

Harriet Martineau's Sociology of Charity

Kristen Pond

To the prospects of the sufferers of society let the observer look, and he will discern the prospects of the society itself.—Harriet Martineau, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (184)

When Harriet Martineau decided to write a series of tales illustrating economic theories, little did she think they would make her a household name almost overnight. Her motive for writing them, as she explains in her autobiography, was her sense that the poor would be better able to help themselves, and to bear up under their circumstances, if they understood the economic principles shaping their lives. She recognized that this was unlikely to happen with the current literature available, and what the general population needed was fiction's illustrative power. After a series of rejections, Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-34) was published by Charles Fox. Fiction's power, and Martineau's skill at harnessing it, was recognized by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge as a strong influence shaping public opinion. As a result, Martineau was recruited by Lord Brougham to write *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated*, which aimed at educating lower classes about the New Poor Laws. She later expressed regret about the tales' too-close connection to politics: "I do not repent doing these tales, because I hope and believe they were useful at a special crisis: but [...] it certainly appeared that all connexion with the Diffusion Society, and Lord Brougham, and the Whig government, was so much mere detriment to my usefulness and my influence" (*Autobiography* 177). Her regret stems partly from her personal dislike of Lord

Brougham—"I never esteemed or liked him, or relished being implicated in business with him"—and from her desire to be "free from any kind of claim on me" (330).¹ Martineau's motive—to write something useful—shows that, with these stories, as with her more popular *Illustrations of Political Economy*, she hoped to ease the passage and acceptance of the New Poor Laws aimed at improving the situation of the poor in England.²

Although Martineau's motive sounds reasonably honorable, she is not best known for her charitable attitudes or actions. This is not an entirely unfair perception, given her support of Malthusian doctrine, her distaste of unions, the way her writing played into categories of "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, and her impatience with certain zealously evangelical charitable efforts.³ Yet, as some of her more direct statements about charity discussed below demonstrate, Martineau was passionate about helping the poor, so long as it involved active solutions leading to self-sufficiency. This paper focuses on her primary goal in writing the *Poor Law* stories—a desire to help the poor—as a form of charity, revealing analogies between the lady visitor and Martineau's role as author. The comparison is mildly ironic: Martineau would not have wanted to compare her profession with the quintessential Evangelical missional activity mocked by novelists of the time.⁴ Indeed, she flouted nineteenth-century female stereotypes by writing about economics in the first place; later, as an invalid in the sickroom, that classic space allotted to weak and helpless women, she wrote some of her most controversial material on mesmerism. But there is much insight to be gained by thinking about some of Martineau's writings, particularly *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated*, as structurally and thematically resembling the home visit.

First, Martineau's methods for observing, as laid out in *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, shares several principles offered in instruction guides for lady visitors who conduct home visits and dispense charity. This comparison reveals that the professionalization of charity work was at its core a sociological movement. The sociological methods Martineau develops in her work shares with these guides the recognition that effective observation leads to greater knowledge, and that the basis for effective observation is a balance between distance and sympathy.

Second, thinking about the narrative form of Martineau's stories as structured around the principles of home visits better reveals her craft. Her tales and novels have been largely neglected by critics who object to their synthesis of fiction and didacticism, particularly true of the *Poor Laws* stories.⁵ This is not surprising, given the moral purpose they clearly serve, as a kind of propaganda tool for a government bill. Nonetheless, these tales make use of narrative strategies that are now recognized as key elements of realism, here practiced in the earliest years of the Victorian novel's development. One of the roots of the Victorian novel, then, lies not in the romance or the gothic, but in public debate. This essay considers two of the four tales comprising *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* to provide a sense of Martineau's sociology of charity. "The Parish" demonstrates her use of conversation as a narrative structure resembling a home visit in its emphasis on the importance of knowledge and understanding gained from personal exchange. As a central quality of such exchanges, "The Town" models disinterested objectivity. Before turning to these stories, the essay explores parallels between Martineau's sociological method and home visiting guides.

It may be surprising that Martineau wrote specifically about charity in *How to Observe Morals and Manners* ("Progress," chapter five). She viewed the charitable activities of a society as a measure of its development, arguing that the highest society is one wherein the powerful take responsibility for the powerless, out of "concern that any are depressed and endangered as they would themselves refuse to be" (129). The development of missionary societies, prison societies, and temperance societies is evidence of activity that she calls "looking wide, so wide as that the spirit of charity acts as seeing the invisible" (129). While Martineau is critical of certain forms of charity, she also recognizes that charity is a natural human impulse, one needing education and training to become more effective. In *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, she establishes a hierarchy of charitable actions:

the lowest order of charity is that which is satisfied with relieving the immediate pressure of distress in individual cases. A higher is that which makes provision on a large scale for the relief of such distress; as when a nation passes

on from common almsgiving to a general provision for the destitute. A higher still is when such provision is made in the way of anticipation, or for distant objects; as when the civilization of savages, the freeing of slaves, the treatment of the insane, or the education of the blind and deaf mutes is undertaken. The highest charity of all is that which aims at the prevention rather than the alleviation of evil. (128)

The best form of charity is that which has a long view toward the “distant objects” of preventing people from entering the ranks of the poor; the worst charitable actions are those that give food or money directly to the poor to help only with immediate needs. Martineau often sounds quite critical of the poor, evident in her depiction of characters who enter the workhouse or depend on poor rates.⁶ But she is even more critical of ineffective systems and laws that turn self-sufficient individuals into paupers: “it is a nobler charity to prevent destitution, crime, and ignorance, than to relieve individuals who never ought to have been made destitute, criminal, and ignorant” (129). The idea that these individuals “have been made destitute” is important to understanding where Martineau’s heaviest critique resides. In her preface to the *Poor Law* stories, she indicates that the problem is a systemic one:

but there is a satisfaction amidst the pain of exhibiting the reverse of the picture, when vice and misery can be indisputably referred to the errors of a system rather than to the depravity of individuals. All social systems being remediable, the task of exposing the unhappy results of any involves a definite hope of the amelioration which must, sooner or later, follow the exposure. (6)

Martineau targets systems rather than people, arguing that it is easier to change a faulty system than to change a degenerate person. This also points to her belief that the poor should not be blamed for being lazy or wicked, since it is the system that creates and perpetuates those behaviors. This is one of the most crucial points where Martineau’s approach to charity diverges from the philosophy undergirding home visits. The theory behind home visits claims that change must start with individuals. But she presents a more tempered

view of individual responsibility through highlighting the culpability of the system itself. Her fiction exhibits a balance between detached and personal viewpoints. Through the characters that act as mouthpieces to convey arguments for systemic change, Martineau asks readers to inhabit a more objective, distanced view of poverty by focusing on abstract laws and arguments. But she also infuses her narrative with characters' backstories, giving names and faces to problems that the poor encounter. By relying on fiction instead of the essay form, Martineau presents an individualized view of poverty that might encourage readers to identify and sympathize with the specific characters representing the poor.

It may be helpful to provide a brief sketch of how home visits were viewed in the nineteenth century. The idea of home visiting was grounded in the belief that one had to know the poor in order to help them: "the declared objective of most charitable institutions [...] was to enable a new kind of relationship between rich and poor. Philanthropists argued that any help they offered, spiritual or temporal, could have value only in the context of a personal, reciprocal relationship between themselves and those in need" (Siegel 19). Despite the growing emphasis on statistics and centralization, the idea that knowledge was a prerequisite for good charity subsisted well through the end of the century. In *Feeling for the Poor*, Carolyn Betensky explains that "by the 1880s feeling for the poor was finding expression in a national preoccupation with the prospect of making personal contact with the working classes" (163). This obsession is evident in the 20,000 salaried and half-a-million women volunteers performing on-site philanthropy, either working with or living among the poor.⁷

Increased knowledge of the poor was touted as one of the benefits of home visiting. In *Essays on the Principles of Charitable Institutions* (1836), home visiting is recommended because the relationship cultivated with the poor develops more accurate comprehension of their condition:

but how is the reality of indigence to be ascertained? Not by investigation, commonly so called; for the innumerable examples have been adduced to prove that isolated visits of express inquiry, whether made by the parish officer, or by

opulent individuals in a private capacity, are most frequently illusory in their results. If you wish to become acquainted with the character and circumstances of a neighbour in your own rank of life, you do not expect to learn them by sending a messenger to his house or by paying him a single formal call. No, you go yourself; you cultivate his acquaintance; you share in his hospitality; and, if you are of a benevolent disposition, a thousand nameless opportunities will occur, in the sequel of your intercourse, for contributing to his enjoyment, or promoting his welfare and prosperity. (202)

The author resists the move toward statistical evidence and general observations that were part of the New Poor Law reforms. In his testimony for *The Parliamentary Papers* (1857-58), the Reverend William Weldon Champneys shares his experience organizing lay agents for home visits:

the result has been to bring the clergy into close contact with the people, and enabling us both to know them and them to know us; that has given us an influence in the parish over the people generally which without them I should have conceived would have been impossible in so large a number.
(qtd Lewis 131)

Debates about how to solve the problems of poverty often focused on what forms of knowledge would lead to the best solutions, with those who favored the method of home visits advocating more personalized and particular knowledge.

As long as visitors did not include money as part of their charity, home visiting was seen as a great benefit to the poor generally and to the problem of class issues specifically. Charles B.P. Bosanquet, secretary of the Charity Organization Society (COS), emphasizes friendship as the main goal of the visitor:

The marked separation between classes in England makes it especially desirable to promote intercourse amongst them [....] these circumstances render systematic house-to-house visiting even more important than it would otherwise be, and indicate

that it should be looked on chiefly as a mode of keeping up friendly communications between persons in different positions of life, and should be made as much as possible to resemble neighbourly intercourse. The Visitor should go as a friend rather than a teacher. (qtd Betensky 168)

Bosanquet recasts estranged middle- and lower-class people as neighbors, claiming that the home visitor can re-create "friendly communication." But he adds a subtle clarification in this description: the visiting must be "systematic." Gradually, from the early Victorian period through mid-century, the urge toward better organized charity efforts extended to regulated and systematized home visits. For example, in *Sisters of Charity* (1855), Anna Jameson constructs women's charitable work, including home visiting, as a vocation requiring formal training:

The absolute necessity that women should be trained in order to make good and efficient parish visitors is apparent; for it is wonderfully and often pathetically absurd to see with what a large stock of goodness and conscientious anxiety, and what a small stock of experience, knowledge, and sympathy with their objects, some excellent women set off on their task as lady visitors of the poor. (75-76)

Jameson's comment demonstrates the important role training plays in charity work and how such an emphasis led to the regulation and systematization of home visits.

There is a similar call in Martineau's *How to Observe Morals and Manners* for the professionalization and skills acquisition of the traveler who undertakes to observe and write about another culture. Cultural observation should be taken as seriously as other kinds of work, and therefore requires training:

the observer of men and manners stands as much in need of intellectual preparation as any other student [...]. Every man seems to imagine that he can understand men at a glance; he supposes that it is enough to be among them to know what they are doing; he thinks that eyes, ears, and memory are

enough for morals though they would not qualify him for botanical or statistical observation. (7)

Written in 1834 during her forty-two-day sea journey to America, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* was published in 1838 in Charles Knights' series, *How to Observe*. After returning to England, she published *Society in America* (1837), a sociological analysis of American culture, and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838), a more anecdotal, conventional travel memoir. Today considered a founding theoretical work in the field of sociology, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* details the materials and mechanics for gathering information about a country or people foreign to one's own. By the nineteenth century, it was important to distinguish between the traveler and the tourist, and most people recognized a clear difference between the kinds of activities undertaken by those two different types.⁸ Yet it was not enough, in Martineau's viewpoint, to simply deem the traveler serious minded: she wanted to establish professional credentials, outlining those skills in *How to Observe*. Her insistence that not "every man" can make accurate observations, or that people would mistakenly think that "eyes, ears, and memory are enough," is part of her vision of the traveler as a professional who needed to learn and acquire a specific set of skills.

The call for skills in guidebooks aimed at (mostly) female visitors was not as concerned to establish professionalism as to indicate that home visits should be considered skilled work requiring knowledgeable practitioners. There are similarities between Martineau's sociological methods for observing and the kind of advice given in manuals for conducting home visits. One example is "District Visiting" by the Rev. J.L. Davies, lecture five in the 1855 collection *Lectures to Ladies on Practical Subjects*, a series that aimed to establish a Women's College for the Aid of the Rich and Poor. Davies' point in *Lectures* was to show that just because a number of people engaged in home visits, it did not follow that home visiting was easy or needed no guidelines:

District Visiting, indeed, is not a new work for ladies to undertake; but, on the contrary, one of the most common and familiar of all benevolent occupations. It does not follow,

however, that it is an easy one, or one for which no teaching or training can be useful. Many of those who have never tried it,—some, perhaps, who have had a little experience of it,—might be thankful for the advice, and encouragement, and mutual support, as well as for the wider and more orderly view of their business. (118)

Davies' use of the word "business" is one way that he constructs home visiting as something more than a hobby. He envisions a "wider" and more "orderly" view of the work that suggests long-term planning and forethought and requires education and skills.

Following the trend to regard observation and visiting as skilled work, both Davies and Martineau actually address attitudes and morals more than specific skills. Both emphasize the importance of the observer's principles. For Davies, this means understanding one's motive before engaging in home visits:

Let me, then, endeavour to trace, first, the true principle of such District Visiting, or, in other words, to discover how Visitors ought to *regard their own work*; and then we may be able to see how a firm grasp of this principle would meet some practical difficulties, and guard the work from degenerating into some corruptions to which it is liable. (119, emphasis added)

Martineau is similarly concerned with how an individual's principles determine his or her effectiveness in methods of observing:

yet a moment's consideration shows that the mind of the observer, the instrument by which the work is done, is as essential as the material to be wrought [...]. It is not enough for a traveller to have an active understanding, equal to an accurate perception of individual facts in themselves; he must also be in possession of principles which may serve as a rallying-point for his observations, and without which he cannot determine their bearings, or be secure of putting a right interpretation upon them. A traveller may do better

without eyes or without ears than without such principles.

(*How to Observe* 15)

One striking similarity between advice manuals for home visiting and Martineau's sociological treatise was the expectation that a lady visitor or an observer must embody certain principles or character habits in order to be successful. Both types of manuals eventually discuss specific and tangible skills, but they begin with states of minds and hearts first.

Sympathy is one of the principles viewed as a requirement for the observer in Martineau's sociological method: "he may see, and hear, and record, and infer, and conclude for ever; and he will still not understand if his heart be idle, if he have not sympathy" (*How to Observe* 143). Similarly, in "District Visiting," sympathy is described as a way of preparing the heart and mind; Davies recommends the lady visitor say to herself:

I do not go intrusively to make my calls. I do not want to gratify any vulgar curiosity. I am not going to lecture the poor from a high vantage-ground on their improvidence [...]. I am going quite humbly to see whether these my neighbors will do *me* the service of letting me serve *them*. (123)

Both writers also use the language of brotherhood when discussing sympathy. The relation of the observer or visitor to the observed should be based on a "spirit of brotherhood" or "fraternal spirit" (*How to Observe* 130), as Martineau says, or on "an interchange of brotherly and sisterly offices," according to Davies ("District Visiting" 134).

They are similar also in the attitudes they warn against, such as apathy. For Davies, apathy destroys the visitor's original motives, turning the practice into a routine without the proper sympathy:

It is especially through the languor brought on by despondency that District Visitors allow their occupation to sink into certain formal rounds. Dangers of this kind, I said, would be avoided by keeping resolutely before the mind the true principle of visiting. (128)

The lecture claims that apathy can be confronted by not always looking for immediate results and by not becoming a money or tract dispenser. Similarly,

Martineau has advice for how to "guard against some of the effects of seizures of apathy":

[the observer] should provide himself, before setting out, with a set of queries, so prepared as to include every great class of facts connected with the condition of a people [...]. He can be constantly adding to them as he goes along and as new subjects arise, till he is in possession of a catechism on the facts which indicate morals and manners; which must prevent his researches being so capricious, and his information so vague as his moods and his idleness would otherwise occasionally make them. (*How to Observe* 139)

Such similarities demonstrate the connections between Martineau's *How to Observe* and Davies' lecture, although each has different motives for writing, and each addresses very different audiences. By extension, the insistence in each that charitable efforts require a balance between a distant, objective viewpoint and particular, personal knowledge is applicable to Martineau's fictional Poor Laws stories. Written in 1833-34, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* preceded these two texts and is arguably an important precedent for *How to Observe*. Davies' lecture was delivered and published in 1855, by which point charitable activities were moving toward increased systemization, with the Charity Organization Society, the first major governing body to coordinate charity efforts, being founded in 1869. One can see, then, how the *Poor Laws* stories are one of the first places where Martineau addresses the tensions between individuals and systems. How she attempts to work this out in her fiction—her emphasis on dialogue, for example—figures prominently in her later nonfiction work. The fictional techniques she deploys show important affinities with her own sociological method and also with home visits. Both Martineau's fiction and the efforts to standardize home visits have roots in sociological methods, in particular the emphasis on observing from a vantage point that can utilize both sympathy and judgment.

The specific kind of sympathy Martineau describes in *How to Observe* is "untrammelled and unreserved" and combined with "fair evidence and just reflection" (31, 20), created through certain narrative techniques like the use

of dialogue. In the *Poor Laws and Paupers* stories, dialogue proves to be an effective way of generating knowledge; conversation and discourse connect Martineau's fiction to her sociological methods. She devotes an entire chapter in *How to Observe*—"Discourse" (Chapter Six)—to conversation, calling it "indispensable" and advising that "The traveller must obtain all that he can of it" (133). She warns, though, that discourse is only useful if the observer "preserves his impartiality, and does no injustice to question or persons by bias of his own" (136). Thus, she says "a traveller free from gross prejudice and selfishness can hardly be many days in a new society without learning what are its chief interests" (134). In this section, Martineau makes clear that conversation does more than simply allow the traveler to gather a store of facts: it can shift the perspective of those involved. She equates "the result of the whole of what [the traveller] hears" with what "the journey of life yields to the wisest of its pilgrims," which is that people "will learn to condemn less, and to admire, not less, but differently" (137). Knowledge gathered from perspectives balanced between judgment and sympathy, through forms that include both facts and stories, becomes, for Martineau, the best kind of information the traveler can gather. Applied to her use of discourse as a literary device in the *Poor Laws* stories, conversation creates better communication between characters while engaging readers' enhanced understanding.

In addition to setting aside prejudice, the cultivation of sympathy has an important function in relation to discourse. The observer's sympathy will encourage people to talk candidly: "whatever may be the penalties imposed upon particular kinds of communication, all are unavailing in the presence of sympathy. At its touch the abundance of the heart will gush out at the lips" (*How to Observe* 134-35). But these personal conversations must be balanced by a perspective that comes from a more distanced view of systems rather than individuals. By itself, such conversation "would do little more than mislead [the observer] by means of his sympathies, if such confidence were his only means of knowledge; but, coming in corroboration of what he has learned in the large elsewhere, it becomes unquestionable evidence of what it is that interests the people most" (135). Conversation confirms generalizations

while also illustrating the particular interests that make a community or culture unique; it "assumes its proper value, and becomes illustrative" when the traveler uses "individual testimony" as "certain fixed points being provided round which testimony may gather" (188). That is, the traveler who uses sympathy to gain a close, personal, and particular view of a society in combination with a more objective and distanced view of generalizations and abstract facts facilitates the greatest understanding of a society or class of people. Near the end of *How to Observe*, Martineau remarks on the effects of conversation:

[The traveller] cannot have sat in conversation under the village elm, or in sunny vineyards, or by the embers of the midnight fire, without knowing how spirit is formed to unfold itself to spirit; and how, when the solitary is set in families, his sympathies bind him to them by such a chain as selfish interest never yet wove [...]. No one will doubt this who has been admitted into that range of sanctuaries, the homes of nations; and who has witnessed the godlike achievements of the servants, sages, and martyrs who have existed wherever man has been. (137-38)

Conversation improves the traveler's understanding of that which is different, in part by showing points of connection illustrating what draws people together. An appreciation of difference alongside a sympathetic recognition of human ties leads to the desire to improve the lives of individuals and societies. This view toward helping people help themselves, the narrative of progress underlying Martineau's sociological works, represents the rhetorical goal of the *Poor Laws* stories. The ending of these stories appears to have failed when it seems the suggested reforms do not work; yet each ending does illustrate how the characters are implicated in one another's lives, a kind of ethical position pointing to the more abstract principles behind Martineau's views on charity. Both poor and rich have a responsibility to acquire mutual knowledge leading to understanding and active solutions.

Martineau uses a lot of dialogue in all four of the *Poor Law* stories, especially in "The Parish." Extended dialogue opens and closes the story; in

each case, it is not tête-à-tête, but a panoramic conversation in which most of the characters are involved as they enter and leave the discussion at different points. The story begins on pay day, and includes exchanges between the poor and middle-class characters, as well as the squire and overseer. The dialogue serves two purposes: it introduces the characters and helps explain the problems with the current Poor Law system. Dialogue aimed at explaining principles may at first seem stilted, but in this case the form of dialogue does more for the interest of the story than if Martineau's narrator explained the problem of the system.⁹ The following excerpt introduces one of the "villains" of the story, Mr. Blogg, who has built cheap houses for the poor; one of the "heroes" of the story, the farmer, Mr. Goldby; and the overseer, Mr. Donkin. Outlined are some problems with the current Poor Law system: its lack of protocol, the way the overseer can be manipulated, and the way the rates have been continually extended. In other words, much is accomplished through this conversational exchange between characters:

"Sharpe tells me," said Blogg, "that you refuse to pay his rent for him."

"To be sure," replied the overseer; "you know little of the calls upon the rate, if you think that we can pay rents out of it."

"I know that you will have worse calls upon it if you do not pay rents. I must have my money; and unless you help Sharpe to pay it, will distrain, and then you must do the best you can with him and his family." [...]

"You are out in your reckoning, my good sir," observed the overseer. "It has never been our practice to pay rents out of the rate."

"That is no reason why it never should be. If people have a right to a maintenance from their parish, I cannot see how you can deny them wherewith to pay for a roof over their heads."

"True, true; very true," observed the squire. "Neither you nor I have any right to draw the distinction where the law makes none. You must help Sharpe with his rent if you find that he really cannot pay it himself." (15-16).

Blogg uses the threat of further demands on the rate in order to push Donkin to a short-term solution: if he doesn't pay Sharp's rent now, then the parish will have to pay out even more to Sharp in aid later. Blogg is able to abuse the system in part because it lacked clear policies: although Donkin says "it has never been our practice to pay rents out of the rate," the squire steps in to say that they do not have any right to "draw the distinction where the law makes none" (16). Without a clear policy to back him up, Donkin gives in to the pressures around him. Whereas Blogg abuses the system for his own benefit, the squire's role is interesting in this dialogue. He represents the indiscriminate charity that Martineau and others felt only trapped the poor in the vicious cycle of aid and dependence. The dialogue helps illustrate this point, when the well-meaning squire ends up helping the scoundrel Blogg. The farmer Goldby, not the squire, represents the most moral and effective ideas regarding the poor, and in this conversation his main commentary is to point out Blogg's unethical actions. When Donkin complains about the quality of the houses not being worth the price Blogg charges, farmer Goldby adds: "How can you for shame, Blogg, ask seventy pounds for such piles of old brick and rotten wood?" (17). Throughout the story, Goldby points out the unethical actions of others, but usually connects them to the way the system itself breeds such actions.

The story concludes with a cacophony of conversations in the church yard on a Sunday morning, all talking about farmer Goldby who had finally been forced to sell his farm because of high poor rates. This "gossip," as the narrator calls it, was followed by more formal dialogue when the rector requested that everyone stay after the sermon, "as some affairs were about to be discussed which were of great importance" ("The Parish" 244). This dialogic frame is even carried through what amounts to a long narrative diatribe on the ills that the system had created in the parish. But the form of dialogue is important because, while the narrator reports the characters' words to readers, the lessons are ones learned by the characters themselves and have been illustrated throughout the story. Thus, Martineau's theory of illustrating principles bears out here through the dialogue. Key phrases indicate the presence of this dialogue: "The rector explained," "The rector then briefly exhibited," "The squire declared," "the rector could not let this last

explanation pass without remark,” and “Goldby here rose to say” (244-47 *passim*, 250). Such speeches represent an argument about Poor Law reforms, but this does not mean that they are not an effective fictional device. Coming as they do from characters’ mouths, with reference to people and situations from the story, they convey a context more effectively than government reports or political speeches. Martineau uses fiction to dramatize the palpable impact of socio-economic circumstances on people’s lives; readers’ identification with individualized characters evoke deeper sympathy than the lists of facts and tables of statistics employed for writing the stories.¹⁰

These dialogues also represent Martineau’s strategy of blending knowledge gained from distant and near perspectives. Reference to a particular character recalls the personal details of a story that encourages sympathy, while the references to a failed system help maintain the distance required to take the longer view of systemic reform. For example, when farmer Goldby stands up to critique the practice of giving relief to able-bodied laborers, he explains how this hurts those who are willing to work, like Ashby. Ashby is an honorable man, unable to find work because the parish forces people like farmer Goldby to take on unwilling laborers, thus rehearsing a central problem of the parish relief system. But Martineau does not want that identification to result in the desire to give immediate relief, as the squire had done: “He had devoted his time and his money for years past [...] but] seemed after all to have done nothing but harm” (“The Parish” 247). She thus shifts attention to the more distanced perspective of thinking about the system in addition to the characters. The rector concludes the discussion with a reference to the management of this system: “it was therefore to be hoped that they might further agree on such alterations in their mode of management as might in time redeem the parish from its depth of pauperism” (252). This blend of nearness and distance is also seen in the final lines of the story, as farmer Goldby leaves the parish: “[it was hoped] he might be the last martyr to the mal-administration of the Poor Laws in the parish of Thorpe” (254). Goldby positioned as a “martyr” encourages sympathy with a specific character, while reference to systemic mal-administration encourages the distanced view of reason that Martineau hopes will lead to long-term solutions.

In "The Town," the emphasis on distance and objectivity represent clear components of Martineau's sociology of charity. In a conversation between two of the story's most sympathetic and relatable characters, disinterest is part of the solution. The vicar begins with an exasperated declaration: "I suppose we shall grow wise enough, some day, to have an uniformity of management in our workhouses" ("The Town" 90). To Orger, the current overseer, he explains:

Now, if the diet and clothes were the same in every workhouse, and if there was a fit resident officer in all ; the whole being under the *impartial* management of a central board, through paid, and therefore *disinterested*, agents; all vagrancy of the kind I have mentioned, all individual speculation and trickery, would be swept away at once, and contract management would follow of course, as being the easiest and most economical under a *system of regularity*, and safe, while under the superintendence of a vigilant and *impartial* authority. The contractor would be a check upon the tradesmen, by its being made *his interest to deal in the best market*. The paupers would be a check upon the contractor by their power of appeal to the district superintendents; and the central board would be a check upon all parties, having the means afforded, *by a general experience, of judging rightly* in individual cases, as long as uniformity of management is maintained. (90, emphases added)

The number of references to the role of disinterestedness or impartiality is striking in this passage, demonstrating the key role of such a perspective. Martineau's economic theories blend with her views on charity in the Vicar's speech; the free market that is a "check upon the tradesman" encourages the "impartiality" and "regularity" of the new system, one that makes use of a central board rather than local members of a community. When the rate-payers of "The Town" decide to draw up a petition, they emphasize the need for disinterest in carrying out aid to the poor:

That though by making vestry decisions final, one great class of evils,—those arising from *magisterial interference*,—would be lessened or excluded, and by other specific methods specific grievances might be remedied, there can be no security for a wise and virtuous parochial government till the administration of parochial funds and influence is committed to *disinterested* persons responsible to a *disinterested* head,—contrary to the proposition that every parish is the best manager of its own affairs. (149, emphases added)

This portion of the petition argues against the prevailing rationale that each parish should manage its own affairs, because only the people in the parish would have the kind of particular knowledge of its inhabitants that would lead to the most effective dissemination of aid. The kind of knowledge needed instead is articulated by the vicar—“general experience” leading to “judging rightly.” The need for administrators who would be more distanced from the inhabitants of the town, and therefore might be more unbiased and less easily influenced, supports Martineau’s overall emphasis on reforming systems.

Indeed, one of the more specific references to actual home visits shows how they are ineffective in the context of a corrupt system. The vicar bemoans how his individual charitable efforts fail because of the current Poor Law system:

Where is the use of my carrying a pittance of aid to their homes, while I make no effort to prevent their subsistence being flung away by a wrong administration in vestry? What good will my advice and reading and prayers do them, if I countenance by my silence whatever is done to tempt them to theft, and goad them to violence, and sink them into faithless despondency? The priest and the Levite of old might be praying or praising as they passed by; but how was either the Samaritan or themselves the better for that?” (“The Town” 74)

This response defends the vicar’s involvement in vestry meetings, despite the argument that he should remain neutral. Thus, while disinterest is considered a virtue in the story, the community as a network also has value. As Gregory

Vargo argues, Martineau's stories are adept at "show[ing] the texture of pressures and loyalties that surround the poor laws," yet she does not explicitly advocate for a central administrative body (12). The closest she comes to this position is creating "a set of abstract characters who are independent from the world they wish to reform." This is the very tension established in *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, where the accurate observer must be able to balance sympathy with judgment. Such a position values the importance of knowledge gained from within a community as well as knowledge gained from an outside viewpoint: "To stand on the highest pinnacle is the best way of obtaining an accurate view, in contemplating a society as well as a city" (*How to Observe* 36). Orger comes closest to representing this position in the story; he has insider knowledge but can be unbiased because he had "nothing to sell which might be neglected; he employed no workmen who might be tampered with" ("The Town" 13). Those characters who want to cheat the system, like Gillingham, do not want Orger to be in charge of poor relief because they know his intimate knowledge of each member of the community enables him to see through dishonest efforts to receive aid.

The complications of this position are further emphasized by the ending of the story, which anticipates Elizabeth Gaskell's characters' emigrating to Canada in *Mary Barton*. Orger has been chased away by more corrupt overseers, and the shoemaker's wife, Mrs. Waters, reports that the "parish has gone back to the old plan" ("The Town" 166). Waters will actually benefit from the corrupted system that earns him inflated prices for making shoes for workhouse inhabitants, but he and his wife recognize the harm these old practices will bring on the community.

In her preface to *Illustrations of Political Economy*, the model for the *Poor Laws* stories, Martineau declares there is no reason "why an explanation of the principles which regulate society should not be made more clear and interesting at the same time by pictures of what those principles are actually doing in communities" (xii). But just as she warns in *How to Observe* that sympathetic reactions alone can be misused and are in need of a wider perspective, fictional stories must be set in the context of works that "teach the science systematically

as far as it is yet understood” (xi). These too are very valuable. Martineau’s views on charity follow her sociological methods for observing, and the basis for both was knowledge gained from two positions: a near one from which to gain personal knowledge and identify with sympathy, and a distanced one from which to gain wider, abstract knowledge enabling more accurate, and therefore ethical, judgments. In Martineau’s view, the administration of charity required a similar blend of knowledge. Individual charitable acts were not enough, and indiscriminate aid was damaging, but neither would impersonal systems provide a complete answer. Her fiction shows that to reform the current system of charity would require both sympathetic and impartial action. Her fiction also elaborates just how difficult that would be: given the debates that ensued throughout the Victorian period, she was right.

Notes

¹ See Martineau’s commentary on her American writings in the *Autobiography*. She declined to accept publishing offers before her trip in order to travel without bias (210-11, 330, 393-94).

² On the Poor Laws, see Marilyn Button’s introduction to *Victorians and the Case for Charity: Essays on Responses to English Poverty by the State, the Church and the Literati* (McFarland & Company, 2014).

³ On charity, see Deborah Logan, *Harriet Martineau, Victorian Imperialism, and the Civilizing Mission* (Ashgate, 2009).

⁴ For example, Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens’ *Bleak House*.

⁵ According to Baker and Womack: “Best known for her social criticism, Martineau made an unconvincing attempt at the domestic novel in *Deerbrook*” (5-6). See also Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); M. Colleen Willenbring, “Legal Questions and Literary Answers: Poor Law Taxonomies and Realist Narrative Technique in Harriet Martineau’s ‘The Town’” (*Victorian Network*, Vol. 5, No. 2 [2013], 51-66); and Ann Hobart, “Harriet Martineau’s Political Economy of Everyday Life” (*Victorian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 [1994], 223-51).

⁶ "Cousin Marshall" (*Illustrations of Political Economy*) deals most directly with issues of charity and the Poor Laws. It exemplifies the complexity of Martineau's representations of the poor by including both positive and negative characterizations. This practice continues in her *Poor Laws* stories.

⁷ Scholars working on the role of women in Victorian philanthropy often note the important role that charitable activity had in women's lives by offering them a chance to work outside of the house in a socially sanctioned way. See Bronwyn Rivers, *Women at Work in the Victorian Novel: The Question of Middle Class Women's Employment* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2005); also Dorice Williams Elliott, *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (University Press of Virginia, 2002).

⁸ See James Buzard, *The Beaten Track* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹ Deborah Logan calls the dialogue in Martineau's work "expository conversation," terming it "innovative" (xv). See also Jennifer Yates, "'A Habit of Speculation': Women, Gossip and Publicity in Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook*" (*Women's Writing* 9 [2002]: 369-78; and Kristen Pond, "Harriet Martineau's Epistemology of Gossip" (*Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 69, No. 2 [2014], 175-207).

¹⁰ In her autobiography, Martineau explains how these facts and tables were provided to her to ensure the accuracy of her stories (177-78). This also shows how these early Victorian fictional stories are important precursors to the industrial fiction of the 1840s that responded to the publication of government blue book reports.

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