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The Metropolis and Mental Life in the Novel*

Julie Choi

In so far as money is the symbol as well as the cause of making everything indifferent and of the externalization of everything that lends itself to such a process, it also becomes the gatekeeper of the most intimate sphere, which can then develop within its own limits.

—Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*

MY TITLE PAYS TRIBUTE TO ONE of the best-known essays by Georg Simmel entitled “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), which serves as a useful entry into his oeuvre, and in particular, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900). The metropolis in Simmel’s writing represents “the seat of money economy because the many-sidedness and concentration of commercial activity have given the medium of exchange an importance which it could not have acquired in the commercial aspects of rural life.”¹ As David Frisby comments, for Simmel, “it is the metropolis, rather than the industrial enterprise or production or rational organization, that is a key site of modernity.”² My purpose is to reexamine the “rise of the novel” in the context of the metropolis to see in what ways Simmel’s insights can illuminate our understanding of the realism and “truth to life” we all claim to be able to see, yet find so difficult to define, in the novel. Although Simmel’s metropolis is based on his experience of Berlin at the turn of the last century, his discussion of the metropolis can be fruitfully extended backwards to the eighteenth-century experience of the rise of big cities in England, and in particular London, where the explosive growth of the urban population coincided with the onset of a mature money economy.

Quite blankly stated, I propose that the novel is the sustained realistic treatment of mental life in the large context of the money economy encapsulated in the idea of the metropolis. Many of the first novels in English such as Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* take as their subject matter the mental life of individuals in the metropolis. Simmel’s work provides a very rich descriptive context within which we can begin

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to explain the formation of new kinds of subjective experience in novels that speak from any number of ideological perspectives. It is my contention that Simmel's characterization of life, and in particular "mental" life in the metropolis, can serve as an explanatory model for the rise of the kind of novel experiences of subjective life we begin to see represented in the new genre we call the novel. Whereas Marxist analyses have much to say about capitalist relations and the social consequences on individual life, Simmel's larger and looser approach to the "money economy" allows us to think about modern developments that predate strictly capitalist modes of production as well as those that go beyond them.

Unlike Marxist readings, a Simmelian reading does not force us to take sides or to prematurely read class struggle into a period when the terms "capitalist" or "bourgeois" are not of much use. By reading the novel as the sustained and serious representation of "mental life" in the metropolis, we benefit from not having to force all novelists and all novels into any single ideological service, or having to read any and all action as either subversion or containment. It also allows us to observe characters without having to classify them as middle class or of any class whatsoever, not only because such class demarcations are not at all evident, but also because aristocracy, gentry, and the common folk all participate, albeit differently, in the metropolitan economy. And although the scope of this essay does not allow us to speculate on novels from other periods and regions, viewing the novel from the prism of the metropolis may well help us understand why the novel becomes an important genre in different cultures at different times.

In Section One, I will present the main outline of Simmel's argument in *MML*, supplemented by passages from other works, to convey a full sense of the tenor of his thought and how I find this thought to be particularly illuminating in charting many of the characteristics of the eighteenth-century novel. In Section Two, I will suggest in what ways a Simmelian interpretation of the "rise" of the novel can enrich existing understandings of the genre we call the novel.

I

Simmel's primary interest in *MML* is to inquire into "the specifically modern aspects of contemporary life with reference to their inner meaning . . . the body of culture with reference to the soul," primarily by investigating "the adaptations made by the personality to its adjustment to the forces that lie outside of it" (*MML* 325). He begins by examining how the modern individual learns to cope with the unbearable psychic "attacks" to which he or she is subjected in "the intensification

of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli" (MML 325). Simmel defines the "intellectualism" of the metropolitan type as "a protective organ for itself against profound disruption . . . Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner" to parry the shock of momentary events so that they do not enter the "depths of the personality" (MML 326). Simmel reserves judgment on the morality of this intellectualistic quality of the metropolis, unlike most writers who can only view metropolitan life as a fall from the organic wholeness of a more traditional, communal past. In MML, Simmel attempts to show how point for point, this intellectualistic quality "becomes ramified into numerous specific phenomena," as we shall see.

First and foremost, for Simmel, "money economy and the domination of the intellect stand in the closest relationship to one another. They have in common a purely matter-of-fact attitude in the treatment of persons and things in which a formal justice is often combined with an unrelenting hardness" (MML 326). The "inhumanity" of many of Defoe's characters springs to mind in this context, as they navigate a metropolitan network of a distinctly modern world. In *Roxana*, the female heroine confounds us with her ability to number her children and to dispose of them in the same manner as she does her more "material" possessions such as her plate. Roxana's callous use of Amy as instrument is symptomatic of the money economy in which even human beings become mere means in an extended chain of means. Roxana is a near-perfect example of Simmel's type of the avaricious person who is addicted to ownership of money, "an objective delight in money, in the awareness of a value that extends far beyond all individual and personal enjoyment of its benefits." As the ultimate tool that can convert into any value, and hence exceeds any single value, money becomes for such a one the ultimate purpose, "not content with being just another final purpose of life along-side wisdom and art, personal significance and strength, beauty and love; but in so far as money does adopt this position it gains the power to reduce the other purposes to the level of means."³

Money reduces everything to a common denominator, doing away with the imponderable differences and qualities of more personal relationships. The disquisition on the unfeeling, hardhearted nature of the intellectualistic culture of the metropolis leads Simmel to the heart of his next major point in his essay, the calculating nature of the modern mind:

The calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money economy corresponds to the ideal of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a

mathematical formula. It has been money economy which has thus filled the daily life of so many people with weighing, calculating, enumerating and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms. Because of the character of calculability which money has there has come into the relationships of the elements of life a precision and a degree of certainty in the definition of the equalities and inequalities and an unambiguousness in agreements and arrangements, just as externally this precision has been brought about through the general diffusion of pocket watches. It is, however, the conditions of the metropolis which are cause as well as effect for this essential characteristic. (MML 327–28)

This long excerpt shows how swiftly Simmel moves between very large ideas without offering any scholarly apparatus to support his claims. Characteristically, he makes no citations and feels no need to bolster his claims with evidential argumentation.⁴ The importance of mathematical knowledge for Enlightenment thought cannot be underestimated and as Lorraine Daston states, “The conviction that rationality could indeed be reduced to a calculus lay at the very heart of the classical program. The recurring Enlightenment dream of a calculus that would convert judgment and inference into a set of rules stemmed from the seventeenth-century fascination with methods of right reasoning, with the further embellishment that the rules were mathematical.”⁵ Whereas Daston limits her argument to the connection between advances in mathematical knowledge and the Enlightenment fascination with “right reasoning,” Simmel links both mathematical thought and scientific rationalism to the calculating mind of the money economy. And whereas Ian Watt, in the enduring classic, *The Rise of the Novel*, remains satisfied to suggest that formal realism in the novel can be traced to Lockean empiricism, a Simmelian approach would interpret both as offspring of the money economy.

Simmel shows how punctuality, too, results from the new precision demanded by the calculating nature of modern life: “Punctuality, calculability, and exactness, which are required by the complications and extensiveness of metropolitan life are not only most intimately connected with its capitalistic and intellectualistic character but also color the content of life and are conducive to the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign human traits and impulses which originally seek to determine the form of life from within instead of receiving it from the outside in a general, schematically precise form” (MML 328–29). This is why the city has become the focus of strongly felt critique by thinkers like John Ruskin and Friedrich Nietzsche, “personalities who found the value of life only in unschematized individual expressions which cannot be reduced to exact equivalents” (MML 329). Furthermore, such rationality results in a profoundly personal consequence for the metropolitan type, best summarized by his “blasé outlook.”

The blasé mind is the intellectual consequence of having hardened oneself to the shocks of everyday existence, and the price paid for surviving the nonetheless constant onslaught of sensual stimuli in the metropolis, resulting in the “incapacity to react to new stimulations” (MML 329). Baudelaire’s celebrated indictment of the supremely “ugly and abortive” beast of the modern mind, *Ennui*, the suffocating inability to feel, can only resonate within the context of metropolitan life.⁶ Aesthetic deadening of the senses goes hand in hand with moral indifference: “The essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things. Not in the sense that they are not perceived, as is the case of mental dullness, but rather that the meaning and the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless. They appear to the blasé person in a homogeneous, flat and gray color with no one of them worthy of being preferred to another” (MML 329–30). This “psychic mood” is linked to the central characteristic of money itself, which “with its colorlessness and its indifferent quality” can become the common denominator of all values and hence “hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair. They all float with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money” (MML 330). Unlike the gloating cynic, another metropolitan type explored in *PM*, the blasé individual derives no pleasure from the meaninglessness of a life in which everything can be obtained for money. Rather, *ennui* struggles to find salvation in momentary excitement, impression, stimulation: “The search for mere stimuli in themselves is the consequence of the increasing blasé attitude through which natural excitement increasingly disappears. This search for stimuli originates in the money economy with the fading of all specific values in a mere mediating value. We have here one of those interesting cases in which the disease determines its own form of the cure. A money culture brings about such an enslavement of life in ‘means’ that release from its weariness can only be sought in a mere means which conceals its final significance—in the fact of ‘stimulation’ as such” (*PM* 257).

It is in the context of the blasé mind that the romantic turn to nature as well as the sentimental movement of the eighteenth century can be understood as nostalgic reaction to the alienating, heartless metropolis—the desperate search for experience, the sublime experience that will transport one beyond the unbearable and heartless humdrum of everyday life. In a short piece entitled “The Alpine Journey” (1895), Simmel derides the glorification of the sublime landscape as a shallow trick of self-deception whereby egoistic pleasure is cloaked in the language of inner depth and spirituality. He comments:

I think that the educative value of alpine travel is very small. It gives the feeling of tremendous excitement and charge in its incomparable merging of forbidding strength and radiant beauty, and at the time the contemplation of those things fills us with an unrivalled intensity of feeling, prompting undisclosed inner feelings as if the high peaks could uncover the depths of our soul. Strangely this excitement and euphoria, which drive the emotions to a level more intense than the normal, subside remarkably quickly. The uplift which a view of the high Alps gives is followed very quickly by the return to the mood of the mundane.⁷

This insight is further developed in the final chapter of *PM*, where he discusses the crucial concept of distance in relation to modern styles of life. The number of personal contacts increases in a society of differently specialized people, but such relationships are often based on monetary interest, leading Simmel to conclude that money creates distance through an inner barrier that develops between people. He extends this idea of distance between people to distance between people and objects, and even between people and nature:

Stated directly: just as money intervenes between person and person, so it intervenes between person and commodity . . . money and the enlargement of its role places us at an increasingly greater mental distance from objects. This is true not only of cultural objects; our whole life also becomes affected by its remoteness from nature, a situation that is reinforced by the money economy and the urban life that is dependent upon it. To be sure, the distinctive aesthetic and romantic experience of nature is perhaps possible only through this process. Whoever lives in direct contact with nature and knows no other form of life may enjoy its charm subjectively, but he lacks that distance from nature that is the basis for aesthetic contemplation and the root of that quiet sorrow, that feeling of yearning estrangement and of a lost paradise that characterizes the romantic response to nature. (*PM* 478)

Simmel characterizes the romantic sense of nature as a singularly modern phenomenon stemming from the intellectual distance created by urban life and the money economy. This is not only cause for mourning, as this distance enables a connection at the same time as it forbids a genuine union: “the very fact that nature can only be enjoyed by urban people under these conditions thrusts an entity between them and nature—no matter in how many transformations and mere after-effects—which forms a link between the two at the very same time that it separates them” (*PM* 478).

But nature is not the only source of feeling that the metropolitan mind turns to in search of experience. The metropolis itself is the emporium of consumer goods collected from all corners of the globe. The eighteenth-century obsession with the consumption of luxury, described by many critics as perhaps the central theme of the period, is elegantly explained

within the context of a money economy in which all hope of genuine fulfillment has disappeared and yet the doomed desire for stimulation fails to wane. The excitement created by such a concentration of purchasable things “stimulates the individual to the highest degree of nervous energy” (MML 330). Such energy cannot be sustained, swiftly turning excitement into its opposite condition, where the nerves renounce any response to excitation. In the more sustained analysis of what money does to personal values in *PM*, Simmel writes: “If that insecurity and disloyalty in relation to specific possessions which is part of the money economy has to be paid for by the very modern feeling that the hoped for satisfaction that is connected with new acquisitions immediately grows beyond them, that the core and meaning of life always slips through one’s hand, then this testifies to a deep yearning to give things a new importance, a deeper meaning, a value of their own” (*PM* 404). The loss of meaning in things and in people in the money economy thus ironically results in a renewed desire for meaning and value, just as the distance from nature creates a new link to it.

Simmel’s ability to always show another facet to a given phenomenon is particularly well illustrated by the next sequence of moves he makes in MML as he links the blasé attitude with reserve toward others. Individuals in the city do not have the capacity to respond to others as “people” with their particular needs, constitutions, and sensibilities: “If the unceasing external contact of numbers of persons in the city should be met by the same number of inner reactions as in the small town, in which one knows almost every person he meets and to each of whom he has a positive relationship, one would be completely atomized internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition” (MML 331). The result is indifference, the negative face of distance, which easily translates into the feeling of aversion particular to urban personalities.

Antipathy saves us from our nature, which is programmed to a certain extent to respond to every contact with another. The heartlessness of the modern world bemoaned by every man of feeling can be viewed in this context as a lack of nuanced insight into the innermost workings, in some sense, the very biology of the newly emerging metropolitan mental life. David Simple’s tragic and sentimental adventures can only fail, as revealed by the full title of Sarah Fielding’s novel: *The adventures of David Simple: containing an account of his travels through the cities of London and Westminster, in search of a real friend*. A real friend is not what comes naturally to the metropolis. The chronic loneliness of Harley, the hero of *Man of Feeling*, in his quest for sympathy in the city is another example of the misguided and quixotic metropolitan quest, which nonetheless cannot give up on the search for shared feeling. Catherine Gallagher’s observation that sympathy does not come easily, especially when property

interests are crossed, makes a lot of sense in this context, as does her insight that fictional characters provide an easy way out of the dilemma because their “nobodiness”—in other words, their very fictionality—frees them from conflicting with real-life interests.⁸

Simmel, however, is able to link what seems to be an especially dark aspect of the metropolitan spirit, indifference, with its most rewarding if inevitably compromised counterpart: freedom. The freedom of the modern individual is a value that Simmel defends at all cost, even as he demonstrates a deep awareness of all the alienating forces that continually threaten it. For him, money provides the basis for this freedom, fully explicated in the section entitled “Individual Freedom,” which starts off the second “Synthetic Part” of *PM*. In more abbreviated form in *MML*, Simmel describes the contrast between the freedom of the metropolis and the nature of intimate bonding that characterizes smaller communities, such as the three or four families so favored by Jane Austen. Tight circles require “a rigorous setting of boundaries and a centripetal unity and for that reason cannot give room to freedom and the peculiarities of inner and external development of the individual.” As the circle grows outward through new networks of monetary relations, such close ties are loosened, resulting in “a freedom of movement far beyond the first jealous delimitation” (*MML* 332). Just as organizations such as the church, guilds, and political parties have developed in this manner, so does the city exhibit this concentric growth. The crowds spell intoxicating freedom for the city dweller precisely because the lack of space and the overcrowding “make intellectual distance really perceivable for the first time” (*MML* 334).

Simmel does not reach a triumphant conclusion with this newfound freedom. The other side is never really its opposite, permitting a potentially infinite turning of the screw. This method is the pleasure as well as the difficulty of reading Simmel, who works through contraries, constantly showing us the reverse and the obverse: “It is obviously only the obverse of this freedom that, under certain circumstances, one never feels as lonely and as deserted as in this metropolitan crush of persons. For here, as elsewhere, it is by no means necessary that the freedom of man reflect itself in his emotional life only as a pleasant experience” (*MML* 334). Loneliness, anomie, and the desire to reach out and break the unbearable solitude are the price of freedom. David Simple’s desire to have a true friend is as much a symptom of his freedom as it is of his loneliness. The loneliness of the city fosters the desire for intense friendships unmatched in former times, and this may very well explain why friendships become the focal point of much literature in the modern period, as well as why the home needs to become an oasis of genuine sympathy. And because we have become so individualized, it is all the more difficult,

and pressing, to find the one “real” friend, the particularized soul mate. Just as loss of value and meaning leads to search for value and meaning, general indifference fuels the search for a true soul mate in an unfeeling world. The sentimental turn makes perfect sense as a response to the metropolitan turn of the new money society of the eighteenth century. But like all stimulation, the charge of the sentimental encounter can only be momentary and is never capable of bringing about real change. The episodic nature of the sentimental novel, often without a full plot and always reading like a disjointed and forced sequence of hyperbolic moments of transport, can be read as the doomed but unending search of the blasé individual for release from his ennui. The popularity of the genre is a reflection on the hypertrophied mental lives of the readers, the hypocrites and brothers of the metropolitan writer. Sentiment in the metropolis, the pulsating *sensorium* fueled by ennui, remains at the level of *Erlebnis*, not *Erfahrung*, or the more genuine experience of a more innocent past. The dangers of an excessive addiction to extreme sentiment were obvious to many contemporary observers. As Susan Manning observes: “Sensibility’s tendency to play with excess and arousal (with all the connotations of uncontrollable sexual excitation implied) was especially troublesome to moralists: feelings *excited* and *stimulated* by the spectacle of suffering.”⁹⁹ Manning also discusses the structural similarities of sentimental writing with pornography, which operates as “repetition without progression . . . a duplicitous principle of intensification” (92). The inflaming *Adventures of Fanny Hill*, censored well into the middle of the twentieth century for its particularly frequent and titillating descriptions of moments of supreme transport, presents itself as a sentimental tale. Meanwhile, the domestic novel banks its success on the notion that earthly bliss is within reach if true “minds” meet.

Mental life in the metropolis is simultaneously liberating and alienating, lonely but charged with the hope of true spiritual friendships, filled with both apathy and endless stimulation, characterized by a sense of worldliness as well as worthlessness. Characters are increasingly distinguished from one another, more finely differentiated than they could have ever become in “the idiocy of rural life” to borrow Marx’s famous formulation. Simmel finds an explanation for the increasingly distinctive, *individual* character in the specialization that is increasingly required within the metropolitan economy. Because of specialization, we become more dependent on a greater number of people, but “we are remarkably independent of every specific member of this society, because his significance for us has been transferred to the one-sided objectivity of his contribution . . . this is the most favourable situation for bringing about inner independence, the feeling of individual self-sufficiency” (*PM* 298). This returns us to the idea of individual freedom, which is

not only negatively defined as freedom of movement and emancipation from prejudices but, in a more positive sense, as the expression of “the particularity and incomparability which ultimately every person possesses in some way, giving form to life” (MML 335). This new kind of freedom is clearly very different from the ideal of disinterested independence in classical republican thought. The growingly objective world stands in opposition to the personality of the free individual and these form the inseparable antinomies that emerge from the undifferentiated primitive whole where ego and world are not yet separate as in the world of epic and myth.

As much theorization as there was about epic in the eighteenth century, no epics were written because the times had become too objective. Nonetheless, there was tremendous enthusiasm for the “recovered” epic, simulated in such forgeries as *Ossian*. Georg Lukács memorably described the world of the novel as a world of spiritual homelessness, where man’s soul has lost touch with the elemental fire of the stars. It is not surprising that there should have been so much nostalgia for the lost world of epic in the metropolis. Nonetheless, Lukács characterizes the novel as the “art-form of virile maturity,” because it is the genre that struggles to represent the incomprehensibility and meaninglessness of modern existence within a form that does not give up on a formal immanence, which ironically can only be achieved “precisely when the author goes all the way, ruthlessly, towards exposing its absence.”¹⁰ Lukács goes on to point out that the biography or the story of the individual life is the form of choice for the novel, because the life of an individual provides a beginning and end for a world in which there is no organic wholeness, whereas the epic has no need for such formal beginning or end because it depicts a world that is organically whole.

Modernity is at once the growth of objectivity *and* the growth of personal freedom in the form of individuality, an agonistic dualism which Simmel finds reflected in the art of the past several centuries:

Thus we can observe the distinctive parallel movement during the last three hundred years, namely that on the one hand the laws of nature, the material order of things, the objective necessity of events emerge more clearly and distinctly, while on the other we see the emphasis upon the independent individuality, upon personal freedom, upon independence in relation to all external and natural forces becoming more and more acute and increasingly stronger. The naturalism of Van Eyck and *Quattrocento* is, as it were, an elaboration of what is most individual in phenomena. The simultaneous appearance of satire, biography and drama in their first forms exhibit a naturalistic style that centres upon the individual as such. This occurred, by the way, at a time when the money economy began perceptibly to display its social implications. (*PM* 302)

One could add that the novel emerges when both objectivity and freedom reach a new peak with the maturity of the money economy in the eighteenth century in England. Though Samuel Johnson celebrates the universal through the voice of Imlac in *Rasselas*, the age is one that demands the streaks of the tulip rather than the shape of the forest. Another great celebrator of the novel from the Marxist tradition, Mikhail Bakhtin, pays tribute to this turn to the individual and objective away from traditional authority superceding time and place: "From the beginning the novel was structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality. At its core lay personal experience and free creative imagination. Thus a new, sober artistic-prose novelistic image and a new critical scientific perception came into being simultaneously. From the beginning, then, the novel was made of different clay than the other already completed genres; it is a different breed, and with it and in it is born the future of all literature."¹¹ This influence of the "new critical scientific perception" of the novel on all other literature is described by Bakhtin as the "novelization" of literature, a trend he sees everywhere, including the "novelized poetry" that breaks loose from tradition and comes into contact with the changing realities of modern experience we call romantic poetry. The value of Simmel is that he permits us to see quite clearly that the prized prize, the free individual of the novel and all "novelized" literature, is the creation of a world made newly objective by the money economy as it is its prey.

As the influence of the metropolis expands outwards, "economic, personal and intellectual relations in the city grow in a geometrical progression as soon as, for the first time, a certain limit has been passed" (MML 334). This extension of the individual beyond the limits of his physical body is another aspect of Simmel's notion of a positive freedom of uninhibited growth. The metropolis and the metropolitan individual alike enjoy the freedom and responsibility emanating from this functional magnitude in a world enlarged and made penetrable by money and the new networks it produces. Simmel elsewhere speaks of the formations of new groups that could never have joined forces other than through the impersonal medium of money. The joint-stock company or the philanthropic association are both good examples of new forms of associations with significant consequences that become possible as people who would never personally associate with one another become linked through a network based on money.¹² The break between "the objective economic activity of a person and his individual coloration" permits us to focus on a more deeply individualized and interior subjectivity. The positive aspect of freedom that emerges from the expansion of horizons is our increasing ability to "follow the laws of our inner nature—and this is what

freedom is," and we express this to ourselves and to others by expressions of ourselves that distinguish ourselves from others (MML 335).

But becoming more individualized also involves becoming more specialized in a not so positive sense. The market economy forces one to develop increasingly specialized skills, and the market demands products that are increasingly finely differentiated to meet the increasingly refined needs of the public. This results in "the narrower type of intellectual individuation of mental qualities to which the city gives rise in proportion to its size." The need to seize and capitalize on difference "leads ultimately to the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice, of fastidiousness, the meaning of which is no longer to be found in the content of such activity itself but rather in its being a form of 'being different'—of making oneself noticeable" (MML 336). This desire to stand out stems from a need to demonstrate self-worth, an increasingly rare commodity in the metropolis as explained above. The increasingly extravagant fashions of the period prove the validity of this insight. Representations of the macaroni styles of dress and hairdressing, emulated even by servants, and country boys and girls with even the most fleeting experiences of the city, survive in some of the best-known prints of the period. Paradoxically, the language of fashion continually undermines the individual statement, rooted as it is in the rapid demise of individual fashions and an industry that promotes an ever-revolving single "look" and repeat purchases to keep up.¹³

In his important and intricate "concluding" section to MML, Simmel returns to a very important distinction in his work—the objective spirit versus subjective culture: "The development of modern culture is characterized by the predominance of what one can call the objective spirit over the subjective; that is, in language as well as in law, in the technique of production as well as in art, in science as well as in the objects of domestic environment, there is embodied a sort of spirit (*Geist*), the daily growth of which is followed only imperfectly and with an even greater lag by the intellectual development of the individual" (MML 337). In the title of another famous essay, he refers to this split as "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture" (1911).¹⁴ The accumulation of the subjective expressions of human experience become objectified forms of knowledge, which come back to haunt the individual as something external that must be confronted, internalized, and re-presented as something uniquely individual. The vast growth in culture is tragically mismatched by the impoverishment of the individual who is increasingly specialized, one-sided, and incapable of comprehending the wealth of his own culture. Progress in knowledge, institutions, and comforts contrasts terribly with the "regression of the culture of the individual with reference to spirituality, delicacy and idealism" (MML 336). The overgrowth of ob-

jective culture is the decisive factor in the Simmelian understanding of modern man's alienation:

He becomes a single cog as over against the vast overwhelming organization of things and forces which gradually take out of his hands everything connected with progress, spirituality and value. The operation of these forces results in the transformation of the latter from a subjective form into one of purely objective existence. It need only be pointed out that the metropolis is the proper arena for this type of culture which has outgrown every personal element. Here in buildings and in educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technique, in the formations of social life and in the concrete institutions of the State is to be found such a tremendous richness of crystallizing, depersonalized cultural accomplishments that the personality can, so to speak, scarcely maintain itself in the face of it. (MML 337–38)

For those who would see in Simmel only an unabashed apologist for the positive aspects of metropolitan culture, this passage provides clear evidence of his deep wariness. As always, however, the sword is double-edged. The atrophy of individual culture is deeply lamented, and the metropolis becomes the object of the bitter hatred of apostles of individualism in the line of Nietzsche, but by the same token, such desecrators of the metropolis are passionately loved by the metropolitan personality to whom only such aversion appears as containing the seeds of salvation.

Simmel concludes his essay with the statement of a powerful paradox. The eighteenth century introduced an ideal of human equality based on the dissolution of powerful bonds that had placed profound limitations and inequalities on individuals. The liberal desire to emerge from these bonds as free individuals equal in nature is countered, however, by what he terms the uniqueness glorified by romanticism and accelerated by the economic division of labor: "Individuals who had been liberated from their historical bonds sought now to distinguish themselves from one another. No longer was it the 'general human quality' in every individual but rather his qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability that now became the criteria of his value" (MML 339). For Simmel, then, the metropolitan individual embodies these two equally formative but mutually contradictory characteristics.

Simmel locates the metropolis as the site in which this struggle, characterized as the defining internal history of our time, must be carried out. The opposing sides "reveal themselves as one of those great historical structures in which conflicting life-embracing currents find themselves with equal legitimacy . . . it is our task not to complain or to condone but only to understand" (MML 339). These are the last lines of the essay closely pursued in all its detail in this brief introduction to Simmel's insights into the modern condition. The novel can be read as the primary

cultural field in which this struggle begins to take shape and to find form even before the complex and self-contradictory new realities of modern life can be properly grasped by those undergoing the complex processes we too blithely call "modernization."

II

The scope of so much recent critical work on literature in the eighteenth century has been established by the parameters of discourse laid out in the work of J. G. A. Pocock, which charts the struggle between civic virtue and the "corrupting" influences of the new commercial society.¹⁵ As fruitful and productive as this framework has been, it has often remained too grand and schematic to explain in satisfying detail why we have the complex new kinds of "mental life" represented in the novels of the period. As John Richetti observes, "The early eighteenth century witnessed, in fact, a less rarefied debate than Pocock describes about the nature of society and the role of the individual in relation to what were perceived, if not wholly understood, as radically new circumstances."¹⁶ Often these novels were written by men and women who were not cognizant of the political and economical theories of a "higher" republic of letters and had no coherent sense of why their own experiences as well as those of the characters they were depicting were so incoherent and singularly unheroic. Marshall Berman somewhat condescendingly writes about this early modern period from the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century: "People are just beginning to experience modern life; they hardly know what has hit them. They grope, desperately but half blindly, for an adequate vocabulary; they have little or no sense of a modern public or community within which their trials and hopes can be shared."¹⁷ Perhaps he overstates the ignorance, but he nonetheless makes an important point often disregarded by specialists of the eighteenth century.

Jürgen Habermas's work on the public sphere is another major contribution that has deeply colored our understanding of the period and produced much exciting recent work on the period. As important as the idea of rational private individuals engaged in public debate has been in helping us understand how traditional authority was overcome by new modes and arenas for public political debate, it too is an overly grand framework that risks losing sight of the ordinary men and women who were engaged in the new mental experience of living in the metropolis. Likewise, the focus on the concept of luxury, which clearly remains central to the period, has prohibited us from fully exploring the complexities of the new mental and moral economies because of an overinvestment

in the issue of consumption. While all of these frameworks have been tremendously empowering, an *ex post facto* analysis of the effects of the money economy on mental life can help us explain more fully the contradictory and often inexplicable developments we see in the novels, which are the first texts that attempt to represent the mental life of the metropolis. The formal shapelessness of the genre, whose main characteristic is its discursivity, is well-suited to the protean shapelessness of the metropolitan subject. Great differences among different individuals are inevitable as not all individuals have the same access to money and to the pleasures and tribulations that money effects, the freedom and alienation, the loneliness and friendships, the indifference and the passionate search for true meaning that characterize modern life.¹⁸ The very lack of defining form permits the novel to adapt itself to the widely varied manifestations of modern metropolitan life that occur as a result of the differences in location of different subjects in different money economies, which are themselves in various stages of transition, from more primitive to extremely advanced.

The single-minded advance of *homo economicus* is an overly reductive model of character that fails to do justice to the unresolved and mutually contradictory strands of the metropolitan personality. If character originally means the strong imprint of a distinguishing and ineradicable single trait, the period we are discussing begins to suffer from a total and irreversible loss of character.¹⁹ The “round” character, which has skewed discussions of the novel ever since E. M. Forster pronounced its superiority to the “flat” character, is in this sense really no character at all, but a fuller representation of the contradictions of mental life of the metropolis in the novel. Loss of character has the benefit of greater tolerance as noted by Simmel: “The trend towards conciliatoriness springing from indifference to the basic problems of our inner life, which one can characterize at its highest level as the salvation of the soul and as not being soluble by reason—right up to the idea of world peace, which is especially favored in liberal circles, the historical representatives of intellectualism and of money transactions: all these are positive consequences of the negative trait of lack of character” (*PM* 432–33).²⁰ The politeness of the commercial British people in the eighteenth century is also a sign of their lack of character, and hence the pride and lamentation of contemporary observers. It is a notable paradox that women, accused by Pope of not having any character at all, should eventually come to occupy the character of virtue within the isolation of the domestic sphere in the “elevated” novels that begin to define the genre in the middle of the century.²¹

Gender becomes a critical marker as women are differently situated within the money economy from men. In many ways, women are seen

by Simmel to transcend the contradictions of the new order because of their distance from the cash nexus. They become neither specialized nor intellectualized thanks to the separation of spheres.²² In this regard, it comes as no surprise that many scholars have felt that modern conceptions of gender come into formation in this precise historical period. Many novels celebrating a unified moral character take as subject the virtuous female heroine who becomes tragically embroiled in monetary issues. For Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* there is only death, and for Frances Burney's *Cecilia*, near death and the loss of both fortune and name to a marriage that is at best a state of resignation. Such virtue cannot survive in the open economy, and hence must perish or be safely entombed within domestic life, where it is celebrated as the new spiritual center of civilization. The gendering effects of the division of spheres thus can also be read as a function of mental life in the metropolis.

By defining the novel as the sustained and realistic representation of the mental life of the metropolis, we can override the exhausting and inconclusive debates about what properly constitutes the novel, without making the term a marker of any particular value. This is, of course, not to say that there are not better novels than others, because as cultural productions, they can have less or more merit in terms of integrity, insight, and aesthetic value. The patches of psychological or otherwise descriptive realism critics have found from classical times, through Chaucer, and to the modern period, do not qualify all such narratives as novels by the standards proposed here.²³ Aphra Behn's *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* does not feel like a novel to us, because as detailed as the psychology of the lovers gets, their mental lives are not formed in the context of the metropolis in the large sense we have been discussing throughout. Rather, the emphasis on "realistic" representation focuses on smoldering sexual desire, enraging betrayal, and cruel revenge represented as primeval rather than socially constituted. Her *Oroonoko*, despite its strong romance ingredients, reads much more like a novel on the other hand, because the characters, and in particular the narrator herself, exhibit many signs of the complex makeup of the metropolitan individual. The keen eye for detail for goods and products that can gain in value when transported back to the metropolitan center, the calculated actions of all players in the wild chase for material gain, the amoral but lucrative investment in human beings as property, all bring to the fore problems and characteristics of metropolitan mental life. Both woman and racial other stand as problematic types of the metropolitan individual. This is why *Oroonoko*, not *Love Letters*, is often touted as the "first" novel in alternative and often feminist accounts of the rise of the British novel. Watt's attempt to restrict the term "realism" to the techniques of "formal realism" in defining the novel fails to advance beyond the far

too general formulation of a plot acted out by “particular people in particular circumstances, rather than, as had been common in the past, by general human types against a background primarily determined by the appropriate literary convention” (16). What Watt really seems to mean by “particular people in particular circumstances” is particular individuals with the complex mental life determined and defined by their particular locations within a large, unstable, expanding, and anonymous network created by the mature money economy we have been calling the “metropolis” throughout this essay. It is hoped that this attempt to redefine the novel can also speak for the changing manifestations of the novel in different manifestations of the life of the spirit in different *metropoles* in time and place. This is already understood in a more literal translation of Simmel’s original title, *Die Grossstädte und das Geistesleben*.

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NOTES

- 1 Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 326 (hereafter cited in text as MML). I quote extensively from Simmel’s own words throughout to provide a sense of his distinctive style, intuitive flair, and poetic diction.
- 2 David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, eds., *Simmel on Culture* (London: Sage, 1997), 12.
- 3 Simmel, *Philosophy of Money* (London: Routledge, 1990), 241 (hereafter cited in text as *PM*).
- 4 Those who dismiss the importance of Simmel’s contribution focus on his apparent lack of systematic coherence. Emile Durkheim reviewed the *Philosophy of Money* as follows: “Imagination, personal feelings are thus given free reign here, and rigorous demonstrations have no relevance. For my own part, I confess to not attaching a very high price to this type of hybrid-illegitimate speculation (*spéculation bâtarde*) where reality is expressed in necessarily subjective terms, as in art, but also abstractly, as in science.” Quoted in Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein, *Postmodern(ized) Simmel* (London: Routledge, 1993), 9–10. Simmel’s erstwhile student Georg Lukács defends the use of the essayistic style: “The essay can calmly and proudly set its fragmentariness against the petty completeness of scientific exactitude or impressionistic freshness.” Quoted in Frisby, *Georg Simmel: A Revised Edition* (London: Routledge, 2002), xxv.
- 5 Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), xv.
- 6 Perhaps the earliest representation of the *ennuyé* in the English novel is the outrageously fashionable Mr. Meadows in Frances Burney’s *Cecilia* (1782), which is a veritable gallery of modern metropolitan types listed by Simmel in *PM*—such as the spendthrift, the cynic, the ascetic—of whom the *ennuyé* is only one. Edmund Burke dubbed Burney the “little character monger” because of her remarkable ability to bring to life recognizable modern types in her novels.
- 7 Simmel, “Alpine Journey,” in Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*, 220.
- 8 See her chapter on Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* in Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

- 9 Susan Manning, "Sensibility," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740–1830*, ed. Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 10 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 72.
- 11 M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 59.
- 12 See "Money in Modern Culture" (1895) in Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*, where Simmel goes on to conclude: "Thus when one laments the alienating and separating effect of monetary transactions, one should not forget the following: money creates an extremely strong bond among the members of an economic circle . . . Thus it is ultimately money which establishes incomparably more connections among people than ever existed" (246).
- 13 Simmel's insights into fashion remain highly regarded even today. A good place to see his thoughts on the subject is "The Philosophy of Fashion" in Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*.
- 14 Reprinted in Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*.
- 15 See *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975) and *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 16 John Richetti, *The English Novel in History 1700–1780* (London: Routledge, 1999), 10.
- 17 Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1988), 16–17.
- 18 Simmel's last chapter in *PM*, "The Style of Life" (which he personally recommended as the first chapter to be read by the prospective reader), is an enlightening analysis of the differences of style of life determined by one's location within the money economy.
- 19 Deirdre Lynch has made the important argument that character was conceived as of the surface and legible before taking on the notion of interiority in the later eighteenth century in *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 20 We can still observe how liberal tolerance, when vilified as lack of character, can impact outcomes in American presidential politics.
- 21 For an interesting argument for a concerted drive to "elevate" the novel from its more seedy origins in amatory fiction by women like Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood, see William Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).
- 22 See "Female Culture," in Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture*, where Simmel remarks: "The fundamental structure of the female nature . . . achieves historical expression only in its estrangement from culture as specialized and objective" (50). The potential sexism of this view was the subject of early attacks by feminists including Max Weber's wife, Marianne Weber. The importance of Simmel to feminism has been discussed by Rita Felski in *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 23 See in particular Margaret Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).