (1907). The late twentieth-century excursion jumps straight to consumer culture in postmodernity. In the process, the attention shifts from British to American fiction, and so from the epicenter of commodity culture in the nineteenth century to what has become its central hub today. This excursion takes as its focus shopping with DeLillo in White Noise (1985), and addresses the following question along the way. What forms do consumerism and its representation assume in the fiction of late capitalism?

At this point, it is important to stress that the jump into the late twentieth century sets out to offer a contrast to the nineteenth and early

twentieth-century excursions made all the more vivid by a fold in space and time. In other words, the jump is partly conceived to feel as disorienting as the crazy consumer world where it lands. As a rehearsal for the last chapter, however, the preceding ones all draw parallels between their early visions of commodity culture and a range of late twentieth-century ones. These include parallels between Gaskell's industrial novels and Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting (1993), Vanity Fair and Martin Amis' Money (1984), The Eustace Diamonds and the 'Madonna Phenomenon', and The Secret Agent and the rise of British punk.

Together, the chapters on Gaskell, Thackeray, Trollope, Conrad, and DeLillo advance the argument that the project of representing commodity culture's impact on identity and agency remains a dominant concern in literary production from the mid-nineteenth century onwards; and that both the commodity and the consumer world through which it circulates find ambivalent expression in the narratives that represent them. Finally, and as this chapter's title suggests, the study finds that the commodity figures throughout the fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a living object of consumer fetish that excites desires yet strangely denies satisfaction.

#### From the Victorian to the Modernist

By the mid-nineteenth century, the increasing influence of capitalism on everyday life generated in Britain what has come to be known as a 'commodity culture' - a culture organized around the production and exchange of material goods. The economic conditions that largely determined this cultural moment owed much to the industrial revolution. Beginning in earnest in the 1760s and tapering off by the 1840s, the industrial revolution saw a wide range of scientific, technological, agricultural, political, economic and legislative developments that, working in tandem with industry, wrought major and lasting changes in the fabric of British society. Amid advances in agricultural and machine technology, increased domestic and foreign trade, urban demographic explosions, and political reformation, the very character of Britain, as a mercantile nation, altered radically. At the center of those changes, what both supported and spurred industry's accelerating expansion, was the

emergence of a free or competitive market economy – the gradual substitution of a realized capitalist economic system for the quasi-feudal mercantile practices dating back to medieval times (see McNally 5-42; Cipolla 256-73). By the 1770s the agrarian-based marketplace previously in place had effectively given way to an industrial-based marketplace that now traded in a new form of good: the capitalist commodity.

But the full realization of a capitalist economic order, from its embryonic character in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, transformed more than just the face of Britain's economy. It also established a free market or exchange society which in its practices, and wittingly or not, adopted capitalism's economic imperatives. Free market economy changed not only the dominant mode of production and its supporting systems of distribution and exchange – not only the way in which commerce was conducted and sustained – but also the conduct and sustenance of society itself.

At the very center of this change was the commodity. Produced at unprecedented rates, exchanged in unprecedented numbers, and consumed in unprecedented volumes, commodities soon became the prominent, visible markers of industrial and market expansions in the decades leading up to the nineteenth century. Commenting on the early days of Victorian commodity culture, Thomas Richards suggests that, by the nineteenth century, 'fundamental imperatives of the capitalist system', such as the mass production of commodities, 'became tangled up with certain kinds of cultural forms, which after a time became indistinguishable from economic forms' (1). By the 1850s, he goes on to propose, 'the commodity became and has remained the one subject of mass culture, the centerpiece of everyday life, the focal point of all representation, the dead center of the modern world' (1). At this time, in other words, as Britain emerged from the industrial revolution to enter the era of economic expansion that would see it through to the 'turbo capitalism' of today's global economy (Luttwak 52), the commodity so saturated and engrossed Victorian society that it even came to stand as an icon of nation.

London's Great Exhibition of 1851, a monument to industrial innovation on an international scale, testified to just that. Billed as the 'Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations', what Richards describes as a congress of sorts for a 'league of nations' (17), the event hosted representatives of thirty-two nations from as far afield as Africa and Asia.

Yet the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park where the exhibition took place 'contained, not an army of diplomats and attachés, but an assembly of manufactured goods' (Richards 17), commodities of every conceivable shape and size. That a collection of commodities, however comprehensive and fantastic, was used to represent the participating nations - that commodities could, in a way, speak volumes for whole countries and cultures - pointed towards the exhibition's founding conception namely, as Richards notes, 'that all human life and cultural endeavor could be fully represented by exhibiting manufactured articles' (17). The visibility and distinction that the Great Exhibition granted to the commodity registered the extent to which it had gained cultural currency in nineteenth-century Britain. What the Crystal Palace exhibited, in other words, was not just the amassed artifacts of global industrial innovation. but also how deeply capitalist society had internalized those artifacts in its collective imagination. Effectively, The Great Exhibition not only signaled the emergence of commodity culture in the most public and sensational of ways but in the process served, as Richards stresses, 'to legitimate the capitalist system' (4). Walter Benjamin makes a similar point in his discussion of urban modernity in Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism. 'World exhibitions', he observes. 'were places of pilgrimage to the fetish Commodity ... They opened up a phantasmagoria into which people entered in order to be distracted. The world exhibitions erected the universe of commodities' (165-6). In short, by the mid-nineteenth century, and helped along by public relation exercises such as London's Great Exhibition, commodity culture had come into its own.

One response to the rise of capitalism and the 'universe of commodities' it created was the forging of a new field of social and economic thinking: political economy. The publication of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) in many ways marked the first consolidated if somewhat experimental effort to interpret the new forms of wealth that made up Britain's economy in the wake of the industrial revolution. Smith steeps his economic analysis in an Enlightenment philosophical tradition which saw political economy as a sub-field of moral philosophy. In fact, Smith tellingly taught political economy, not as a discipline in its own right, but as one of four parts (the others: natural theology, ethics, and rhetoric) that made up his course in moral philosophy at Glasgow University (see Napoleoni 25). And it is precisely Smith's tendency to

treat political economy in the context of his thinking on rationalism, virtue, and civil society that explains why critics today generally view *The Wealth of Nations* as one of the final products of the Scottish Enlightenment.

In the course of the nineteenth century *The Wealth of Nations* became what Keith Tribe aptly describes as 'the gospel of free trade and economic liberalism', a 'textual symbol of British economic supremacy' (23-4), which in the hands of economic naturalists such as Ricardo and Malthus was heralded as the keystone, or first champion, of classical political economy. Smith's blueprint of *laissez-faire* economics laid much of the necessary groundwork for subsequent studies which, in the nineteenth century, arguably culminated in Marx's monumental *Capital* (1867; first English ed. 1887). Though Marx later criticized Smith for his tendency to internalize and 'naturalize' the economic system – what Marx understood as the very antithesis of natural – Smith's model already located the commodity at the center of the capitalist system.

But where Smith's theorization represents an essentially 'agricultural' approach to an essentially 'industrial' phenomenon, an approach recent economic historians have faulted for its neglect of the industrial revolution as much as for its outdated social model (Mokyr 13; Napoleoni 31), Marx's theorization represents a response that was in many ways more in tune with its time. As Marx, responding to a Smithian version of exchange economy, asks in Capital, 'how long is it since [political economy] discarded the Physiocratic illusion that rents grow out of the soil and not out of society?' (93). And where Smith arrives at a generally optimistic response to economic liberalism, Marx in turn arrives at a far more cautionary one. Smith fills his 1776 publication with promising visions of a nation prospering universally under a free market regime. In the 'Introductory Discourse' to The Wealth of Nations he goes as far as to propose that the production and consumption of commodities has beneficially 'subdued the natural aversion of man from labour, and armed ... industry with the zeal to undertake, and perseverance to overcome ... irksome and disagreeable tasks' (15). Marx, almost a century later and so with the added advantage of hindsight, fills his 1867 publication with grim visions of a society alienated and dehumanized through industry's impersonal cogwheels, a world sucked dry by capitalism's insatiable thirst for profit: 'Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' (241). Still,

like Smith, Marx centers his analysis of capitalism on the commodity. Unlike Smith, however, Marx takes the commodity well beyond the 'natural' form Smith gives it. Marx abstracts it, categorizes it, systematizes it, and even demystifies it.

In particular, to counteract the progressive cultural assimilation of the capitalist system, Marx's theorization of capitalism sets out to distance the commodity from its cultural mythology. For Marx, there is no Smithian 'invisible hand' regulating exchange and spontaneously organizing free market society – no celestial, phantasmal, or superstitious explanation for economic order. Rather, there is the dialectic of commodity production and exchange which, through the marketplace, regulates capitalist economy and structures capitalist society. In Marx's hands, the commodity is no longer the trivial, magical thing we find in Smith. It becomes instead a rationalized, socialized, and historicized object. It emerges as the linchpin of capitalist order.

Though the commodity influenced cultural forms in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by the middle of the nineteenth century it developed into a cultural form of its own. The discourse of economic exchange became the discourse of social exchange; and the commodity, as the prime organizer of the capitalist economic system, lent itself to nineteenth-century society as its prime organizer. At one level, then, Marx's Capital represents both a recognition of this tangle and an effort to distinguish between economic and social activity, though the distinction was becoming increasingly unclear. At another level, Capital testifies simply by virtue of its subject to the degree to which the commodity already controlled and consumed those activities.

Another response to the rise of commodity culture, and one that complemented the pioneering work of thinkers like Smith and Marx, was the Victorian social novel. Like Smith and Marx, nineteenth-century social novels similarly put much of their energy into unraveling the significance of the commodity and the material world through which it circulates. That Marx begins his analysis of capitalism with the analysis of the commodity is no accident, as Georg Lukács proposes in *History and Class Consciousness*: 'at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the riddle of commodity-structure' (83). If the commodity was so central to nineteenth-century political economy in its efforts to understand the impact of capitalism on society,

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then it is no more likely to be an accident that, in their own efforts to assess capitalism's social effects, nineteenth-century novelists should similarly address the problems and riddles of the commodity. In particular, nineteenth-century novelists such as Gaskell, Thackeray, and Trollope – to name only those considered in detail in this study – all work to uncover the imperatives of the capitalist system, to expose the commodity at work mediating the social world around it. But rather than negotiating a response to capitalism's significance in economic terms, social novelists negotiate that response in social terms.

In her discussion of the way economic constructions of society figure in nineteenth-century narrative, Elizabeth Ermarth convincingly argues this point. Social novelists, she suggests in The English Novel in History, register the 'seismic activity' taking place in British commerce and culture 'in the material of their art' (135). But economy and society do not enjoy so close and easy a relationship in nineteenth-century narrative as they do in the thinking of early political economists like Adam Smith. In contrast to Smith, for example, who conceives the social body in strictly economic terms and who conceives the economic system as somehow 'natural', social novelists grapple with questions such as 'what if the social entity is not at all "natural" and 'what becomes of the economic mechanism then?' (Ermarth 139). As Ermarth goes on to argue, social novelists of the nineteenth century 'focus on precisely what Smith overlooks: the relationships and gaps between systems' (140). In this sense, while they detail and interpret the changes brought about by the rise of capitalism, social novelists also seek - not unlike Marx in Capital - to account for the human element in their response to the capitalist condition. And in setting out to solve 'the commodity riddle', novelists like Gaskell, Thackeray, and Trollope take the commodity and the world through which it circulates beyond the point where early economic thinking by theorists like Smith leaves them. These novelists move from generality to detail, from anonymity to the intimately private, and, most importantly, from the abstractions of economic theory to the realities of social practice. In short, Victorian novelists put the social back into Smith's economic version of society.

For example, Gaskell's industrial novel *North and South* (1855) gives a version of society caught somewhere between Smith and Marx – that is, a version of society torn between a Smithian rural landscape populated by contented and rewarded artisan laborers, and a Marxian cityscape

populated by discontented and unrewarded factory workers. In its geographic and thematic division between the grime and soot of Northern manufacturing cities and the pastoral charms of Southern farming country, the novel emphasizes the discord between dwindling land-based economies on the one hand, and booming city-based economies on the other. As Gaskell writes of Milton, the novel's manufacturing city, 'here and there a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens, puffing out unparliamentary smoke, and sufficiently accounting for the cloud which Margaret had taken to foretell rain' (59). Though it says much about the part factories play in the nurturing of an indústrial city, Gaskell's analogy between a factory and a farmyard order of mothering also comments slyly on the contrast between the two. The 'great oblong factory', massive and 'many-windowed', impersonal and unemotive, seems no fretting mother at all. Moreover, the belch of the factory's smokestacks, which Margaret mistakes for rain clouds, supplants nature. In this brief description Gaskell gives a sense of the displacement that exists between land-based and city-based economies, and their respective allegiances to nature on the one side and industry on the other. And of these two competing models of economy, so the novel makes clear, urban industrialism has by far the upper hand.

Margaret's journey from the country to the city similarly marks a process of displacement that serves to dispel, returning to Marx's phrase, the 'Physiocratic illusion' that capital grows 'out of the soil and not out of society'. Significantly, Margaret receives this education in social rather than economic terms, through human experience rather than theoretical conjecture. Capital, Marx's repository of dead labor, comes alive in Gaskell's novel in the form of Milton's factory owners, though without shaking its vampiric qualities. Here, human laborers are sucked dry by their human 'Masters', Gaskell's undead personifications of wealth.

Following up on these thoughts, chapter 2 looks at commodity culture from the production end of the economic cycle in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, where the consumption of commodities remains conspicuously absent. In particular, Gaskell's industrial writing explores the reifying influence of the commodity on productive society and the ways in which the industrial condition serves as a matrix for human relations. In both novels, the commodity-world has an alienating and dehumanizing influence on society's productive membership. Gaskell, however, actively resists that influence, investigating ways in

which to repair a fractured society. And in exploring the individual's relation to a larger mechanized social body, the novels' journeys of disillusionment simultaneously assess the human casualties of industrialization.

In contrast to Gaskell who details what it takes to make commodity culture, novelists such as Thackeray and Trollope show what it takes to sustain it. To sustain commodity culture, it is necessary to circulate and consume commodities. And it is, in turn, precisely this aspect of commodity culture that occupies both Thackeray in Vanity Fair and Trollope in The Eustace Diamonds. In both novels, the production of commodities is what is now conspicuously absent. For Thackeray and Trollope, it is the social conditions implicated in the exchange and consumption of material goods, rather than the industrial condition associated with their production, that serves as a matrix for human relations. The result is that commodities come magically alive in Vanity Fair and The Eustace Diamonds. They move, circulating and recirculating, through the novels and the language of the novels. What happens to commodities once they enter society, once they move from the marketplace into the home? How do people acquire them, shop for them, relate to them, value them, wear them, eat them, look at them, think of them, and even dream of them? These are key questions and motivating concerns for writers like Thackeray and Trollope.

With these ideas in mind, chapters 3 and 4 look at the representation of commodity culture in first Vanity Fair and then The Eustace Diamonds to consider how both novels address the influence of the commodity-relation on human agency, social order, and the economic construction of identity. In the case of Vanity Fair, the discussion concentrates on Thackeray's representation of the pathological consumer and the carnivals of consumption to which that figure belongs. In the case of The Eustace Diamonds, the discussion focuses on Trollope's investigation of women's potential to capitalize at a material level on the commodification of female identity.

Gushing from factory gates, commodities in Gaskell are hot off the production line. In Thackeray and Trollope, they still flaunt their price tags. In a sense, all three novelists, writing in the first triumphal moment of capitalism, trade in the new goods of a commodity culture still in its infancy. By the turn of the century, however, novelists begin to deal in damaged goods. That is, commodities and the consumer world through

which they circulate take on an air of decay in the hands of early modernist writers. Chapter five argues that Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907 but set in London in 1894, registers this shift.

As in Thackeray and Trollope, society in Conrad begins at the point where commodities enter into circulation – or at least, at the point where they should enter into circulation. For unlike Vanity Fair or The Eustace Diamonds where goods change hands incessantly and circulate constantly, commodity traffic in The Secret Agent is surprisingly stagnant. Goods in Conrad sit on shelves and collect dust. But this sluggish traffic extends beyond the material world to encompass the novel's social world where political extremism and human agency suffer from an identical and consequent lack of momentum. Though the conditions of decay in Conrad give the novel's anarchists reason to aspire to the violent subversion of capitalist order, they simultaneously result in an apathy that paradoxically robs them of the will to act.

Together, Gaskell, Thackeray, Trollope, and Conrad provide enduring images of the commodity's power to remake society molded in its image and tailor-made to its specifications – its power, in short, to reify the world around it. Each novelist conceives social exchange in terms of economic exchange. Each novelist constructs, and in the end deconstructs, identity and its constituent parts in terms belonging to the marketplace. These writers register the growing pains of capitalism. They identify the anxieties, the tensions, the conflicts, the choices, the problems, and the dangers endemic to the rise and triumph of capitalism. In so doing, as we will see, these writers also show commodity culture in its early moments already moving rapidly towards today's mass cultural forms – towards the hyperreal consumer world of postmodernity.

#### The Postmodern

Over the course of the twentieth century, commodity culture undergoes many twists and turns. Beginning in the early twentieth century, picking up in the post-war decades, and accelerating dramatically in the 1980s – the golden years of multinational conglomeration and deregulated markets – capitalist society shifted away from industrial production and towards consumerism as we know it today, away from the making of commodities and towards their mass cultural representation. That is,

starting in the first half of the twentieth century and taking off in the second, capitalist economies experienced massive market expansions, in areas such as information technology, service industry, mass media, and the meteoric rise of advertising, that explicitly set out to prioritize consumption above all else – to create consumer demand where none existed before (Jhally 2-3). The last fifty years, in short, have witnessed a massive growth in the power and influence of the commodity over the social imagination and its desires. Such developments, as David Hawkes notes in *Ideology*, took place 'alongside the corresponding rise to cultural prominence of the technological media of representation' (2). Through film, radio, television and, slightly later, computers, videos, compact discs, and the internet – through mass media generally – images of commodities have attained an unprecedented pre-eminence in the second half of the twentieth century.

One effect is that the consuming public of the late twentieth century has been hit, as Hawkes explains, with 'an explosion in the number and kinds of images' of commodities bombarding it 'with incessant injunctions to purchase' (3). Technological advances in media representation, harnessed in particular by a global advertising industry, have resulted in images of commodities, as much as commodities themselves, circulating and recirculating through society. These images have supersaturated the late twentieth-century consumer world to the point where representations of commodities have become autonomous subjects of consumption and objects of desire in their own right. As a consequence, commodities in postmodernity not only inhabit the material world, but have also colonized the realm of representation as well. The postmodern era, as Hawkes rightly points out, is 'the era of the Image' (3).

Cultural thinkers of the late twentieth century quickly rose to the challenge of interpreting the commodity in its increasingly abstract and disembodied forms. Following Roland Barthes' innovative writing on the semiotics of consumerism in *Mythologies* (1957), one of the first thinkers to integrate the idea of the 'image' fully into an account of late capitalism was Guy Debord. In 1967, Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle* in which he works towards an account of 'the spectacle' of consumer society. The book is perhaps best described by John Frow in *Time and Commodity Culture* as a series of 'discontinuous theses' and 'aphoristic statements' that are 'neither arguments nor dialogue' but sweeping

'authoritative pronouncements' (5). Jon Savage explains in more detail:

[The Society of the Spectacle] plundered philosophers like Sartre, Lefebvre and Lukács, and urbanists like Lewis Mumford. From his collage of avant-garde art, Marxist theory and existential obnoxiousness, Debord fashioned a language that battered on the subconscious like a negative mantra. The Society of the Spectacle is a series of numbered aphorisms, like the Poesies of Lautreamont and which Debord, in homage, plagiarizes. (31)

Despite the fact that this mishmash of disparate artistic, philosophical, and political thinking makes for a confusing read, Debord's book does advance a compelling argument about the spectacle of late capitalism – an argument that foregrounds the importance and role of the commodity in enabling that spectacle.

For Debord, the 'spectacle' both constitutes and determines late twentieth-century consumer society. Though Debord's idea of the spectacle resists simple definition, it is clear that the spectacle, like his working model of society, is anchored in a Marxian account of capitalism. Debord's first thesis makes this immediately evident: 'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation' (12). The phrasing of this thesis invites a deliberate comparison with the first sentence of Marx's Capital: 'The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities' (45). Important here is that Debord substitutes the spectacle for the commodity. This suggests, as his subsequent theses go on to elaborate, that the spectacle represents the historical evolution under capitalism, a more modern cultural manifestation, of Marx's 'classical' commodity of the nineteenth century. And though Debord sets out to modernize Marx - to revise and update Marx in the aftermath of postindustrialism - Debord's spectacle and Marx's commodity fulfill much the same function.

For Debord, the spectacle of commodities sits at the very center of the social world mediating and regulating all relations, shaping and determining the fabric of our everyday lives. The difference between Marx's 'classical' commodity of the nineteenth century and Debord's

spectacle of the late twentieth is that the spectacle represents the transformation of the commodity-as-thing into an advanced cultural form: the commodity-as-image. Debord puts it like this: 'the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image' (24). Following this formulation, Debord attempts to show how consumer society, given sufficient time, has moved towards the sophistication and ultimate completion of what he sees as capitalism's project - namely, the representation of all cultural forms through their basis in the spectacle of commodities: 'The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life' (29). The problem with this scenario, Debord insists, is that the spectacle becomes the only medium for social relations - a vacuous, abstract medium which increasingly distances the social body from any recoverable human relation. The spectacle instills in consumer society its irrational and compulsive appetite for consumption. It obscures the 'self'. But above all, it generates radical forms of everyday alienation. In such terms, Debord sees the commodity through the spectacle as an essentially semiotic phenomenon. Here, as Thomas Richards sums up, 'Marx meets Saussure' (13).

Far from settling anything, The Society of the Spectacle spurred more debate and raised more questions about social problems and social possibilities under capitalism. The commodity's cultural status stood, as it did in Debord's writing, at the center of the ensuing debates. Following Debord, for example, postmodern cultural thinkers like Jean Baudrillard further explored the semiotics of the commodity-form in works like The System of Objects (1968), where he proposes that 'to become an object of consumption, an object must first become a sign' (79). Baudrillard takes this idea ever further in For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1972) with the suggestion that 'a critique of general political economy ... and a theory of symbolic exchange are one and the same thing' (128). In Baudrillard, Debord's commodity-as-image becomes the commodity-as-sign. The 'commodity question' soon began to surface in the work of feminist thinkers as well. Most notably, in This Sex Which is Not One (1977) Luce Irigaray considers the commodity's symbolic function in Western cultural constructions of the feminine. In Irigaray, Marx not only meets Saussure, but Lacan and Freud as well. Baudrillard's commodity-as-sign now becomes Irigaray's commodity-sign-woman: 'Participation in society requires that the [female] body submit itself to a

specularization ... that transforms it into a value bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier (179-8).

There is, however, a key distinction to be made between the concept of commodity advanced by late twentieth-century thinkers like Debord, Baudrillard, and Irigaray and the concept of commodity advanced by Marx. It is a distinction that registers and responds to specific moments in the historical development of capitalism. For Marx, whose critique of capitalism corresponds to the rise of industrialism in the nineteenth century, the commodity is inextricably linked to 'the general form of capitalist production', to its 'means of production and material conditions of labor' (1996, 1054). In other words, as a category of analysis, the commodity is first and foremost a matter of production. It is an object that emerges from and belongs to the industrial condition of early capitalism. By contrast, postmodern thinking tends to elide the commodity's roots in production. Responding to the late twentieth-century age of mass media and mass consumption, it stresses instead the commodity's centrality to consumerism. In other words, for thinkers like Debord, Baudrillard, and Irigaray, the commodity as a category of analysis is first and foremost a matter of consumption. It is an object - or, more accurately, a representational form - that emerges from and belongs to the postindustrial condition of late capitalism.

This, however, is not to say that such a view of the commodity necessarily marks a radical departure from Marx. Rather, it is more the case that it takes its cue from Marx, following through some of the implications raised by his analysis of capitalism. In the nineteenth century, Marx already identified the commodity as an object possessing representational properties. Most notably, he observes in Capital that the commodity's mediation of society leads to 'the personification of objects and the representation of persons by things' (123). The shift from industrialism to post-industrialism over the course of the twentieth century, combined with the rise of mass-media and the emergence of brand-name consumerism, has seen a dramatic accentuation of the commodity's representational properties in the flow of everyday culture. And it is precisely the commodity's ability to function in capitalist society as an increasingly autonomous representational form - a phenomenon first noted by Marx - that preoccupies and informs the critiques of cultural theorists as diverse as Debord, Baudrillard, and Irigaray. Significantly, the common thread running through the work of these

various postmodern thinkers is that the commodity in its mass-mediated and spectacular forms has become the focal point of cultural representation in late capitalism.

Chapter 6 argues that Don DeLillo's White Noise (1985) is a case in point. In this parody of the postmodern consumer world, DeLillo offers a comic exposé of what, rephrasing Fredric Jameson, could be called the cultural illogic of late capitalism. Computer-generated voices clog the telephone lines, college professors philosophize about bubble-gum wrappers and detergent jingles, musicians play live Muzak, and tabloid coupons guarantee life after death. Cruising the suburbs, malls, and supermarkets of contemporary Americana, the novel describes a world of shopping, simulation, and surface engulfed by the white noise of consumerism - by a circumambient buzz of television sets, radio transmissions, computer terminals, electrical appliances, air-conditioning units, garbage disposals, neon lighting, automatic doors, and bar-code scanners. In DeLillo, people shop impulsively and compulsively. Shopping redeems. It recharges the soul. It defers death and reaffirms life. As the novel's visiting lecturer on living icons sums up, 'Here we don't die, we shop' (38). In short, White Noise explores how the background babble of late twentieth-century consumerism not only affects conscious thought, but also penetrates and shapes unconscious moments. In the process, it works hard to decode the strange and unsettling forms that the commodity and its spectacles assume in the age of mass media. The result, as we will see, is a novel that stages a series of spectacular collisions between consumer culture and postmodernity.

# Chapter 2

# Down and Out in Gaskell's Industrial Novels

### The Underbelly and the Underdogs

In novels such as Thackeray's Vanity Fair (1848) and Trollope's The Way We Live Now (1875) commodities and the material world through which they circulate possess little or no history. All the trappings of material culture - all the goods, wares, and trinkets that saturate and even bog down these narratives - materialize out of nowhere and at specific moments in the economic cycle: the moments of exchange and consumption. In Vanity Fair, for example, Jos Sedley eats his way across Europe as lavish feasts and other funfairs of consumption spontaneously appear before him at every stop along the way. In The Way We Live Now, Melmotte spontaneously explodes on the London scene with all the material markers of a rich man married to a life of compulsive consumerism. But Trollope leaves Melmotte's history, like the history of his material fortune, deliberately untold. Thackeray sums up the substance and tenor of both novels in this description from the prologue to his own: 'there is a great quantity of eating and drinking ... smoking, cheating, fighting, dancing, and fiddling' (33). As Thackeray touches upon here, both novelists deliver visions of nineteenth-century commodity culture that are alive with celebrations of consumerism.

But what about the production of commodities and its attendant commodity culture? Where after all do all the goods which pepper these narratives come from? Who makes them? How are they made? And under what social and material conditions? These are questions that both Thackeray and Trollope leave entirely untouched. As the title to *The Way We Live Now* explicitly states in Trollope's case, these are novels of the moment. Moreover, the 'We' of Trollope's title, like the 'Vanity Fair' of

Thackeray's, implicates but a specific social stratum: the consumer. These novels do not slip behind the scenes into kitchens or farms or factories or mines to witness all the productive energy that sustains the Jos Sedleys and Melmottes of the world. For such writers, interested as they are in the social dynamic of consumerism, the origin of commodity culture proves less important than its trajectory; the production of commodities, less important than their exchange and consumption.

The social parodies of Trollope and Thackeray represent one response by Victorian social novelists to the rise of commodity culture (see chapters 3 and 4). Elizabeth Gaskell's industrial writing, however, represents another one entirely - one that takes its view of society from the opposite end of the social (and economic) spectrum. For the industrial novel typically concentrates its narrative on the worker rather than on the consumer. Spearheaded by writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, and responding directly to what Thomas Carlyle proclaimed the 'Mechanical Age' (34) in 'Signs of the Times' (1829), the industrial novel emerged as a new breed of social novel in the wake of the industrial revolution towards the middle of the nineteenth century. Taking as their subjects the new social experiences of a newly industrialized world, explicitly industrial novels like Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1855) tell the untold stories of urban existence - namely, those of the working classes, the unemployed masses, and the material hardships of their domestic lives. In short, they focus on the underbelly and the underdogs of nineteenth-century capitalist society.

In particular, Gaskell's industrial novels focus their attention on the productive activity that makes Victorian commodity culture possible rather than on the consumer practices that sustain it. Where Vanity Fair and The Way We Live Now thrive in the moments and spaces of exchange, Gaskell's Mary Barton and North and South dwell in the places and processes of production. But they do so oddly. Gaskell sets both novels in manufacturing cities – in sprawling urban spaces built in the sooty shadows of industry and 'deafened', as she puts it in Mary Barton, 'by the noise of tongues and engines' (3). Yet her novels seldom make it through the factory gates into the working spaces of industry. Though we hear telltale noises of factory production and witness clouds of industrial smoke choking the city air, we never really see an industrial machinery – either human or metal – in motion. We never really experience the bump and grind of daily life on the production line. Still,

many of Gaskell's characters are factory workers, people who, in the crudest terms, make commodities. Why then is it that we hardly ever see those workers at work, and never actually see the immediate products of that work?

Questioning the industrial label of Mary Barton, Jane Spencer provides a likely answer. She points out that Mary Barton spends more time in the home than in the factory, concluding that it is 'family life in industrial society', rather than factory life in that society, 'that interests Gaskell' (34). The same observation, of course, holds true in North and South. In other words, Gaskell is interested not so much in factories as in factory-people; not so much in commodities themselves, as in the social and domestic conditions required to produce them.

This helps to put in context Gaskell's strange claim, made in the preface to Mary Barton, to know 'nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade' (xxxvi). Critics, from her contemporaries to ours, have offered a range of explanations for this disclaimer that the novel quickly disproves and that her letters, showing she read widely in the field of political economy, flatly contradict (see Chapple and Pollard). Her novels alone display not only a deep and powerful understanding of theories of trade, but also a deep and powerful grasp of how those theories play out in social practice. Perhaps the most widely accepted explanation for Gaskell's statement is that it serves as an apology of sorts for a woman writer stealing into what, in the nineteenth century, was still staked out as masculine territory (Ingham 55). An ongoing intellectual dialogue of technical and theoretical complexity conducted almost exclusively among men, the budding field of political economy was still seen as a 'man's business' throughout Gaskell's writing career. But whatever the reason for Gaskell's retraction, whether false modesty, irony, apology, or insecurity, it does not really matter. The reason is that Gaskell is concerned not so much with the abstractions of social and economic theory, as she is with the particulars of social practice and the concrete realities of an abject social condition.

So in calling attention to the problems facing Britain's industrial workers, Gaskell conceives those problems, as Terence Wright argues, in human terms rather than in the 'statistical or objective' (21) terms found in the annals of emergent economic and political theory. With characters such as Jem Wilson, John Barton, and Nicholas Higgins, for example, Gaskell gives a human face to Adam Smith's laborers and individual

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appetites, desires, fears, ambitions to Marx's collective workforce. Likewise, with the novels' factory and mill owners such as Thornton and Carson Sr., Gaskell gives names to Engels' nameless bourgeoisie. This, however, is not to say that political economists and social theorists like Smith, Marx, and Engels do not humanize or personalize the subject of their work. The opposite is in fact the case, despite the stress on theorization and objective analysis in their writing. In Capital, for example, Marx supplements his analysis of the working day with extended and deeply empathic descriptions of the real conditions facing women and child laborers in factories across Britain (see 251-63). Similarly, Engels devotes substantial space in The Condition of the Working Class in England to surveying and recording the disturbing human scenes of Britain's industrial cityscapes (see 35-50). Even Smith's The Wealth of Nations contains the occasional poignant anecdote about everyday life under capitalism. Accordingly, my point is simply that Gaskell's industrial writing engages with the same issues that consume economic and social thought from Adam Smith onwards, but that in doing so her writing focuses on the human condition even more closely than the gospels of political economy.

So again, what of the social origins of the commodity and, in particular, the social conditions required for its production? Though Victorian writers like Thackeray and Trollope do not engage with these sorts of questions, Gaskell, as this chapter argues, does.

### **Outside Looking In**

Whereas Thackeray and Trollope locate their narratives in the thick of nineteenth-century commodity culture, Gaskell locates hers on the outside looking in, as this passage from *Mary Barton* touches upon. Here, John Barton steps out at night from Davenport's gloomy cellar to find medicine for a sick and destitute friend:

It is a pretty sight to walk through a street with lighted shops; the gas is so brilliant, the display of goods so much more vividly shown than by day, and of all shops the druggist's looks the most like the tales of our childhood, from Aladdin's garden of enchanted fruits to the charming Rosamond with her purple jar. No such associations had

Barton: yet he felt the contrast between the well-filled, well-lighted shops and the dim gloomy cellar, and it made him moody that such contrasts should exist. (70)

To say that such contrasts make Barton 'moody' is, of course, an understatement of sorts since his moodiness eventually turns murderous. More important now, however, is that the magical qualities Gaskell attributes to the window displays neither capture nor excite Barton's imagination. The 'lighted shops', in other words, do not fill Barton's thoughts with consumer fantasies for the very reason that such fantasies, as far as the novel's factory workers like Barton are concerned, remain just that. But although the dazzle of the window displays fails to trigger fantastic associations in Barton's mind, that same dazzle does remind him of the impossibility of indulging the very desire it is designed to create namely, the desire to consume. The 'lighted shops', crammed with goods of every sort, are spaces reserved for commodity exchange. They are starting points for consumerism. As such, the shops represent a strangely alien world systematically denied to John Barton and the novel's wider working community. They belong to a world that Barton, like Gaskell's writing in general, sees through windows but never fully enters.

In his book on commodity culture and Victorian narrative, Novels Behind Glass, Andrew Miller attaches particular importance to the power of shop-windows to excite the imagination. He suggests that, as 'transparent media' for the display of consumer goods, shop-windows became in the imagination of the Victorian public new catalysts 'for elaborate fantasies of consumption, sensuous experiences of imagined acquisition' (1-2). The nineteenth-century social novel, as Miller goes on to argue, represents a similarly transparent medium, explicitly show-casing for its readership the same kinds of fantasies and anticipated pleasures of ownership. Though this becomes immediately apparent in novels such as Vanity Fair, it is not exactly the case in Gaskell. In fact, Gaskell's window passage in Mary Barton, like the industrial novel more generally, showcases something quite different.

As Miller describes it, a shop-window's transparency asks its viewer to formulate a social identity as 'consumer' in relation to the goods on display, to recognize its reflection in what could be seen as an almost Lacanian mirror. In Gaskell, however, the process of specular identification breaks down. Unable to recognize his reflection, John

Barton, when confronted with the window display, cannot formulate an identity as consumer. He cannot *identify* with what he sees in (and through) the window: the goods do not 'speak' to him. The shop-window does not become a cultural site teeming with the material signs of consumerism. Rather, for Barton and the novel as a whole, it becomes an empty sign, a misplaced signifier divorced from meaning and belonging to a cultural discourse that excludes and eludes him.

Accordingly, the shop-window passage in Mary Barton showcases not a consumer fantasy, but its general absence and impossibility within the working-class context of the industrial novel. For it is precisely because Gaskell, in the tradition of nineteenth-century industrial writing, places her novels in the margins rather than at the center of industrial market society – because her narrative is not sucked in to the vortex of what Thomas Carlyle famously dubbed the 'cash nexus' – that consumer fantasies remain outside the scope of Barton's imagination and outside the record of the novel's experience. In effect, then, the window passage highlights perhaps the most striking characteristic of Gaskell's particular vision of industrial market society. In Mary Barton and North and South, the exchange and consumption of commodities, as elusive luxuries glimpsed only in passing, remain largely and conspicuously absent.

Nowhere, though, does Gaskell bring home this point more poignantly than in her vivid description of the broken working-class homes her novels so frequently visit. In Mary Barton, for example, Gaskell goes out of her way to point out that Davenport's back room, polluted with 'the moisture from pigsties, and worse abominations', has 'not an article of furniture in it' (71). Even Davenport's front rooms have little more to offer by way of material comfort. When Barton looks around for something to prop up a sick baby's head, he finds that 'there was literally nothing but some loose bricks' (68). North and South has its own scenes of domestic poverty and material hardship. When Margaret visits Higgins' run-down home, she is welcomed by a 'large fire in the grate' that makes 'the whole place feel like an oven' (99). Margaret fails to understand that for the Higgins household a generous coal fire, lit as a sign of hospitality, represents a rare indulgence, what Gaskell tellingly terms a 'lavishness' (99). That heat as a basic human need actually represents a luxury only serves to express once again, but in slightly different terms, a condition of severe material hardship.

Under-furnished and under-decorated, these domestic spaces remain

uncluttered by the products of human industry. Marx famously begins Capital by observing that 'the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an "immense accumulation of commodities", its unit being a single commodity' (45). Here, however, there is no stockpiling of goods, nothing really to accumulate. There are no material signs of capitalist wealth in the way that Marx defines it. And interestingly, Barton's home undergoes a transformation over the course of Mary Barton which testifies to just that. To put it simply, it is a transformation that reverses or undoes Marx's process of wealth-accumulation. Out of work and increasingly short of funds, Barton has no choice but to pawn his personal belongings. Piece by piece his home is steadily stripped and emptied of material possessions. Unit by unit, his already modest collection of commodities is gradually depleted.

In short, Gaskell's workers own very little and consume even less. In fact, starvation, what Gaskell's working-class characters call 'clemming', becomes a central and recurring problem in both novels, though particularly in *Mary Barton. Mary Barton* begins with a modest, makeshift feast that brings together a small party of working families. And like the bright fire in the Higgins' home, this feast clearly represents another extravagant and prohibitively expensive deviation from normal, everyday practice. In Gaskell's writing, these moments of rare indulgence are, as Jane Spencer points out, 'poignantly short-lived' (39). Though rare and sporadic, such moments of restrained indulgence serve to throw the 'improvidence' and 'clemming' that plague so much of Gaskell's account of the industrial condition into high relief.

By contrast, when Trollope in *The Way We Live Now* takes us into the home of Melmotte, his villain-financier, we are wined and dined in lavish style at sumptuous and exclusive Society dinners. Gaskell's industrial novels, however, take her readers to see an opposite extreme. 'Clemming' families such as the Davenports in *Mary Barton* eat but a 'drop o' gruel' (79) most of the time, and nothing at all the rest of the time. Thackeray, in turn, proves immensely fond of flaunting the procession of exotic dishes paraded through the pages of *Vanity Fair*. But in the general absence of consumption, *Mary Barton* and *North and South* have no exotic dishes to catalogue and display. Gaskell has no celebratory consumer antics to parade through the pages of her novels.

Taken together, the kinds of barren and broken domestic spaces that