Victorian Literature and Culture (2005), **33**, 395–414. Printed in the United States of America.
Copyright © 2005 Cambridge University Press. 1060-1503/05 $9.50

THE FAILURE OF CONDESCENSION

By Daniel Siegel

> [W]ith his whole heart and soul he thanked his majesty for this gracious condescension – this testimony of approbation – these proofs of sensibility to his attachment, which paid – overpaid him, in a moment, for the labours of a life.
>
> — Edgeworth, *Patronage* (1813)

> Mr. Cleves has the wonderful art of preaching sermons which the wheelwright and the blacksmith can understand; not because he talks condescending twaddle, but because he can call a spade a spade, and knows how to disencumber ideas of their wordy frippery.
>
> — Eliot, "Amos Barton" (1857)

HOW DID IT COME TO THIS? How did the precious coin of the sovereign become the twaddle of misguided preachers? Where did condescension go wrong?

No social history of condescension has been written, but we can easily imagine the outlines of such a history. Condescension originally denoted an act whereby an authority figure temporarily abdicated the privileges of his or her position for the benefit of a dependant. In this way condescension was traditionally used as an argument for paternalism, a model of government in which the legitimacy of empowered groups rested on the ability and disposition of those groups to provide for the less fortunate. When in the early Victorian decades paternalism was eroded by such liberal formations as self-help, separate spheres, voting reform, and the deregulation of markets, condescension became an object of critique. It was reappropriated and disseminated by the liberal opponents of paternalism, in forms meant to expose its inherent deficiencies and dangers. This attack against condescension as a mode of behavior was accompanied by a major shift in the normal connotations of the word. To condescend was no longer to renounce, but to make a show of renunciation; it was no longer to help others, but to demean them for one's own gain.

The assault on the social utility of condescension was partly accomplished through a transformation in the literary uses of the condescension scene. While the literary legacy of the eighteenth century – crystallized in writers like Scott, Austen, and Edgeworth – displays the ability of condescension to reconcile conflict, the great Victorian novelists see condescension as an obstacle to reconciliation. Thus Victorian scenes of condescension are frequently catastrophic, creating new narrative problems and calling for new solutions. Victorian fiction is full of condescension scenes; among the most famous are Edward Rochester's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

marriage proposal to Jane Eyre, Mrs. Jellyby's efforts for the natives of Borrioboola-gha, Miss Havisham's invitations to Pip, and Edward Casaubon's patronage of Will Ladislaw. Yet these episodes backfire. Rochester's marrying days are behind him; Mrs. Jellyby's domestic problems disqualify her from any charity more distant; Miss Havisham's uses for Pip are narcissistic and fleeting; and Casaubon's payments to Will are a self-imposed blackmail, motivated by the haunting consciousness of a family wrong. The best-intentioned acts of condescension are thwarted: in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dr. Manette, though a hero of the Bastille, can do nothing for his son-in-law; in *Middlemarch*, when Mr. Brooke tries to comfort the farmer Dagley, he is reviled; and in *Framley Parsonage*, Fanny and Lucy Robarts are rejected and humiliated on a charitable mission to the Crawley family. The blame in these cases is shared between the high and the low, the powerful and the disaffected. But while the causes are multiple, the problem is the same: condescension is consistently invoked as a plausible means of reconciling people, and it is consistently rejected as a poor solution. Victorian fiction stages countless scenes where acts of good-will fail, due sometimes to the insensibility of those who have and sometimes to the viciousness of those who want.

Condescension, as described in this historical outline, is not really a doctrine or a structure of feeling, but a transactional protocol, a social and literary convention. In particular, it is a convention associated with charity and giving. This gives us a clue as to why condescension has not been investigated before. There is a long tradition of talking about charity as a necessarily spontaneous and unregulated expression of feeling. This tradition was challenged, around the middle of the nineteenth century, by a movement to replace spontaneous charity with a highly organized institutional philanthropy. In the ensuing debates, which of course persist to this day, the subjective impulse was clearly distinguished from the institutional form, and scenes of giving were held to demonstrate either one or the other. Little thought has been given to the structural patterns in which the subjective impulse takes shape, the conventions through which particular acts of charity are realized. Condescension is just such a convention. The pages that follow will investigate nineteenth-century condescension as a conventional form, a form that, even as it participates in the broader movements of social and literary history, has its own particular logic.

Theories of convention tend to run in one of two channels. The first holds convention to be a product (and agent) of materialist determination; because convention has a social mandate, every aspect of a convention can be correlated to its ideological function.[1] Alternatively, conventions can be seen as ritualized performances that, over time, become autonomous from the practical needs that generated them.[2] We can reconcile these views by way of Stuart Hall's discussion of ideology, following Gramsci. For Hall, an ideological conception is not the spontaneous articulation of a class interest or a political force, but the battleground on which opposed classes and forces contend. If so, then it is precisely because a convention has developed its own rationale – because its grammar has been fixed – that it can become an effective site of contestation. A convention can function in the service of variable social agendas, only because it has, in the popular imagination, turned its back upon its moment of origin. In other words, it is because conventions are not reducible to particular structures of feeling that they can be a vehicle for articulating these structures. Therefore, if we want to understand the variable aspects of a convention – the places where ideology becomes visible – we must first understand its autonomous symbolic language.

Conventions like the condescension scene have their peculiar ways of signifying and are too often misunderstood within the field of Victorian studies. In many cases we make

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

flattening assumptions about conventional behavior or conventional narratives in order to assert particular cases of subversion or other interest. More often, though, we ignore conventions altogether, using specific texts as windows into the cultural imaginary. This oscillation between text and discourse has become standard procedure, and yet when we treat cultural texts as the eruptions of an epistemological moment, we are only telling half the story. Every text mounts the historical stage clothed in convention, and we must understand the semiotics of its conventions before we can make reliable claims about its ideological significance.[3]

Reading condescension as a narrative and behavioral convention will also allow us to take an experiential approach to questions of authority, an approach that asks not what authority is but what it is like. If authority is a felt or perceived experience, rather than a social fact, then "typical" encounters such as the condescension scene are among the places where authority is negotiated and understood. The importance of experiential aspects of authority has been shown by a number of recent studies of the class politics of Victorian sentiment, including Audrey Jaffe's *Scenes of Sympathy* (2000) and the work of Miriam Bailin. These studies explore the particular mechanisms through which relations of power are constructed; they forego aerial views and attempt to capture the workings of authority at the ground level. Such a perspective is only possible when we bracket the structural equations that would reveal all acting subjects to be the interpellated agents of a class ideology, and reconstruct the ways in which particular social exchanges ask their subjects to manipulate an array of familiar roles, conventional gestures, and legible attitudes.[4]

This essay will provide a historical survey of condescension as a word, a literary paradigm, and a social idea. It will then proceed to a structural analysis of the condescension act. Placed in dialogue with one another, these two approaches will enable us to see a radical transformation in the meaning of condescension, and yet at the same time to detect the semantic continuity between an early, productive condescension and a later condescension under siege. What will ultimately emerge from this inquiry is a conventionalized history, an account which recognizes that the agents of ideological change must always grapple with the intransigence of conventional modes.

Condescension in History

IN ITS TRADITIONAL SENSE, the word "condescension" designated an act of exceptional generosity, an act that fell beyond the scope of expectation and almost automatically provoked responses of gratitude and even wonder. It was a talisman of the encounter between the noble and the common, or indeed, between the divine and the human. Twice, for instance, does Milton's Adam thank the angel Raphael for condescending to reveal to him the divine plan of history. In the eighteenth century, condescension lost some of its aura of exceptionalism, and came to mark a more ordinary – but still commendable – generosity of spirit. In eighteenth-century prose, it is thus common to find the word "condescension" qualified by adjectives such as "generous," "good," "kind," "humble," and particularly "affable." This last word shows that condescension had become an index not only of ethical practice, but also of personality. To condescend demonstrated an easy-going flexibility of temperament, a willingness to compromise. In *Clarissa* (1749), Mrs. Howe chides Anna for being unwilling to forego her pride and condescend however slightly to Hickman ("You know not what it is to condescend"); elsewhere, Anna agrees that Clarissa's condescension, whereby she has

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

consented to exchange letters secretly with Lovelace, "has no doubt hitherto prevented great mischiefs" (274, letter 65; 71, letter 10). Eighteenth-century condescension thus connoted a whole range of practices spanning from extreme renunciation to polite deference.

Like the other canonical virtues, condescension was often exposed by eighteenth-century writers as a mask for vice. "False" condescension was therefore – and frequently – seen as a tool for dissimulation and hypocrisy, in a manner which affirmed, rather than denied, the value of "true" condescension. But while the idea of a pernicious condescension was quite common in the eighteenth century, it was in the nineteenth century that false and true condescension became hard to distinguish. The condescension act came to be thought of as double by nature, comprising generosity and self-interest at the same time. Austen's *Emma* (1815) expresses it precisely this way: "Emma did not repent her condescension in going to the Coles. She must have delighted the Coles – worthy people, who deserved to be made happy! – and left a name behind her that would not soon die away" (239; ch. 27). As Emma sees it, the establishment of her reputation does not compromise the condescension act, but validates it. For Emma, condescension is an index to character, and it is only fitting that charity should reap its benefits in renown. When Mr. Elton, for instance, meets Emma and Harriet on a charitable errand, Emma decides that the mutual satisfaction attached to the act of charity may well bring about a declaration of love between the others. And yet the novel itself is less sanguine about the uses of reputation and pride and suggests that the complacency brought about by Emma's charity has its defects. The doubleness of condescension is elaborated even more explicitly in *Guy Mannering* (1815): "The Baronet received his visitor with that condescending parade which was meant at once to assert his own vast superiority, and to show the generosity and courtesy with which he could waive it, and descend to the level of ordinary conversation with ordinary men" (2: 148; ch. 13). Scott goes a step further than Austen: whereas Emma sees her reputation to be a fortuitous effect of her condescension, the baronet makes reputation his deliberate rationale.

In the Victorian period, the belief in a constructive condescension largely fell away, and the word itself (with exceptions) was given over to its negative connotations. Condescension came primarily to signify self-promotion at another's cost; to condescend was to assert one's own superiority in a way that degraded others. Like Emma Woodhouse, Martin Chuzzlewit finds his own condescension "inexpressibly delicious to him" (231; ch. 13);[5] Paul Dombey Sr. cannot imagine that anyone would not wish to be distinguished by his condescension (594; ch. 42). Frequently the self-promotion of condescension is accidental, emphasizing even further the insensibility of the superior. Thus the well-intentioned "Miss Assher's smiling condescensions were torture to Caterina" (*Scenes of Clerical Life* 148; ch. 10); thus too does the disaffected Miss Wade remark of her conciliatory schoolmates, "They were always forgiving me, in their vanity and condescension. Little images of grown people!" (*Little Dorrit* 2: 663; ch. 21). Just as the condescension that exalts the self is reviled, its absence is often praised. "There are many girls," observes the narrator of *Can You Forgive Her?* (1865), "who could submit themselves at a moment to the kindness of such a woman as Lady Glencora . . . for of all such women in the world, Lady Glencora was the least inclined to patronize or be condescending in her kindnesses" (2: 403; ch. 79). Shirley Keeldar gladly observes that "[Sir Philip Nunnely] did not *condescend* to their society – he seemed *glad* of it" (*Shirley* 446; ch. 27). In these cases the exaltation of the superior has become incompatible with the dignity of the subordinate, and a condescension that achieves the former must necessarily default on the latter.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Another equally negative – and equally common – Victorian connotation of the word takes exactly the opposite view: condescension is seen not as promoting but as degrading the one who condescends. In such cases the object of condescension is thought to be unworthy; consequently, to condescend is to be compromised. Scott can serve here as our locus classicus: "the high rank of the marshals of the lists would have been held degraded, had they condescended to superintend the sports of the yeomanry" (*Ivanhoe* 1: 182; ch. 13). Some decades later, Trollope uses the word almost exclusively to imply degradation. For instance, Mr. Harding will not condescend to tell a lie (*The Warden* 242; ch. 18). In *Orley Farm* (1862), Sir Peregrine implores Lady Mason not to condescend to notice Mr. Dockwrath's legal action against her, roughly equating condescension with subscription to blackmail. And *Can You Forgive Her*'s George Vavasor, making a typical Trollopian calculation, concludes that "whether or no he cared to marry his cousin . . . it was necessary for his honour that he should have that for which he condescended to ask" (1: 326; ch. 31). In these examples condescension is a threat not to the subordinate but to the superior, who by lowering him- or herself to the level of the common, risks losing dignity or authority.

The failure of Victorian condescension, then, takes multiple shapes, and while many of the examples above show condescension to be a locus of bitter contention, there is another view in which it takes on the nostalgia, pathos, and ridiculousness of a faded ideal. Thus it is in the last number of *Bleak House* (1853), in which Dickens describes Volumnia Dedlock's efforts to recover her former glory on the rare occasion of a public ball:

> Then, indeed, does she captivate all hearts by her condescension, by her girlish vivacity, and by her skipping about as in the days when the hideous old general with the mouth too full of teeth, had not cut one of them at two guineas each. Then does she twirl and twine, a pastoral nymph of good family, through the mazes of the dance. Then do the swains appear with tea, with lemonade, with sandwiches, with homage. Then is she kind and cruel, stately and unassuming, various, beautifully wilful. Then is there a singular kind of parallel between her and the little glass chandeliers of another age, embellishing that assembly-room; which, with their meagre stems, their spare little drops, their disappointing knobs where no drops are, their bare little stalks from which knobs and drops have both departed, and their little feeble prismatic twinkling, all seem Volumnias. (875; ch. 66)

In the desire to captivate and conquer, in the ritualized mystification of the dance, and in the aristocratic voraciousness that ingests homage with its lemonade and sandwiches, Volumnia is the figure for a vitiated condescension. The doubleness (self-interest and generosity) of an earlier condescension persists in Volumnia's kindness and cruelty, her stately and unassuming manner – as if a show of vivacity might palliate the encroaching demands of a world beneath her.

A couple literary scenes, written at different points in the century, can illustrate the evolution of the condescension act from a constructive measure to a harmful or futile one. The first, taken from Scott's *The Antiquary* (1816), justifiably brought tears to the eyes of Woolf's Mr. Ramsay. Steenie Mucklebackit, a fisherman's son, has drowned, and the grieving family is visited by Oldbuck, the Laird of Monkbarns. The scene is not concerned with the drowning itself, so much as with the problem of consolation. The mourners cannot be comforted. The fisherman is entirely possessed by his grief, and he can neither look at his son's coffin nor look away from it. The narrator explains that the fisherman's "family had not yet dared to address to him a word, either of sympathy or consolation" (2: 118; ch. 10).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Similarly, we read that the mother's friends are "endeavouring to stun the grief which they could not console" (119). The grandmother has fallen into a state of incomprehension and defies approach. When the clergyman enters the hut, his consolations are initially ignored, and then come to meet a worse fate from the grandmother: "She drew up her head and body, shook her head in a manner that showed at least impatience, if not scorn, of his counsel, and waved her hand slightly, but with a gesture so expressive as to indicate to all who witnessed it a marked and disdainful rejection of the ghostly consolation proffered to her" (2: 123–24; ch. 10).

The family's paralysis can only be broken down by an extreme act of condescension on the part of Oldbuck. The coffin is about to be interred, and the onlookers remind the family of the custom that the father should support the head of the coffin, a duty that he is reluctant to assume. At this point, the narrator explains, "Oldbuck interfered between the distressed father and his well-meaning tormentors, and informed them that he himself, as landlord and master to the deceased, 'would carry his head to the grave' " (2: 125–26; ch. 10). The results of this proposal follow:

> In spite of the sorrowful occasion, the hearts of the relatives swelled within them at so marked a distinction on the part of the laird; and old Alison Breck, who was present among other fish-women, swore almost aloud, 'His honour Monkbarns should never want sax warp of oysters in the season (of which fish he was understood to be fond), if she should gang to sea and dredge for them hersell, in the foulest wind that ever blew.' And such is the temper of the Scottish common people that, by this instance of compliance with their customs, and respect for their persons, Mr. Oldbuck gained more popularity than by all the sums which he had yearly distributed in the parish for purposes of private or general charity. (2: 126; ch. 10)

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

There are other hints as well of the difficulty condescension will face in the coming decades. In the previous quote, for instance, we see that Oldbuck gains popularity for his compliance with custom; as the scene develops, the necessity of compliance becomes pronounced, and Oldbuck's popularity is shown to be tenuous. For instance, he objects to the mourners' decision to wear crape on their caps, but must keep still: "Monkbarns would probably have remonstrated against this superfluous expense, had he been consulted; but, in doing so, he would have given more offence than he gained popularity by condescending to perform the office of chief mourner" (2: 126; ch. 10). A departure from popular custom would expose Oldbuck's superiority as callous and removed. More disturbing than this is an earlier moment when, at the Laird's entrance, the distracted grandmother offers an ominous toast: "Wishing a' your healths, sirs, and often may we hae such merry meetings!" (2: 121; ch. 10) The woman's grief has caused her to forget her grandson's death, and her statement receives a response of "shuddering horror" from all who are present. But her very mistake correctly exposes the fact that the condescension of superiors necessarily trades on the distress of subordinates. In a sense the success of condescension is only as great as the distress which makes it possible. The grandmother's celebratory pledge is really, then,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

another form of the gratitude of the whole family towards the Laird, a gratitude which entails a momentary abandonment of the drowned boy. By the same token, the boy's specter – and in general, the consciousness of distress – provides an undertow that pulls against the success of condescension.

By May 1852, which saw the publication of the third number of *Bleak House*, everything had changed. In Dickens's episode of the brickmaker's cottage, the condescension of the rich is not a mixed blessing, but a failing cause. The keynote of this failure is struck by Mrs. Pardiggle, whose "forcible composure" seems to Esther "calculated . . . to increase [the brickmaker's] antagonism" (107; ch. 8). Perhaps Pardiggle's most telling characteristic is her complacency, her sense that the protests of the cottagers affirm her purpose: "I enjoy hard work; and the harder you make mine, the better I like it" (Penguin ed. 132; ch. 8).[6] Pardiggle's self-congratulation belies a condescension meant to reward the philanthropist, and this time the reward is not incidental to the interests of the needy, but explicitly in conflict with them. Dickens voices a critique that was common at the time and would become even more so in the 1860s and 70s, an attack against the philanthropic establishment for seeking its own glory above all. Pardiggle's self-absorption leads her to hear all the brickmaker's objections as routine gestures, and the force of his claims eludes her.

The force of Pardiggle's claims, by contrast, does not elude the brickmaker; out of them he creates a personal drama of assault and justification to rival those of Miss Flite and Richard Carstone in the shadow of the Lord Chancellor. The brickmaker perceives Pardiggle's condescension to be an assertion of her dominance, and he struggles to control the situation by preempting her interrogation: "Now you're a-going to poll-pry and question according to custom – I know what you're a-going to be up to. Well! You haven't got no occasion to be up to it. I'll save you the trouble" (107; ch. 8). Yet by way of denying her the "occasion," the brickmaker subjects himself to a battery of charges, charges which are only partially undermined through his reappropriation. Against some of these charges the brickmaker disdains to defend himself: "How have I been conducting of myself? Why, I've been drunk for three days; and I'd a been drunk four, if I'd a had the money. . . . And how did my wife get that black eye? Why, I giv' it her; and if she says I didn't, she's a Lie!" (107; ch. 8). But mixed in with his disdain is an eagerness to mount a defense:

> Have I read the little book wot you left? No, I an't read the little book wot you left. There an't nobody here as knows how to read it; and if there wos, it wouldn't be suitable to me. It's a book fit for a babby, and I'm not a babby. If you was to leave me a doll, I shouldn't nuss it. (107; ch. 8)

By making his case, the brickmaker betrays a persistent, though attenuated, faith in the condescension gesture. The philanthropist's intrusion is both an outrage and an opportunity; like the aggrieved Chancery suitor Gridley, the brickmaker compulsively petitions his oppressor for a reprieve. The condescension of the rich thus means as much to the poor of *Bleak House* as it does to the poor of *The Antiquary*, and yet it means something quite different. Whereas Lord Oldbuck's solicitude for the fisherman's family, and particularly his attention to local custom, mark him a part of the organic life of the community, Mrs. Pardiggle's visits confirm the poor in their demoralized suspicion of a ruling class that offers a great deal but has nothing to give.

Dickens's episode seems at first, therefore, to have given up on condescension, and to contend that the problems of the poor can only be understood and addressed by the poor

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

themselves. Esther and Ada, who accompany Mrs. Pardiggle, both feel "painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier, which could not be removed by our new friend. By whom, or how, it could be removed, we did not know; but we knew that" (108; ch. 8). Their inability to help becomes emphatically clear when, as Ada touches the face of the poor couple's newborn infant, the child dies. This incident revises the scene from *The Antiquary*, in which Oldbuck supports the head of the dead child to the grave; Ada has become an angel of death. But while Esther and Ada's capacity to help is undermined, they still carry authority in the cottage, a class authority that the novel goes on to validate. The two return to the brickmaker in the evening, with the intention of comforting the mother of the dead child. The mother is asleep, but the sister of the dead infant "was standing laughing and talking, with some other young women . . . but she seemed ashamed, and turned away as we went by" (110; ch. 8). Meanwhile, the woman attending to the mother is "a-watching for my master. . . . If he was to catch me away from home, he'd pretty near murder me" (110; ch. 8). Ada and Esther are duly impressed by the woman's devotion: " 'May Heaven reward you!' we said to her. 'You are a good woman' " (110; ch. 8). The two girls still have no help to offer, but they activate both the shame and the honor of the poor in a way that signifies their unflinching concern. It is as if Esther and Ada have become the compassionate but firm judges that the brickmaker fruitlessly sought in Mrs. Pardiggle. In this manner the episode bears the traces of a constructive condescension.

Nineteenth-century scenes of philanthropy were not, of course, unique to fiction. And just as Victorian novelists questioned the narrative work that could be accomplished through condescension scenes, an industrious middle class argued over what kind of story charity should trace out within a larger narrative of social progress. The two most significant moments in the history of nineteenth-century philanthropy were the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act and the 1869 establishment of the Charity Organisation Society (COS). Both initiatives – one public, one private – had the same object in view: to end pauperism by excluding donation from the encounters between rich and poor. Both measures had only a limited success, even on their own terms. Local Poor Law boards persisted in supplying some outdoor relief, and during hard times the private charities were all the more determined to supply the provisions that the Poor Law withheld. Likewise in the 1870s and 1880s, as we shall see, the COS was not able fully to end various forms of donation. In both the early and middle Victorian decades, the movement to reform charity was impeded by a public unwillingness to embrace the proposed alternatives.

At the same time that the idea of condescension underwent a revaluation so radical as to amount to redefinition, the institutions of English philanthropy and poor relief fought to rewrite their charter. This conjunction suggests that we might use condescension as an analytical yardstick to measure changes in the philanthropic imagination. While previous studies have uncovered a great deal of commotion in the debate and consensus that fuelled the ebb and flow of Victorian charity work, charity itself has been ceded little conceptual complexity, the mind of the philanthropist seen as one with few imaginative resources.[7] To study philanthropy in light of condescension might reveal a conceptual drama within the philanthropic imagination to rival the political drama of relief boards and Bible societies.

When social historians have sought an abstract language for the ideology of Victorian philanthropy, they have most often referred to the anthropological category of the gift, and yet there is a difficult distance between Mauss's gift, which did not precisely even include almsgiving, and Victorian philanthropy, which spanned so widely beyond donation. In a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sense, condescension stands between philanthropy and the gift; it concerns the relational dimension of both. Condescension connotes just those aspects of philanthropy that involve the way rich and poor relate to each other, closing off questions of material transaction. Likewise, condescension allows us to consider the gift exclusively in terms of the social networks it establishes, invokes, and tests; sociation becomes the content itself of gift-giving rather than its rationale. In other words, "pure" condescension is wholly relational and happens at the limits of both philanthropy and the gift: it is the philanthropic gesture without relief, the gift where nothing is given.

Besides thus refining our definition of condescension, the changing context of philanthropy shows us why writers placed such a semantic burden on condescension across the century. The movement to discard the old methods of poor relief was, at every point, plagued by an uncertainty as to alternatives. To many, the welfare state was the great evil to be avoided; on the other hand, the seeming callousness of the campaign against pauperism (and against public charity) struck many Victorians as forfeiting the compassion that characterized other aspects of social reform. Throughout the debates over philanthropy and relief, what was at issue was always what could be preserved from the old forms of middle-class provision (before the 1834 Poor Law amendment), and what must be abolished. In these debates the question of condescension took on a great many inflections. For some, it was the relation that charity established between rich and poor that must be maintained even if relief itself were abandoned, while for others, it was exactly this relation that needed to be altered. Condescension came alternately to represent what was right and what was wrong with institutional philanthropy, and representations of condescension were strong ammunition for both proponents and opponents of philanthropic encounters.

The philanthropic development most tied to condescension was the practice of home visiting, which became extremely popular in the 1830s and 40s, and was subsequently challenged in the late 1860s and thereafter. Visiting had its roots both in the Methodist prayer meetings conducted in laborers' cottages, and in the charitable visits traditionally paid by rural landlords to the families who worked and lived on their estates (often represented by the figure of the "Lady Bountiful"). Visiting perfectly enacted the logic of condescension, holding that charity must be highly personalized, and taking as its primary objective the influence – both spiritual and temporal – that the rich could have on the poor.[8] Stedman Jones thus sees visiting as a response to the "deformation of the gift" – the dissolution of the gift's moral force – in a society where the classes have lost contact with one another (253). Like condescension, visiting required a clear acknowledgement of the distinction between rich and poor, precisely so that distinction could be temporarily waived.[9] In the course of a visit, a charity worker should expect to be alternately firm and yielding, authoritative and companionable. As they condescended (or abdicated their distinction), visitors were required to act like the people they were trying to help. Visitor and visited alike endeavored to discern the intentions and character of the other, in order both to persuade the other and to keep from being exploited.[10] Oscillating between distinction and identification, visiting encounters took on both conciliatory and adversarial qualities, and were "double" in the same way that condescension had become by the early nineteenth century.

Visitors and visiting societies weathered their own internal struggles throughout the middle decades of the century, but faced their first serious external challenge with the 1869 establishment of the Charity Organisation Society in London.[11] The society's mission, broadly formulated, was to end the existence of a dependent class, by preventing state or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

private relief from being distributed among the able-bodied poor (Loch 5–6). Feeling that the philanthropy industry, through its indiscriminate distribution of alms, was hurting the very people it wished to help, the COS attempted to coordinate and unofficially to legislate the operations of all relief organizations. The COS was enormously influential, setting the terms for the public discourse of philanthropy; it was also well subsidized, boasting over a thousand subscribers by its tenth year (Prochaska 242). The most enduring legacy of the COS was its methodical, professionalized casework, which was adopted subsequently by progressive reformers (including the COS-trained Beatrice Webb) who rejected the actual aims of the COS. In their visits to the poor, COS social workers made the same rounds that philanthropic visitors had made many times before, but took pains to distinguish the purpose and effects of their investigations from the visiting practices of others.

The Charity Organisation Society attacked the aspects of visiting most closely aligned with condescension. The rich must stop thinking of the poor as charity cases, just as the poor must stop thinking of the rich as potential benefactors, and the relationship between rich and poor could only be secured by exorcising the specter of help and gratitude. The COS particularly objected to the spontaneity of charity. Visitors must not be susceptible to momentary impulses to help; their intervention must be calculated. Charitable acts were to be evaluated not according to their motives (as in the discourse of condescension), but according to their effects. Perhaps most controversially, the COS claimed that private charities (including visiting societies) were uninterested in ending poverty, but instead found the gap between rich and poor to be a useful one, as a way of allowing middle-class philanthropists to exercise their benevolence and keep the poor under their control (Bosanquet 138–9). Charity could never be successfully transacted between strangers, the COS argued; only those well acquainted with a family in crisis could suggest, and help effect, a real and lasting remedy. This claim, invalidating the work of the district and evangelical visiting societies, was at bottom an attack on the condescension act, which requires an observable and intractable authority gap between superior and subordinate.

And yet there are crucial aspects of condescension that the COS never abandoned, aspects that were in fact central to its mission. For instance, the COS always emphasized the necessity of personal contact between rich and poor. The problem of poverty could not be effectively addressed by legislative means alone (as had been attempted with the self-acting workhouse test; see Himmelfarb 193); it was necessary to create and multiply personal encounters between the classes, encounters in which poor and rich could exert mutual influence on one another. While the COS case worker must by no means make material donations, the worker's presence in the homes of the poor was still considered indispensable. Beatrice Webb attacked the rationale of COS visitation as being focused on surveillance and called COS case workers a fleet of amateur detectives (196). This too affiliates COS practice with condescension; the detective (or the case worker) provides a visible emblem of the power of the state, just as condescension enacts a tangible recognition and acceptance of authority. Thus the COS, in the midst of its campaign against dependency, would theorize, regulate, and sanctify the primal moment of contact between visitor and visited.

Analytic of Condescension

CONDESCENSION IS A WORD – like belligerence, or amnesty, or degeneration – that can be used to characterize any number of social interactions. It is extraordinary that the valence of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

such a word can change across so many contexts at once – that condescension can come to seem a problem as it operates between teachers and students, pastors and parishioners, wives and husbands, employers and laborers, nurses and patients, the indigent and relief-workers. The word's thematic capaciousness suggests that it may be no more than a nexus of multiple ideas sedimented together, with no unifying logic, no semantic code. And yet the failure of condescension, so sudden and so definitive, seems to call for a structural exposition.[12] Georg Simmel sets the strongest sociological precedent for studying social forms in this way:

> We do find that the same form of interaction obtains among individuals in societal groups that are the most unlike imaginable in purpose and significance. Superiority, subordination, competition, division of labor, formation of parties, representation, inner solidarity coupled with exclusiveness toward the outside, and innumerable similar features are found in the state as well as in a religious community, in a band of conspirators as in an economic association, in an art school as in a family. (*Selected Writings* 26)

We must therefore develop an analytic that can be applied to every condescension act, but can also be used to illuminate the workings of condescension at the most local level. In keeping with the general aims of this essay – to formulate the place of convention within cultural history, and to describe the transaction of authority as a felt experience – this analytic will first identify the logic that governs condescension as a signifying system, and afterwards examine what is at stake in condescension from an experiential or perceptual point of view.

The condescension act has no aim other than the explicitly social one of bringing about a particular relationship between its agents. In this respect, a study of condescension can derive a great deal from Mauss's theory of the gift. Mauss values archaic gift exchange over modern economic exchange, in that economics attempts to isolate itself from the moral aspects of social life, while gift exchange is centrally concerned with these moral aspects. Jacques Godbout, a recent disciple and critic of Mauss, radicalizes Mauss's distinction between the gift and the economic: "The gift is the embodiment of that system of relationships that is strictly social, in that these relations cannot be reduced to factors of power or economic interest" (13). For Mauss, the relational aspect of gift-exchange derives from the idea that gifts (unlike economic commodities) are inalienable: they retain the identity of their original owners. Mauss expresses it thus: "It follows clearly from what we have seen that in this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence" (10). Mauss structuralizes this personal quality by claiming that every gift bears with it a *hau*, or spirit of origins, that marks the presence of the giver. The gift has no intrinsic or generic value, but derives its value entirely from the *hau*. Mauss's investment in the *hau* can be read as a disinvestment from the given object, and Mauss correspondingly takes great pains to show that reciprocal exchange (gift-giving) never produces a material gain or loss.

Like gift-exchange, condescension is performed solely for the purpose of refining a social relationship. Lévi-Strauss demonstrates the relational essence of gift-exchange in a passage that could well be applied to the condescension act, as he analyzes the exchange of wine between two strangers seated together at a restaurant table. Here gift-exchange serves the purpose of establishing one's relationship to a stranger. If one stranger accepts the wine-offering of the other, the relationship has become cordial; if he instead refuses the wine-offering, the relationship has become hostile. In either case, the offering has ended the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"relationship of indifference" (59). Likewise, the condescension act, whether it engenders reconciliation or conflict, is a strategy for bringing to light relationships of social authority that have not been fully explored or articulated, validating or challenging these relationships where they are already visible, and creating these relationships (whether hostile or friendly) where they do not exist.

Because condescension is a relation, it must be studied in two perspectives, that of the one who condescends and that of the one condescended to.[13] Peter Mandler, in his introduction to *The Uses of Charity*, complains that studies of Victorian philanthropy have routinely adopted the middle-class perspective and describes the need for a study of charity "from below" (1). We might adapt Mauss's terms to this task by proposing that if the gift-given is inalienable from the giver, so is the gift-received inalienable from the receiver. The project of a social analysis of condescension is therefore to understand both how the condescension-subject (the "superior") gives of-herself, and how the condescension-object (the "subordinate") receives of- (or as-) herself.[14] Neither subordinate nor superior has an advantage with respect to this process of identity-formation. As in Hegel's master-slave dialectic, each agent depends on the recognition of the other.[15] In the condescension act, then, identity is formed on the crucible of relation. As an agent in such an interaction, my whole purpose is to create and control my relational identity — to produce a particular who-I-am-to-you. This act of creation is the entire content of condescension.

How is the transaction of identity accomplished, and how can it be said to fail? We can answer this question by further specifying the kind of exchange that condescension involves. Let us look again at the passage from Edgeworth that began this chapter: "[W]ith his whole heart and soul he thanked his majesty for this gracious condescension – this testimony of approbation – these proofs of sensibility to his attachment, which paid – overpaid him, in a moment, for the labours of a life" (8: 51). As we noted before, condescension is presented here as the supreme reward, ample compensation for a lifetime of labor. And yet the monarch's condescension is not mere payment, but overpayment; it is not just a reward, but a gift besides. As we know from Mauss and Malinowski, gifts confer a debt, demanding the receiver's further participation in a cycle of obligation. When Lord Oldborough corrects himself – he is not paid, but overpaid – he acknowledges that his past duties to the crown have not been enough, and that the king's condescension is sufficient to purchase the labors of the future along with the ones of the past. To be overpaid is in this case rather less than to be paid. Edgeworth's phrase "paid – overpaid" reveals a rift within the condescension act, which unites a sense of excessive generosity with an uneasy confusion as to what kind of payment is being offered anyway, and what is being purchased with it.

As we have seen, for Mauss the value of a gift resides in the *hau*, the spirit of origins that designates the giver. When an inalienable gift is accepted, when it is even apprehended to be a gift, it thereby purchases the recipient's recognition. In other words, whenever I receive a gift of any kind, the immediate return I make is to recognize the giver. Emerson (in an essay which puzzled but intrigued Mauss) understands recognition to be the essence of gift-receiving:

> Rings and other jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts. The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing. This is right and pleasing, for it restores society in so far to its primary basis, when a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> man's biography is conveyed in his gift, and every man's wealth is an index of his merit. But it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something . . . as a kind of symbolical sin-offering, or payment of black-mail. (536)

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

In the case of condescension, recognition is not only the thing purchased, but also the thing given. Of course I may give something else at the same time that I condescend – a salutation, a donation of money, or even a plea for help. But what marks my act out as condescension is that it involves my recognizing someone who is normally beneath my notice. Consider the following passage from *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), in which Mark Tapley denounces the newly unmasked hypocrite Pecksniff. "Pecksniff! Why, I wouldn't see the man myself; I wouldn't hear him; I wouldn't choose to know he was in company. I'd scrape my shoes on the scraper of the door, and call that Pecksniff, if you liked; but I wouldn't condescend no further" (663; ch. 43). Tapley's refusal to "condescend," as he describes it, amounts to a refusal to see, hear, and know – in fact a refusal to recognize.

We see then that condescension involves an exchange of recognition in both directions. To be sure, the whole transaction is set in motion by the superior, but it is ratified by the subordinate, and we can try to understand the phenomenon from both perspectives. When I condescend, I temporarily abdicate my privilege of self-definition. I grant recognition to another and make a plea for recognition in return. Condescension is a momentary rechanneling of recognition outward, an expansion of the circuit of recognition, but always with the presumption that it will lead back to the one who condescends. For the subordinate, condescension is a momentary emergence into the realm of visibility, but also an emergence into a particular role constituted by the recognition of the superior. In other words, condescension is a kind of mirror, an encounter through which both subordinate and superior see themselves as constituted by the recognition of the other.

Of course such recognition is subject to distortion, and it is precisely this distortion that produces the failure of condescension. This failure most commonly takes place when one party uses condescension to claim a superiority that the other party may not acknowledge. In such cases the one who condescends cannot be sure that he or she will be properly recognized as superior and must therefore link the appeal for recognition with an attack against the other person as someone who is indeed subordinate. Thus my recognition of you as my subordinate is in fact a tactic for subordinating you, a projection disguised as recognition. This is the condescension we know and hate, an act that appeals to the other for approval even while subjecting the other to disdain. Of the Victorian novelists, Dickens was the most keenly sensitive to the psychology of a condescension designed to subordinate. For instance, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Pecksniff pawns off his condescension on Tom Pinch as a gift, but we understand it to be a characteristic power play: "He made the promise with so much condescension and patronage, that Tom felt he had asked a great deal (this had not occurred to his mind before), and thanked him earnestly" (90; ch. 6). Along the same lines, Miggs the maid (*Barnaby Rudge*, 1841) describes the demonically manipulative Mr. Chester

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as "So upright and noble, that he seems to despise the very ground he walks on! and yet so mild and condescending, that he seems to say 'but I will take notice on it too"' (211; ch. 27). The ironic resources of an exploitative condescension were certainly a comic gold mine for Dickens, but the irony had its tragic uses too, as in this passage from *David Copperfield* (1850): "We were all extremely glad to see Traddles so put down, and exalted Steerforth to the skies: especially when he told us, as he condescended to do, that what he had done had been done expressly for us, and for our cause, and that he had conferred a great boon upon us by unselfishly doing it" (101; ch. 7). Here there is no insult, but something more threatening still; Steerforth's recognition of the younger students is a simultaneous allocation of privilege and guilt, a tactic of charismatic exposure which brands David even into his adulthood.

Our discussion of recognition (and its distortions) has enabled us to see the mechanism whereby condescension succeeds or fails. But we have yet to consider the qualitative experience of condescension, the motives out of which the act arises and which it fosters in turn. This phenomenological qualification of the condescension structure follows a course proposed by Marshall Sahlins, in his influential revision of Mauss's work. After discussing the possiblity of a "purely formal typology of reciprocities" (191), Sahlins explains that such a typology would be incomplete:

> It ought to be recognized from the beginning that the distinction of one type of reciprocity from another is more than formal. A feature such as the expectation of returns says something about the spirit of exchange, about its disinterestedness or its interestedness, the impersonality, the compassion. Any seeming formal classification conveys these meanings: it is as much a moral as a mechanical scheme. (192)

Sahlins goes on to describe various types of reciprocity that share the same formal structure (donation → receipt → return) but are marked by a different set of attitudes, and consequently seem, from the performer's perspective, entirely distinct. For instance, donation might be understood as "sharing," or "payment," or "losing," depending on the context of the transaction.

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

Traditional condescension is based on the premise that a ritualized recognition of existing authority relationships can work toward their moral justification. In some ways this is hard to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

grasp; we tend to think that power, when it is working, hides itself from view. But traditional condescension requires a situation where there is no confusion about the facts of authority. It is only possible between subjects whose authority relationships are clearly established – servant and mistress, son and father, tenant and landlord, hopeful lover and unrequiting beloved. In such situations the authority figure has every reason to expect the obedience of the subordinate. Condescension therefore lays no new obligation on the subordinate; instead it makes comprehensible, and even desirable, an obligation that is already felt. One such instance takes place at an earlier moment in *Patronage*, in which the young barrister Alfred Percy praises the chief justice under whom he serves:

> Before the chief justice was so high as he is now, without a rival in his profession, he was ever the most generous man to his competitors. I am sure he is now the most kind and condescending to his inferiors. In company he is never intent upon himself, seems never anxious about his own dignity or his own fame. He is sufficiently sure of both to be quite at ease. He excites my ambition, and exalts its nature and value. (VII. 274–5; ch. 22)

Because the chief justice is not anxious – because his dignity and fame are secure – his condescension is compatible with real generosity, genuine humility. In condescending he refuses to take his inferiors for granted, but suggests instead that their labor is something to be earned. In this case condescension to inferiors is given as the moral equivalent of generosity to rivals; it is a way to recognize the worth of the other in the face of a structural antagonism.

Even later in the century, condescension is sometimes able to retain its traditional, conciliatory quality. This is possible, for instance, when one party wants to be under obligation to the other. In Kingsley's *Yeast* (1851), Lancelot Smith is glad to have been graced with the "sunshine" of Argemone's condescension (165; ch. 10) because he wants to serve her. Lancelot's devotional use of the word carries a religious intonation, captured directly by Kingsley in the same novel, with a reference to God as "the Spirit of order, obedience, loyalty, brotherhood, mercy, condescension" (306; ch. 17). In *Romola* (1863), Nello is accused of playing the sycophant to Lorenzo, in order "that he may be affable and condescending to you" (61; ch. 1). And in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), Boldwood appeals to Bathsheba Everdene's "kindness and condescension" (101; ch. 19), mistakenly supposing that he will be able to subordinate his desires to her will. In all of these cases, the problematic opposition between giver and receiver is nullified by the subordinate's willingness to establish an obligation.

Victorian condescension more commonly displays an adversarial quality, where the interests of superior and subordinate are felt to be opposed, and the condescension act becomes a contest of wills. Emerson explains how easily gift-giving can provoke an adversarial response: "For, the expectation of gratitude is mean, and is continually punished by the total insensibility of the obliged person. . . . It is a very onerous business, this of being served, and the debtor naturally wishes to give you a slap" (537). Mauss too is fully cognizant of this condition of gift-exchange; his theory, in fact, is meant to account for all societies of total prestation (in which all wealth is shared in the form of gifts), even where prestation takes a particularly agonistic form. In such cases the exchange is called "potlatch," a straightforward competition – still in the form of gift-exchange – for the benefit of one's own clan (Mauss 4). Condescension is often just this sort of competitive exchange, with

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

both the one who condescends and the one condescended to seeking to turn the encounter to advantage.

We have already looked at a number of these adversarial cases, cases in which the superior condescends in order to control and manipulate the subordinate. In such cases the acceptance of the condescending gesture is felt to be a capitulation to authority, and the subordinate may thus reject the gesture out of hand, or indeed demand more, as in the following exchange from *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862): "'Tell my lady how thankful you are, Luke,' she said. 'But I'm not so over and above thankful,' answered her lover savagely. 'Fifty pound ain't much to start a public. You'll make it a hundred, my lady'" (109; ch. 14). Here Luke Marks lays bare the adversarial nature of Lady Audley's proposal, denying her the appearance of generosity and characterizing her offer as a capitulation to blackmail. Henry Jekyll is similarly compromised when he remarks, "There comes an end to all things; the most capacious measure is filled at last; and this brief condescension to my evil finally destroyed the balance of my soul" (92; "Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case"). His condescension betokens his own defeat and his enemy's ascendancy. In the battle for authority, it is occasionally the subordinate who condescends, as at the moment in *Frankenstein* (1818) when the creature returns to punish his creator:

> Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; – obey! (3: 165; ch. 3)

Condescension is here at its adversarial peak. It is the vehicle whereby the creature reveals his dominance, and the word itself fires a semantic revolution after which the father and creator is to be no longer supplicated but simply tolerated.

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

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Equally important is the element of time, which is frequently discussed both pragmatically and abstractly in relation to the gift. As we have seen, the spontaneity of the gift was an active idea in the public discourse of Victorian charity; it has also been central to theory. Godbout refers to spontaneity as "that element . . . that is found in all varieties of gift" (46). The gift transaction (and condescension as well) must be over in an instant; any residue becomes *debt*, and turns the gift into an economic exchange. Paradoxically, in classical theories of the gift, there is always a return, and it is in fact a long delay between the original and the return donation that makes it a gift-exchange instead of an economic one. Derrida develops this idea: the gift is only a gift until it is returned, at which point it becomes an economic transaction. The progress of time, says Derrida, makes the gift impossible, bringing a return and causing it to cycle back into economics. The gift thus freezes time, momentarily breaking out of the economic cycle. Thus the important fact about the thing given – its very structure – is the delay it causes (40). Because, though, the gift always meets with a return in less than an instant (it is returned even as it is recognized or thought), the delay allowed by the gift takes no time at all, and it is really only the sense of a delay, the already forfeited possibility of an escape from the economic, that is given. This abstract approach is directly relevant to the analysis of condescension acts, since they are threatened by their extension or even their remembrance in time (which creates the suspicion that the act is calculating, looking for a return), but since they also, as they approximate instantaneity, can seem like they have transacted nothing of substance, if anything at all.

The life of a ritual or convention is such that the new conforms to the old, and every improvisation is also a reenactment. In this light the fluctuating meanings of condescension become legible and, amid changing currents of value, the enterprise denoted by condescension retains much of its shape. Even our own condescension to the Victorians – a habit both decried and indulged by Victorianists – bears out the logic of the scenes we have explored, modulating between conciliation and antagonism, and performing strategic recognitions that evince our command of our subject. Thus, while the condescension scene in one sense charts a history of ideological reversals and ruptures, it is in another sense the same as ever, a story about what happens to authority when it presumes to make itself known.

University of Alabama

NOTES

1. "In certain periods of relative stability the conventions are themselves stable and may be seen as no more than formal, the 'rules' of a particular art. In other periods the variation and indeed uncertainty of conventions have to be related to changes, divisions, and conflicts in the society. . . . For it is of the essence of a convention that it ratifies an assumption or a point of view, so that the work can be made and received" (Williams 179).
2. This view is best elaborated in Georg Simmel's account of the development of social forms. This development begins in a way compatible with Williams: "On the basis of practical conditions and necessities, our intelligence, will, creativity, and feeling work on the materials that we wish to wrest from life. In accord with our purposes, we give these materials certain forms and only in these forms operate and use them as elements of our lives." At this point, Simmel turns away from the materialist argument: "But it happens that these materials, these forces and interests, in a peculiar manner remove themselves from the service of life that originally produced and employed them. . . . They

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

come to play freely in themselves and for their own sake; they produce or make use of materials that exclusively serve their own operation or realization" (*Sociology* 41–42).

3. Alan Kidd, in a compelling argument which I discovered only after completing this essay, talks about social conventions in terms very similar to this. Citing Bourdieu's idea of the *habitus*, he argues that it is crucial to be attentive to the complicated symbolic logic of charity, rather than simply reducing it to a probable motivating cause or set of attitudes: "A variety of determinants might be seen to be at work in a detailed study of the interaction between structure and agency which gave more attention to the structured, and *structuring*, performance of the actor" (190–91).
4. Several social historians have tried to integrate the sociological concept of role into their studies of authority relations in Victorian England. Two decades ago Peter Bailey questioned the tendency of social historians to treat certain behavioral protocols of working-class respectability as demonstrating an ideology or a "permanent code of values"; such methodological assumptions, Bailey argues, fasten "the working-class respectable into a characterological strait-jacket" (337–38). Bailey calls for a situational analysis of class encounters, one that understands respectability as a chosen social role rather than a "normative mode." He accordingly reads specific interactions as demonstrating an "instrumental or calculative deployment" of expected behavior (343). Peter Mandler has more recently applied Bailey's suggestions to the study of Victorian charity, citing the "ritual conformity" of the poor (23) and claiming that "at no point did the forms in which charity was offered match the forms in which it was needed" (1).
5. Except where otherwise noted, all Dickens quotations are drawn from *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens*.
6. Pardiggle's defiance bears out a strong claim made by Harrison: "Working people disliked being visited in their homes by philanthropists who often displayed great ignorance about the problems they faced. Even had they been conscious of their ignorance, many philanthropists would not have been perturbed by it. For their aim was not to accept working-class attitudes; on the contrary, philanthropists were in the forefront of the nineteenth-century attack on popular culture" (13).
7. Lauren Goodlad's recent work argues strongly against this critical trend, demonstrating that charity and welfare practices were part of a complex and often divided liberal discourse surrounding voluntary participation and state agency.
8. To a great degree, visiting was a response to the widely discussed problem of mendicity – a particular nuisance in towns, where the large population made it easy for beggars to make fraudulent claims about their circumstances. William Allen, a Quaker philanthropist, thus used visitation as a way to confirm the actual need of mendicants (Roberts 206).
9. Octavia Hill objected strongly to this characteristic of visiting, most conspicuous among philanthropists who cultivated a taste for extreme hardship (Himmelfarb 216).
10. While Anne Summers shows the extent to which visiting was a one-sided affair controlled by the rich, Mandler, Lees, and Ross all show the various strategies that poor families used in order to manipulate the machinery of private and public charity.
11. A similar organization was already operating in Liverpool, but it was the COS that became so universally known, so widely supported, and so sharply criticized. See Himmelfarb 185–206.
12. In isolating the form of the condescension act from its social determinants, we perform an analytical function that is essential to the critical apprehension of social phenomena. This structuralist practice has dominated anthropology, deriving from the foundational work of Durkheim, Mauss, and Lévi-Strauss. It has also been a major thread in sociology, owing mainly to Simmel, who posited that all social phenomena are a composite of two elements: "an interest, a purpose, or a motive" which make up the "content," and "a form or mode of interaction among individuals through which, or in the shape of which, that content attains social reality" (*Selected Writings* 24). Describing an abstract form of interaction is a crucial procedural step even for a historical materialist study. In his study of working-class respectability, Peter Bailey gives a specific motive for paying attention to the forms of behavior: due to conditions arising from urban anonymity, Bailey contends, there is every reason to imagine that respectable behavior had a life of its own; by instead creating classificatory types of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

agent, historians have mistakenly presupposed "a continuity in casting where there may only have been a continuity in performance" (339). The union of structuralism and historical materialism in literary studies has been best accomplished by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*. Jameson's dialectical method requires a temporary separation between structure and content. The work of art is first described as completely as possible in terms of a series of social and narrative codes. This structuralist description, however, is always inadequate; it is, then, precisely where we find a break in the structural circuit, that ideology (the political unconscious) becomes visible. Jameson's work represents a definitive return of morphology to the center of comparative studies of social and narrative process. Following Mauss, Simmel, and Jameson, I consider questions of morphology crucial to a historical apprehension of the condescension act.

13. Howard Newby discusses this approach in his analysis of deference (145–46).
14. What is given and what is received must intersect somehow within the condescension encounter. As cited above, Peter Mandler contends that there was a gap between "the forms in which charity was offered" and "the forms in which it was needed" (1). Mandler's thesis would suggest that class condescension could never produce real sociation, since Victorian class encounters provided no intersection of motives or understanding. Yet the Victorian interest in condescension – whether an embrace of or revulsion from it – suggests otherwise. In these encounters with no object of exchange, relation is still transacted; whether that relation is adversarial or conciliatory, it still has substance.
15. Simmel accordingly explains that authority and domination are social processes that presuppose freedom on the part of the subordinate (*Selected Writings* 96–98).

WORKS CITED

Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

Austen, Jane. *Emma*. 1815. New York: Penguin, 1987.

Bailey, Peter. "'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?' Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability." *Journal of Social History* 12 (1978–79): 336–53.

Bailin, Miriam. "'Dismal Pleasure': Victorian Sentimentality and the Pathos of the Parvenu." *ELH* 66 (1999): 1015–32.

Bosanquet, Helen. *Rich and Poor*. London: Macmillan, 1896.

Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. *Lady Audley's Secret*. 1862. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Shirley*. 1849. New York: Penguin, 1985.

Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time. I, Counterfeit Money*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. 1853. New York: Penguin, 1996.

Dickens, Charles. *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.

Edgeworth, Maria. *Patronage*. 1813. Vols. 7–8 of *Tales and Novels of Maria Edgeworth*. Longford Ed. New York: AMS, 1967.

Eliot, George. *Romola*. 1863. New York: Penguin, 1981.

Eliot, George. *Scenes of Clerical Life*. 1857. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Gifts." *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Joel Porte. New York: Library of America, 1983. 533–38.

Gallagher, Catherine. *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985.

Godbout, Jacques. *The World of the Gift*. Trans. Donald Winkler. Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 1998.

Goodlad, Lauren. *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003.

Hall, Stuart. "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees." *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Hardy, Thomas. *Far from the Madding Crowd*. 1874. New York: Norton, 1986.

Harrison, Brian. "Philanthropy and the Victorians." *Victorian Studies* 9 (1966): 353–74.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Himmelfarb, Gertrude. *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians*. New York: Knopf, 1991.
Jaffe, Audrey. *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000.
Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.
Jones, Gareth Stedman. *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971.
Kidd, A. J. "Philanthropy and the 'Social-History Paradigm."' *Social History* 21 (1996): 180–92.
Kingsley, Charles. *Yeast: A Problem*. 1851. London: Macmillan, 1878.
Lees, Lynn. "The Survival of the Unfit: Welfare Policies and Family Maintenance in Nineteenth-Century London." Mandler. 68–91.
Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer. Ed. Rodney Needham. Boston: Beacon, 1969.
Loch, C. S. *Charity Organisation*. 2nd ed. London: S. Sonnenschein, 1892.
Mandler, Peter, ed. *The Uses of Charity*. Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1990.
Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. Ian Cunnison. New York: Norton, 1967.
Newby, Howard. "The Deferential Dialectic." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17 (1975): 139–63.
Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.
Prochaska, F. K. *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1980.
Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady*. New York: Penguin, 1985.
Roberts, M. J. D. "Reshaping the Gift Relationship: The London Mendicity Society and the Suppression of Begging in England, 1818–1869." *International Review of Social History* 36 (1991): 201–31.
Ross, Ellen. "Hungry Children: Housewives and London Charity, 1870–1918." Mandler. 161–96.
Sahlins, Marshall. *Stone Age Economics*. Chicago: Aldine, 1972.
Scott, Sir Walter. *Waverley Novels*. Ed. Andrew Lang. Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1892–94.
Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1982.
Simmel, Georg. *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*. Ed. D. E. Lévine. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1971.
Simmel, Georg. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Ed. Kurt Wolff. Glencoe: Free, 1950.
Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Stories*. Ed. Jenni Calder. New York: Penguin, 1979.
Summers, Anne. "A Home from Home – Women's Philanthropic Work in the Nineteenth Century." *Fit Work for Women*. Ed. Sandra Burman. London: Croom Helm, 1979. 33–63.
Trollope, Anthony. *Can You Forgive Her?* 1865. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
———. *Orley Farm*. 1862. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991.
———. *The Warden*. 1855. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991.
Webb, Beatrice. *My Apprenticeship*. 1926. New York: AMS, 1977.
Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305050904 Published online by Cambridge University Press