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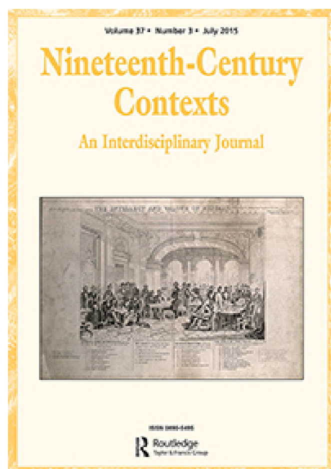

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Walking the Boundaries in Victorian Fiction: Realism as Communal Epistemology

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Walking the Boundaries in Victorian Fiction: Realism as Communal Epistemology

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In Chapter VIII of *The Way We Live Now,* Roger Carbury, the novel's perfect gentleman, chastises his cousin (and would-be wife) Hetta, for going to the ball given by Augustus Melmotte "the great French swindler" (67; pt. I). Hetta's memorable response, "*Everybody* goes there, Mr. Carbury," is emblematic, its "everybody" encapsulating the novel's elusive creed. That Hetta has in fact repeated verbatim the foolish response her mother had made to Roger only a few minutes earlier, serves to underscore the importance of this "everybody" but also to disclose its fragility. Obviously, not "everybody" goes there (Roger, for one, does not) and a reliance on this vague pronoun by the otherwise sensible Hetta suggests a lack of conviction and of substantive grounds; a gesture toward the vapid and the empty. Indeed, this gesture seems to be the answer to the question implied by the novel's title: the way we live now is vapid and empty, frivolous and fallacious.

And yes, the novel seems to bear this out to the end. Roger is right (in that he gets his facts and his morals straight) and "everybody" is wrong. However, reading the social generated in and by the novel in this way might be to miss the point. After all, even though Roger is morally right, it doesn't really matter because he cannot rally others around his morality; the fact that he remains alone at the novel's end proves that being in the right is inconsequential. If being right does not matter in this novel, what does? A closer look at the terms of the disagreement between Roger and his cousins reveals that they do not differ over Melmotte's true qualities or about the facts of his history or even about their moral values. What matters is not whether Melmotte is a swindler or not. What matters is whether it matters that he is a swindler. And that, epistemologically speaking, is much more difficult to determine. It definitely does not help that the answer to this question (whether it matters or not) is constantly shifting. The facts are not known by the other characters,

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and few of them are revealed even to the readers. But what matters here are not the facts, but rather the meaning they are accorded, and that meaning – as I shall show – is determined by those who adopt it. This communal process by which a judgment – or a fact – is constructed as real is the focus of my paper. It is the way in which the ostensibly frivolous and empty is made to matter, the way that language – commonly used – gains its material force.

"Realism," says Fredric Jameson, "is essentially an epistemological category framed and staged in aesthetic terms" (Jameson 2007, 261). For Jameson, this poses an ongoing (and potentially productive) contradiction since the referential truth claims of realism are always undermined by the representational artifice of its fictionality.[1] I would like to offer the communal process I have begun describing as fostering another relationship between epistemology and artifice, one in which they are mutually constitutive rather than in contradiction. I argue that working to locate a commonality was not only one of the main social preoccupations of the Victorian period but also one of the constitutive elements of the realist novel form. Indeed, I contend that it is the realist novel's success in creating a sense of commonality that made it work as an epistemology and prompted its unanticipated prominence in the nineteenth century. I show that this complex process is clearly laid out in Trollope's novel, where "everybody" seems to be the main actor, motivator and object of almost every aspect of the novel. In fact, the novel's title might be refined into a question: "who are 'we,' when 'we' live in this way?" The very question calls for a commonality to answer, even if it's asked by a seemingly disparate group of individuals more focused on working out the identity of their "I" than the "we" of which it forms a part. "We's" in the novel thus range from the most exclusive social and economic communities to an inclusive (though not all-inclusive) national realm. Indeed, success or failure in the world of the novel depends on the quality and especially the *quantity* of people who signify their belonging by adopting a certain view. It does not help that the same people – "everybody" – are at the same time trying to figure out what "everybody" thinks. *The Way We Live Now* is thus at once a novel about social speculation and a speculation on the social.

Here and elsewhere, when referring to commonality, I do not mean an existing delineated common identity but, rather, the search for one and the anxiety over its elusiveness. I distinguish it from "community," which tends to be more stable, smaller in scale, and which also implies personal knowledge of all or most of its members (or at least, generates a totality which can be labeled and known). In contrast, a commonality is almost infinitely extensible and thus more contingent and diffuse than a community. As a result, it cannot be known or named in its totality. Like the "publics" described by Michael Warner, a commonality "differ[s] from nations, races, professions, or any other groups that … saturate identity;" it is "self-organizing, a kind of entity created by its own discourse" and "always in excess of its known social basis" or community (53, 81, 55).[2] Most specifically, commonality here denotes an *epistemological* community – a collective of minds that knows the real world (whatever that may be) in similar ways (whatever those may be), and that works through the accretion of social connections. It is held up by its ability to hold in tension and

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engage both the immanent and the constructed qualities of the real that gives its name to realism.

Correspondence and Commonality

And indeed, where better to examine the social construction of the real than in a novel that repeatedly asks us - or at the least the "us" constituted by the "we" of its title - to consider the difference between the way things appear and the way they truly are? *The Way We Live Now* is written as a biting exposé, revealing with meticulous detail the falsity of the financial, political, and social life of London society in the 1870s, a falsity that drives the novel's many interlocking plots as well as its ethics. At the center of all this deceit is Augustus Melmotte, financier/fraud extraordinaire, master of artifice, who seems to be the model for the new speciousness pervading society.

In a somewhat schematic opposition – which accords with Bruno Latour's description of the post-Enlightenment "Bifurcation" of reality and appearance – one might read Roger Carbury as the antidote to Melmotte.[3] Melmotte's origins are murky and unknown, he "represents counterfeit forms of wealth – above all stock market speculation – not tied to land or to Britain's aristocratic traditions" (Brantlinger 171). In contrast, Roger Carbury still owns and inhabits Carbury Hall, his ancestral home, the very name of which attests to the organic (rather than commercial) relationship between the man, his title, and his landed wealth.[4] Indeed, Roger Carbury is painfully honest and devoid of artifice: his appearance matches his very essence as a character. The comparison between Melmotte and Carbury thus belies a familiar correspondence model of authenticity: a man's true nature or identity exists beneath the surface, though it can be manifested on it. Indeed, truth and authenticity are present when a man's apparent qualities accord with his inner, true self: Melmotte is a fake because his appearance does not immediately correspond to a material or social reality; he cannot be known. Carbury, on the other hand, is real all the way down: his name accords with his land, which accords with his title and corresponds to his character: his apparent qualities are in perfect alignment with what the text presents as his true nature. Indeed, the fact that Carbury is presented as an ideal English gentleman attests not only to the belief in the existence of these immutable qualities and their accompanying transparency and forthrightness, but also to the value the novel places on these qualities and on the familiar correspondence model I have just briefly described.

One possible reading of the novel thus places Carbury as the antidote to the epistemological chaos which is Melmotte. The conservative solution to the troubles inherent in the way we live *now* is to live instead the way we lived *then*: at a time when, ostensibly, one knew one's place and everyone knew everyone else's place (I'll be returning to my discussion of "everyone" presently). But the permeation of artifice in the London of *The Way We Live Now* suggests that a return to the so-called simpler times of yore might be a fantasy evoked by the novel, but not a real option that it promotes. And yet, the gap between artifice and the real is belabored, even as the ostensible solution to the gap – preferring the latter over the former – is rendered

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increasingly unviable. The answer to this conundrum may be a shift in focus: rather than pay attention to the troubled correspondence between artifice and the real presented by the novel, I propose to show how the two in fact constitute each other. Instead of trying to locate and pin down the reality that is represented (truly or falsely) in the novel, I ask how the commonalities created by the novel construct the reality to which the novel's realism refers, even, and especially, when that reality is specifically constructed as latent or absent.

Consider, for example, the most glaring example of artifice as well as the novel's central commercial enterprise: the shares of the Great South Central Pacific and Mexican Railway. As Paul Montague realizes too late, "the object of Fisker, Montague, and Montague was not to make a railway to Vera Cruz, but to float a company" (77; pt. I). This sentence follows the logic of falsity I have just outlined: the company is fraudulent because its appearance (a plan to build a railroad) is not supported by an underlying reality (there is no actual intention to build the railroad). The statement sounds the warning of the well-known dangers of finance capitalism: the means (amassing capital) become the end; labor is omitted rather than alienated; capital generates yet more capital.[5] Indeed, most commentators on the novel, from Trollope's time to our own, have read it in this vein: as a stern, conservative rebuke of the "collapse of standards and social order before new methods of finance" (McGann 133-4).

However, the railway to Vera Cruz is not just a risky financial speculation that trades on the expectation of future profits to drive up its value. It is actually – and significantly – a deception since there is no initial investment, no real plan to build a railway, but only a lie about one. In making Melmotte's pyramid-scheme-like venture the major financial enterprise of the novel, emblematic of the way "we" finance now, the novel conflates (legal if risky) finance capitalism with out-and-out fraud. Given that, as Tara McGann has rightly noted, "in *The Way We Live Now*, finance becomes problematic, that is, a phenomenon to be explored rather than one fixed in meaning" (133), this conflation begs an important question: does the novel suggest that fraud and finance capitalism differ only in scale or also in kind? Is the former a logical extension of the latter which crosses into illegality, or is there a substantive difference between the two? I will return to the question of fraud later in the essay but want to note now that while Trollope scourges speculation as the height of dishonesty, he also recognizes – unlike most writers who came before him – that it functions in myriad and often contradictory ways. In her reading of the novel, McGann shows, for example, that Melmotte's failure can be understood both as the traditional fall or unmasking of the fraudulent villain *and* as his morally neutral mis-understanding of the business cycle. Building on this idea, I would argue that rather than simply dismiss finance capitalism as an artifice, we need to examine it further. As we know, and as Victorians were becoming increasingly aware, the world of finance requires us to put our faith in speculation itself – the momentum that keeps it going – or else suffer potentially catastrophic consequences.

This idea is most succinctly summarized by the emphasis on "float[ing] a company", to describe the novel's central commercial speculation. One way of understanding this statement would be as an exposé, a denunciation of the company as an empty façade, a

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sham and a fake. But I would like to read it at face value: where the floating of the company does not mask an absence of substance but is substance itself. In this reading, stressing the absent depth – the lack of a company – would be to miss the matter at hand, that floating a company is as real an endeavor, as material and with material consequences, as building a railroad. It is just real in a different way, a way that is constituted not physically (or proven empirically) but communally.

For it is easy to recognize that the unmooring of capital that accompanies financial speculation is - on a grand scale - the source of the even larger social anxiety that drives Trollope's novel, the one referenced by the shifting "everybody." The novel presents an entire social class – the minor aristocracy, moneyed gentry, and those who aspire to join them – in panic precisely because older modes of signification, which aligned surface (title, rank, name) with depth (established wealth, lineage, and character) have now been scrambled. As Annette Van has noted, "In a culture that tended to equate respectability with social status, where knowing where someone stood or what someone had (which pretty much amounted to the same thing) was paramount, the shifting values engendered by speculation presented a threat to the notion of value itself" (89-90). The result is a radical insecurity: characters are permanently unsure of the true nature of others and thus at a loss of where to place their trust. Crucial to the novel's plot, they also no longer know what it is they need or desire, or why they sought another's trust in the first place. Social cohesion is threatened and, more radically, the very understanding of the social – and the ability to know and recognize it – is subverted.

Upon further reflection, one might also recognize this speculation – financial and social – not only as an advanced capitalist form of alienation, but also as a crisis of representation. Given that a company operates as a synecdoche of the product it produces, what is a company that produces nothing at all? What is its referent? What does it signify? Note that the crisis of signification - the crisis that constitutes the way we live now - also threatens the literary form in which it is described and evoked, the realist form of the novel. This, then, presents us with an epistemological crisis: if the way we live now is a sham, if there is no "real" to support it, then how can we know the real that is constitutive of the novel's realism? Put differently, if the referential reality is the reality of a sham (a perfectly plausible reading of this novel) then what is the ontological status of a sham, and how can we know it? Can it – like any other fantasy that people believe in – be read in a way that does not simply denote the absence of the real?

As I have already hinted above, I am proposing to do just that, by setting aside the correspondence model promoted by the novel and reading the sham not as an absence but as a presence, as generating a reality, rather than negating it. Rather than looking at the abyss of the absent real, I choose to examine what makes that which is there, real. Most importantly, I will argue that in this understanding, realism is constructed through a social (communal) model, rather than on a correspondence (vertical) model of mimesis.[6] In the remainder of this essay, I thus argue that the artifice, of economic fraud and of social appearance, constructs a reality in the novel—a reality that is not a referent outside the text but, rather, created communally within it.

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Moreover, I show that the characters not only base their interactions on this communally constructed reality, but that their very commonality is constituted through it. I then demonstrate how this reality - and its attendant commonality - is created in the novel through a painstaking but largely invisible process. As we will see, the reality engendered by the artifice *in* the novel is similar to the reality constructed for readers *by* this "realist" novel.

In so doing, I propose to take the novel's realism and the reality that undergirds it seriously, though I hope not naively, by trying to understand the work done by realism. Unlike others, my aim is neither to define realism, nor to trace its rise and/or fall, historicize its scholarship, or its relationship to other genres. My main focus is instead to understand the ways in which realism makes meaning by participating in the creation of "the real" that is at the root of its name. One of the things that realism does – and does very well – is to create a commonality over time.[7] In what follows, I try to show how this works.

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Who "We" Are

At the center of the novel's culture of speculation is the entrepreneur, whose figure becomes increasingly prominent in nineteenth-century fiction as a personification of the market as a system.[8] Interestingly, the narrator states, only a few pages after discussing the fraudulent railway to Vera Cruz, that "Mr Melmotte was indeed so great a reality, such a fact in the commercial world of London, that it was no longer possible for such a one as Montague to refuse to believe in the scheme" (84; pt. I). The choice of the word "reality" is odd. What does it mean that Melmotte is "a reality" or "a fact"? After all, no one doubts his empirical (if fictional) existence. I would venture to say that the reality to which the text refers is that of Melmotte the construct, Melmotte the invincible entrepreneur, Melmotte who is an amalgam constructed out of "everybody's" fears, desires, and fantasies. For Melmotte to be a reality in the sense of this quotation, he needs to be recognized as an economic and financial force by "everybody." But once he is recognized in this way, he really does have the force, which then becomes an empirical fact. Such recognition may not rest on the foundation of an actually existing railway-building enterprise, but, once communally recognized, Melmotte and his "scheme" become powerfully and materially real. The obverse is true as well: once this recognition is (also communally) withdrawn, its reality disappears.

Going back to the makings of "everybody" in the novel, we turn to Georgiana Longestaffe, perhaps the character most pathetically and poignantly in search of this volatile quality. Her family's dwindling fortunes, coupled with her aristocratic pretension, result in the crashing of her stock on the marriage market. In a chapter titled "Everybody Goes to Them" she takes up an invitation (procured because of her father's financial desperation) to stay with the despicable Melmottes. Georgiana initially refuses to go and argues with her mother, Lady Pomona, who persuades her that this will be her only chance to spend the season in London (her father having decreed that they could no longer afford to reside there). Lady Pomona clinches her argument by invoking

words that should by now sound a warning, "Everybody goes to them." It must be stressed that the desire to spend the season in London is not just Georgiana's whim: it is crucial to keeping her afloat in the marriage market. Desperate, Georgiana gives in, only to have her selfish brother Dolly take her to task, throwing her own words back at her:

> "Don't you feel ashamed of yourself?" [says Dolly]
>
> "No;—not a bit."
>
> "Then I feel ashamed for you."
>
> "*Everybody* comes here."
>
> "No;—*everybody* does not come and stay here as you are doing. *Everybody* doesn't make themselves a part of the family. I have heard of *nobody* doing it except you. I thought you used to think so much of yourself."
>
> "I think as much of myself as ever I did," said Georgiana, hardly able to restrain her tears.
>
> "I can tell you *nobody* else will think much of you if you remain here. I could hardly believe it when Nidderdale told me."
>
> "What did he say, Dolly?"
>
> "He didn't say much to me, but I could see what he thought. And of course *everybody* thinks the same." (237-8; pt. I, emphasis added)

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Once again, "everybody" does not really denote everybody but only a select group – a "we" which is defined against a "them." *Going* to the Melmottes means being one of us, but *staying* with the Melmottes – well, then you're already one of them. The fine line between "going" and "staying" is of course immaterial. What matters is the social ability to read that fine line – not only after it has been drawn – but before. After all, the category of those who stay with the Melmottes did not exist until Georgiana went to stay there; neither did the distinction between those who do and those who do not. In going to stay with the Melmottes, Georgiana at once creates a category of those who do so, distinguishes it from those who only "go" there and do not stay there, and finds herself on the wrong side of the distinguishing line: one of *them*, rather than one of us. But the language of "everybody" implies that to be one of "them" means to be a "nobody" – this is explicitly pointed out in the quotation – which explains why Georgiana employs it here so plaintively and pathetically, and her brother so harshly. Moreover, by aligning herself with the wrong "everybody," Georgiana not only endangers the social standing of everyone attached to her, including Dolly whose unusually strong response indicates the enormity of her action. Note that Georgiana is portrayed here as utterly helpless against the collective that ousts her, while, at the same time, every single one of her own actions – ineffectual as they may be for her – has the power to reconfigure the entire collective.

The word "everybody" is a pronoun that denotes a singular collective. But unlike "collective nouns" which denote a certain pre-existing group acting together (e.g. a pride of lions), "everybody" – as it is used here – denotes a number of seemingly disparate and discrete individuals who just happen to sometimes act in concert and thus constitute themselves as a group. In other words, the speech-act designating "everybody" is that which groups the disparate actors together, *pre-constituting* them into

a collective. The entire process has to be experienced as self-explanatory and manifestly obvious: "of course" "everybody thinks the same" as Lord Nidderdale. They think the same precisely because they want to belong to that everybody. The nebulous "everybody" is cast here as the most powerful of social constructs or perhaps the form of social construction itself, an *ur-construct,* if we will.

One might describe this process in terms of a network, imagined as a complex web of intersecting and contiguous connections that usually, if not always, work to create a single entity or foster a certain kind of communication. After all, while some networks come together around a common goal, idea, or theme, people in a society network (in the verb form of the word) precisely to find that common element. Creating, maintaining and reifying these commonalities – generating a "we" – is often far more important, socially and politically, than the ostensible purpose of the networks. In other words, communication not only happens through a network, but the very network – "we" – is created though the communication it enables.

However, what the network metaphor might obscure is the fact that this networking happens over time and that the contiguities and continuities – or their meanings – do not remain constant even after they have been established.[9] Moreover, a network implies fungibility - where the nodes might have different use values (vertical), but carry the same exchange value (horizontal). But the nodes of this network are not equally weighted or enabled, either in terms of their agency or social capital, or in their susceptibility to construction by the network. In other words, as the Longestaffe siblings show in their exchange, the network is always shifting and, thus, enabling each node to exert new meanings and influences on the others.

Remarkably, then, these connections are made and remade over time so that this radical contingency manages to construct a sense of coherence. As Warner has pointed out, the success of public discourse "depends on the recognition of participants and their further circulatory activity, and people do not commonly recognize themselves as virtual projections" (82). Thus, my aim is not to trace the connections and to show how they influence each other (to depict a network), but to understand how these disparate entities project *a sense of themselves as a network* - constructing the "we" or "everybody" on which the novel rests. Note that the constructed quality of these "we"s or "everybody"s is not their weakness, but rather their acknowledged foundation, essential to their nature, and the source of their strength over time.

When Georgiana Longestaffe pleads with her brother, it does not matter whether the "everybody" she invokes is a sham or a definable group. What matters is that she creates the very "everybody" that excludes her. This does not make her exclusion any less real – only a sort of *mise-en-abyme*. My readings thus trace the incremental, almost imperceptible, elements that work together in bringing about shifts in the common over time. Paying attention to their intricate communal machinations, and to their gradual and incremental accretions, opens a way of attending to the process of social construction; to the ways facts are created and authenticated; to the ways common sense is established and maintained, to the material force of language and form.

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How “We” Happens

The Way We Live Now is an especially productive text to read for the complexity of social construction because it offers such a vexed nexus of the social and of artifice (and their attendant anxieties) both in its form and in its content. Moreover, because of its dramatic scale (in plots, characters, narrative scope, and sheer length), it is able to provide an unusually detailed glimpse into this process, a blow-by-blow of the ways in which a construction of the social materializes. See for example the description of the preparations for Melmotte’s ball, which takes place in the novel’s opening chapters:

> The next night but one after that of the gambling transaction at the Beargarden, a great ball was given in Grosvenor Square. It was a ball on a scale so magnificent that it had been talked about ever since Parliament met, now about a fortnight since. Some people had expressed an opinion that such a ball as this was intended to be could not be given successfully in February. Others declared that the money which was to be spent,—an amount which would make this affair quite new in the annals of ball-giving,—would give the thing such a character that it would certainly be successful. And much more than money had been expended. Almost incredible efforts had been made to obtain the cooperation of great people, and these efforts had at last been grandly successful. The Duchess of Stevenage had come up from Castle Albury herself to be present at it and to bring her daughters, though it has never been her Grace’s wont to be in London at this inclement season. No doubt the persuasion used with the Duchess had been very strong. Her brother, Lord Alfred Grendall, was known to be in great difficulties, which,—so people said,—had been considerably modified by opportune pecuniary assistance. And then it was certain that one of the young Grendalls, Lord Alfred’s second son, had been appointed to some mercantile position, for which he received a salary which his most intimate friends thought that he was hardly qualified to earn. It was certainly a fact that he went to Abchurch Lane, in the City, four or five days a week, and that he did not occupy his time in so unaccustomed a manner for nothing. Where the Duchess of Stevenage went all the world would go. And it became known at the last moment, that is to say only the day before the party, that a prince of the blood royal was to be there. How this had been achieved nobody quite understood; but there were rumours that a certain lady’s jewels had been rescued from the pawnbroker’s. Everything was done on the same scale. The Prime Minister had indeed declined to allow his name to appear on the list; but one Cabinet Minister and two or three under-secretaries had agreed to come because it was felt that the giver of the ball might before long be the master of considerable parliamentary interest. It was believed that he had an eye to politics, and it is always wise to have great wealth on one’s own side. There had at one time been much solicitude about the ball. Many anxious thoughts had been given. When great attempts fail, the failure is disastrous, and may be ruinous. But this ball had now been put beyond the chance of failure. (29-30; pt. I)

The length of this quotation is indicative of the way its narrative works: it cannot be summarized since no single bit of information here provides the key to the construction of Melmotte’s ball as a social force. Rather, it is the accretion of detail that constructs this new reality. The reality - as I shall now show - becomes solid as an aggregate of detail, but more specifically as a concentration. In other words, this reality is not

created by the force of the crowd, i.e. more and more people joining a certain group, but rather by the high concentration of people of an already existing group adopting a certain understanding.

The first thing of import in this passage is the insistence on scale; the magnificence of the ball is due to the magnitude of its attendees and vice versa. This matter of scale is magnified as the passage shifts constantly and imperceptibly between the number of people attending the ball and the number of people talking about the ball, and it becomes increasingly clear that the number of people which really matters is the latter. And indeed, while the opening sentence purports to provide a description of the preparations for the ball, what follows is rather an account of *what was said* about these preparations. This talking loops back to the question of magnitude. The "incredible efforts" had been made "to obtain the cooperation of *great* people" that is, to rope in the greatest magnitude (in quality and quantity) of attendees, and in turn to increase the magnitude of those talking about it. The distance between "someone" and "everyone" is one of scale and magnitude. These qualities – and not immanent ones – make the substantive difference. The tension between someone and everyone, the tension of magnitude and accretion is the surface tension which upholds the social world of the novel. The economy of the way we live now is an economy of scale, both literally and figuratively; it undergirds a commonality that works through the accretion and concentration of social bonds. Those creating the ball's importance by talking about it, now need to attend it in order to maintain their belonging in the collective "everybody" they have created by talking about it.[10]

Note then that this passage describes the construction of two things: Melmotte (metonymically through his ball) as a real social and economic force, and the collective – the "everybody" which – by recognizing his power, and his power over their lives – constitutes itself as a group. Yet the entire passage which describes this process at work is narrated in the passive voice. Although it is teeming with talk and with action, there is no agency for this action. The great ball "was given" it "had been talked about" "money had been expended" and even the "incredible efforts" seem to have "been made" by themselves. Even the sentences that are syntactically active are in fact semantically passive; their subjects are generic and unknown – "Some people," "Others" – and therefore do not attribute agency or origin.

The Duchess of Stevenege is – linguistically speaking – almost the only actor in this long passage: "she had come up from Castle Albury." But even her action is highly qualified since the object of her coming is once again static, "to be present." Moreover, her action hardly has agency or volition. She is twice compelled to come; first – on the plot level – to save her cousin from financial ruin, and second – on the narrative level – by all the ambient talking. In other words, the Duchess is interpolated into this network of meanings: once her coming is talked about, she can no longer opt out of participating in it: not coming would be just as meaningful (if not more) than coming. Even more so, her coming is both the result of all the talking and the impetus for it, that which compels everyone else to come. The Duchess is at the vortex of all this social activity: "Where the Duchess of Stevenage went all the world would go." Neither

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generating the rumors and hype nor acting upon them, she nonetheless embodies them and comes to symbolize the collective everybody. Note that the Duchess does not represent a static network, but the action of networking: "and it became known." At once trapped in this network and at the same time its lead actor, she is caught up in its architecture; every one of her actions – or inactions – are meaningful within it.

While the Duchess of Stevenage is central to the novel, she is a less-than-minor character within it: she is not central to the plot, her character is not complex, has no psychological depth and does not alter over the span of the novel and as a result of its plot. Her role – and its centrality – is purely structural: central in the most literal, spatial sense of the word. With one exception, she does not even appear in the novel; the invocation of her name is enough to fulfill this role.[11] The one exception occurs towards the novel's end, in the description of the desperate preparations for the second grand social event hosted by Melmotte: the dinner for the Chinese Emperor. As opposed to the ball, which was designed to construct and consolidate Melmotte's power, the dinner is first meant to flaunt it. Later, in response to the growing anxiety about his social command, Melmotte and his allies seize on the dinner as a means to bolster their force against its imminent unraveling, significantly, on the strength of a rumor. Once again, the Duchess is called on to confirm her presence, and she does; only this time her attendance is not only talked about, but confirmed in her own words:

> "Is your Grace going?" said Lionel Lupton to the Duchess of Stevenage,–having left the House and gone into the park between six and seven to pick up some hints among those who were known to have been invited. The Duchess was Lord Alfred's sister, and of course she was going. "I usually keep engagements when I make them, Mr Lupton," said the Duchess. She had been assured by Lord Alfred not a quarter of an hour before that everything was as straight as a die. Lord Alfred had not then even heard of the rumour (79, pt.).

That the Duchess is called on by Melmotte and her brother to confirm her attendance, accentuates their desperation and her diminishing power. That the narrative seems to require her presence and her voice (and not only the mention of her) underscores the epistemological crisis in the levels of narration - whose voice can be trusted, what facts can be proven.[12] Since the Duchess's power lies precisely in the fact that others mention her attendance, and in the weight that her invocation carries, the need for her actual attendance and words is a sign of weakness, a diminished reality of facts rather than the more powerful one of echoes. And yes, unlike the ball, the dinner fails spectacularly in its mission. The two grand events hosted by Melmotte thus bookend his reign over London. The ball given at the novel's opening signals his rise to prominence – his becoming a "reality" – and the dinner toward the novel's end initiates the of the horrific unravelling of Melmotte's reality and of Melmotte-as-reality.

Does Melmotte's ultimate fall show that the communally-generated realities I have been describing here are not as material or as solid as I have been painting them, that they are doomed to fail as the game of smoke and mirrors that they are, exposing them

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as a mere cover-up of an underlying, immanent truth? Does the fact that Melmotte is finally undone because of forgery rather than of the collapse of his social or financial speculation signify the triumph of the correspondence understanding of reality over the communal one? Is it a final "denunciation of a corrupt financial culture" as some readers would have it (Henry 163)?[13] I think not. As Nancy Henry shows, "[n]either the means nor the fact of Melmotte's suicide makes any difference to the great international game of finance . . . the suicide [is] a futile act signifying nothing" (172). The common speculative enterprise does not depend on any single member - not even its central, strongest one - so that even Melmotte's collapse – and even though his fraud is exposed – does not destroy either the financial reality or the commonality it created. Too many people are invested in this commonality for their social belonging as well as their financial future. As long as there are those keeping the speculation afloat – and the very existence of the City and of Abchurch Lane depends on keeping it afloat[14] – reality it will stay. For while Melmotte fails and falls, the commonality that has made him into a "great reality" does not, still less the communal way it knows the world.[15] The way we live now – as I have been describing it here – is upheld, even strengthened. While fraud can upend and destroy an individual, it does not topple the financial community or the social world it radiates, which might simply be too big to fail.[16]

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Complicating the Correspondence/Communal Opposition

Roger Slakey, discussing Lady Carbury's enterprise of letter-writing to increase the value of her books, has claimed unequivocally that "her aim is fraudulent." He goes on to argue that the power of the novel stems from the fact that its "language exists without reference to its proper meaning" (249). The logic of my argument so far demands that we disagree with the first part; after all, Lady Carbury's fraudulent aim *does* generate real exchange-value (if not use-value) for her books. By extension, one could also argue (as I have been doing so far) that the meaning of language in the novel is not immanent but rather communally produced. The novel's commonalities consolidate around the ongoing endeavor of determining the proper meanings of language.

But this response is not fully satisfying because fraudulence does matter in the novel; Trollope insists that it does and that it is not limited to the world of finance, but extends closer to home, to the realm of language and writing. While I am attributing to Trollope a presciently Sausserian understanding of language in which words gain meaning not in relation to referents but in relation to other words, Slakey is, nonetheless, not completely off the mark: the clearly fraudulent ways in which characters in the novel use language imply linguistic ambivalence. In *The Way We Live Now,* the Sausserian understanding of language is in constant tension with the correspondence understanding of meaning as immanent and referential. Indeed, the two standpoints on reality, I suggest, thrive in their contradistinction. The work of artifice is as integral to correspondence as to commonality. Moreover, the tension between these two modes is constructive; they engage and engender each other.

This is apparent in the character of Roger Carbury, a model gentleman – that repeatedly essentialized and yet always nebulous figure of anxiety in the mid- to late-Victorian period. Melmotte is not Roger's only foil; from the start, Trollope sets up an opposition between Roger and his sister-in-law, Lady Carbury. As an explicit gentleman, Roger does not "alter his notions" or "modify his conduct," while her inconstant conduct is relative, dependent on the number and quality of people who adopt a certain approach, or the money that might follow a certain course of action (69; pt. I). Their opposition is based less on the different values they uphold than on the fact that Roger's constant actions are knowable, while hers vary. Lady Carbury represents all that is superficial, changing and false and Roger all that is steady and true, although, as we have seen, this does not take him very far.[17]

Tellingly, in expressing his unfashionable belief in the superiority of the English gentleman, Trollope is at loss to describe it: "A man who publicly claims exclusive rights (and commissions) to being a gentlemen," he wrote in *An Autobiography*, "would be defied to define the term [gentleman], and would fail should he attempt to do so. But he would know what he meant, and so very probably would they who defied him" (38). Unable to define a gentleman, Trollope, like his novel, resorts to an implied communal understanding. Indeed, as Audrey Jaffe demonstrates in her reading of Ferdinand Lopez in *The Prime Minister*, once the social world is opened to admit new members (and such changes, we have already seen, cannot be denied or willed away) the value of the gentleman is not determined by his use-value (or inherent qualities) but by his exchange value:

> [W]hat a gentleman knows' above all is how to identify another gentleman. However, the allowance of exceptions to the rule means that the gentlemanliness must be determined in each individual case; [...] each candidate becomes, in effect, a stock, his value a function of the assessment of the group. [...] And once the doors to Wharton/Fletcher society, along with questions of gentlemanly identity, are thrown open, the identities of the Whartons and Fletchers - formerly held in place by their strong feeling and prejudices - are also in play (147).

There was nothing immutable about the old mode of membership, Jaffe insists. What appears to be constant is also constructed by "feelings and prejudices," its solidity dependent on the strength and duration of those feelings. Roger Carbury, paradigm of the English gentleman, thus embodies the tension between the novel's understanding of the constructed, contingent, and communal nature of social reality and its persistent commitment to an immutable referential model of truth. It is this tension that upholds the real in this novel and the commonalities that are constructed by it.

The Realist Real

Having described the ways that artifice helps to construct reality in the novel, I now address the ways in which the novel constructs the accompanying sense of "the real" which gives realism its name. I have shown that the common is worked out as minute details – understood not as indices of larger, absent meanings, but as elements of recurring formal patterns– and takes on an explanatory force. Details in realist

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fiction are, therefore, not clues to a latent reality, but reality itself, in the functional sense of what is commonly accepted as real. Indeed, the commonality model that I am positing suggests that the reality of realist fiction is itself an aggregate, or a concentrate, of mutually – if implicitly – agreed-upon assumptions.[18] In fact, as Jonathan Farina suggests, realist novels function as nodes in a network of accretion.[19] The reality of realism is "afloat" as it were, only insofar as there exists an "everybody" sufficient to hold it up – to recognize these texts as realistic, to suspend our disbelief that the reality these fictions reference is in itself a construction.

In a ceremony popularly known by the sixteenth century as "beating of the bounds" the territorial boundaries of the parish were sanctified by a ritual walk through which the community concretized its borders and itself.[20] Similarly, Ramon Saldívar argues that Trollope deploys its realism "not so much to signify Victorian England as to represent certain of Victorian England's ways of signifying itself" (177).[21] Reading realism in this way provides the friction we need to pass through the dead-end to which realism-as-epistemology always seemed to lead: spinning our wheels over the ontology of an elusive – and unknowable – real.[22] If, as I am suggesting here, realism does not describe a real that is outside it, but, rather, one that it communally creates, then its epistemology is self-reflexive.[23] Like the practice of walking the bounds, realism is a cultural practice through which a commonality - society - converges around what it considers real and, in so doing, constitutes itself as a commonality.

The process of constructing a Victorian commonality is complementary to the work of realist fiction: both function by sanctioning a set of communicative practices already considered common. But as the repeated ambivalence expressed toward artifice in Trollope's novel shows, these homologous social and literary functions also propel each other and work together in the same ontological field.[24] An understanding of truth as latent or immanent is generated through communal agreement in the form of conventional reading practices. So who are "we" when we live in this way? I am suggesting that we can never conclusively define or delimit the "we"s or "everybody"s that populate the novel. Instead we can understand how the Victorian realist novel became a central way to communicate the contemporaneous social commonalities that, at the same time, became constitutive of realist form. Saldívar aptly captures the paradox, "Trollope's insight to the facticity at the heart of symbolic social life . . . ends by recognizing the power of human communities to generate meaning immanently" (178). Our own stake in attending to realist form in this way, I propose, is to understand some of the ways that we too come together to define what we consider real.

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Notes

[1] Jameson here returns to an earlier formulation of this contradiction in his essay on "The Existence of Italy" (1998), published in *Signatures of the Visible* (1990).

[2] Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" is another important formulation especially in the ways that it is generated, reinforced and circulated, though I refrain from using it in my own work because of its immediate reference to commonality-as-nationality, and thus to a knowable totality.

[3] Bruno Latour ascribes the ability *to create* the difference between the "true world of realities" and the "veil of appearances" to the (now diminished) post-Enlightenment power of "critique." He thus advocates a "shift" from a realism that implies "a nature always there" to a common endeavor of "an assemblage to be slowly composed" (2010, 477). In this essay I analyze what I see as Trollope's insistence on the simultaneity of both kinds of realism and on their paradoxical engagement. And while my analysis is indebted to many of the questions Latour raises, its unfolding through my close readings of the novel also implies my own critique of some of the broader strokes on which he bases his theory.

[4] On this relationship see my analysis of the opening chapter of Trollope's *Doctor Thorne* in "Trollope and the Law" (161-2).

[5] For recent discussions on the logic and the anxiety of finance capital in the Victorian period more generally and in Trollope more specifically, see Jaffe, O'Gorman, Henry and Schmitt, Bratlinger, Poovey.

[6] Elaine Freedgood addresses the problem caused by "the referential illusion of the real" in realist form by suggesting yet another vertical-to-horizontal critical move, in this case from metaphor to metonymy, a reading of objects as highly embedded "things" *related to* other things, rather than commodities *standing in for* other things (10).

[7] See Ben-Yishai 2013 pp3-8.

[8] According to Irene Perciali, the figure of the nineteenth-century entrepreneur constitutes the market, effectively personifying capitalism itself. Writing about French realism, she argues that "Balzac uses character to establish the possibility of realist totality, and he establishes that possibility through displacement and projection out of the text rather than through an encyclopedic enactment of authorial mastery" (xiii).

[9] I thank Lauren Goodlad for challenging me on this point, both in conversation and in her and Andrew Sartori's critique of Latour's Actor Network Theory.

[10] Thanks to Franziska Tsufim for pointing out that Trollope evokes another meta-literary commonality when referring to the Prime Minister who remained absent from the ball. As faithful readers of his work "we" know that the Prime Minister referred to might as well be Plantagenet Palliser who, as perfect gentleman, would never consider attending the ball (whereas Lady Glencora obviously would).

[11] The Duchess's name is invoked throughout this long novel only to confirm the legitimacy of social relations with the Melmottes (chapters 21, 28, 32). Significantly, it is used by Lady Pomona to convince her daughter, Georgiana Longestaffe, to go and stay with the Melmotte's, in the scene already discussed above: "Everybody goes to them," said Lady Pomona. "The Duchess of Stevenage has been there over and over again, and so has Lady Auld Reekie. Everybody goes to their house" (202, pt. I).

[12] Ramón Saldívar (writing about Trollope's *The Warden*) identifies the narrator with this collective "consciousness which is not present in any one individual but which is present at all times within the world of the novel to hear its characters' 'murmurs'" (170).

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[13] Nancy Henry argues that the mid-Victorian trope of suicide as a response to financial loss was "part of an attempt to find the right language and images with which to represent a financial sector that had long been unsuited and inappropriate for fiction" (163).

[14] Tara McGann's analysis of "the voice of the City" and of "Abchurch Lane" shows how they ascribe Melmotte's fall to an individual failing and mismanagement of cash-flow, rather than to a systemic failure of finance-speculation. Her analysis also foregrounds the ways both of these are in fact collective entities, and repeated use of the passive form to express their collective voice "It was asserted in Abchurch Lane" (142-3).

[15] In fact, Anat Rosenberg argues that it is precisely because Melmotte's fraud is a breach of the social (in the form of a forged promissory note) that he falls: "the relational context giving meaning to promise disappears. With this symbolic evaporation of the supportive social structure of promise, the whole Melmottian system disappears as well" (16). I would argue that the system does not disappear, but that it just ceases to be "Melmottian," perhaps belonging now to "everybody" and thus taken for granted.

[16] Note also, that as Henry shows, "Although he is certainly a swindler and a forger, Melmotte is found after his death to be worth a great deal of money. . . . While his body may be metaphorically carried off to the crossroads, his reputation enjoys a 'whitewashing'" (172).

[17] And yet, while discussing the novel in his autobiography, Trollope singles out Roger Carbury as first of the novel's (three) "uninteresting" characters (356). The other two are Hetta Carbury and Paul Montague, who, like Roger, remain true to themselves and ultimately refuse to be swayed by what "everyone" thinks.

[18] Thinking of realism as an aggregate has been central at least since Watt's formulation of an "aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places" (31). My own model owes much to Elizabeth Ermarth's 1983 *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* and is akin to what, more recently, Kent Puckett has described as "a range of coherence effects," Rae Greiner has called "a meeting of minds," David Kurnick has identified as "radically collective," and Nicholas Dames has registered as the "common affective range" or implied "unspoken consensus" as the collective products of Victorian reading protocols. While our arguments may differ, it seems to me that I join all of these Victorianist scholars in regarding reality as a socially-produced aggregate. Note that in naming these scholars as taking part in a common scholarly endeavor, I have generated another commonality. In fact, this is a third order of commonality: in addition to the commonalities generated *in* the realist novel, and the ones generated *by* the novel's realism, I now add a commonality generated by the study *of* realism.

[19] Farina argues that "Dickens and Thackeray mint metonyms, 'pithy sayings,' that become 'common talk,' part of the social network, social networking mediums that work because they are shared associations, collective impressions and suggestions. These metonyms are 'luminous,' it seems, because they coincide with current social feeling and thought; they touch readers' associative cognitions." They thus create "an epistemology of superficiality in a world that appreciated the contiguity of networks to the binding intimacy of narrative."

[20] Steve Hindle shows how this ritual perambulation combined the practical necessity of perpetuating historical and geographical knowledge with a powerful statement of communal identity and spiritual unity. "This practice," he argues, "represents one of those moments when society might be observed in describing itself" (206).

[21] Saldívar writes about *The Warden* but makes clear that his argument holds true for Trollope's work as a whole. "[I]n his work, [Trollope] often seems interested not so much in 'reality' as in the Victorian conventions of representing reality" (166).

[22] "The issue that perhaps makes us most anxious in relation to the language that we do not read is that of reference. The orthodoxy of the 'referential illusion' hangs around, reminding us of the gap between words and things, the problems of representation, the difficulty of adequately capturing anything about a Real that we know only as an absent cause" (Freedgood and Schmitt 4).

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[23] In their reading of Barthes "Reality Effect" Rachel Buurma and Laura Heffernan argue that in the "Reality Effect" the uninitiated subject can only experience the real world in opposition to meaning. "Experiencing this opposition forces him or her to accept history as natural and the 'real' as given. He or she then imagines meaning making is a secondary operation that seizes upon elements of this natural, real world in order to pull them into an ideological realm of constructed meaning. Such an experience of the world precludes the possibility of the subject's participation in the construction of the world" (2014, 85).

[24] Buurma and Heffernan advocate a literary criticism that "hold[s] literary and social things together without first pulling them apart, using one to explain the other, or taking one as a figure for the other. [This] work shuns homologies between literary text and referential world, instead searching out metonymic, adjacent, and referential relations between the two" As I hope I have shown here, I think the opposition between a homology and an engagement between the literary and the social that they set up here is not always warranted and that "the local and historicized understanding of how literary meaning, however ephemeral, comes to be" that they advocate (and which I wholeheartedly endorse) can be located precisely where these two modes meet (2013, 625).

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