A SECULAR GOSPEL:

DICKENS ON WORK AND WORKING LIVES

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by

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Abstract

Critics often straightforwardly align the attitude to work in Dickens's writings with the earnest values of his era. This thesis questions the accuracy of such an assumption; it argues, as a result, that Dickens is not, to a great extent, concerned with the abstract or concrete details of work, and stresses instead that he is interested in more sceptically exploring its human dimension. A representative selection of the major novels from different phases of Dickens's career including, but not limited to, The Pickwick Papers, David Copperfield, Bleak House and Our Mutual Friend, is re-evaluated in pursuing this claim. Fresh light is thrown on this familiar terrain by discussing the fiction in several specific contexts. Detailed reference to contemporary writing on the subject is made throughout, and includes both the works of well-known figures such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and Henry Mayhew, and other varied sources, ranging from medical texts and primers to household manuals. Full consideration is given, moreover, not just to the novels, but also to the reinterpretation of biographical materials, and to Dickens's shorter fiction, travel writing and a pertinent selection of journalistic writings from the Morning Chronicle, Household Words and All the Year Round. Reconsidering Dickens's position on the topic also challenges other preconceptions about his work. The notion that gender roles are at all fixed in the novels, for instance, is questioned, thus subtly altering recent work done by feminist critics. The last two chapters of the thesis are concerned not with work, but with idleness and repose; the surprising discovery that Dickens's biographical and fictional response to idlers and idling is more generous than previously thought opens up a new perspective on his views on work, and finally underlines the fact that his engagement with the issue is much more than just a muffled echo of the gospel of work.
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Just over a year into the research for this thesis, my life changed completely. I met and fell in love with Erin, who became my wife in 2005, and has been a constant source of inspiration for my work. As well as having read and commented on several drafts of my thesis, her sceptical turn of mind, shown in our many conversations on Dickens and other literary matters, has immeasurably improved my thinking and writing. I want to show my gratitude by dedicating this thesis to her.
ABBREVIATIONS

Dickens's Works

References in the text to the novels and travel books are to the Penguin editions. When citing from *The Christmas Stories* and journalism I use the Everyman and Dent editions, which are the best and most complete of those texts generally available. Full publication details are listed in the bibliography. The acronyms used are as follows:

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
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<tr>
<td>AN</td>
<td><em>American Notes</em></td>
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<td>BH</td>
<td><em>Bleak House</em></td>
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<td>BR</td>
<td><em>Barnaby Rudge</em></td>
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<td>CS</td>
<td><em>The Christmas Stories</em></td>
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<td>DJI–IV</td>
<td><em>Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism</em></td>
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<td>DC</td>
<td><em>David Copperfield</em></td>
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<td>DS</td>
<td><em>Dombey and Son</em></td>
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<td>GE</td>
<td><em>Great Expectations</em></td>
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<td>HT</td>
<td><em>Hard Times</em></td>
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<td>LD</td>
<td><em>Little Dorrit</em></td>
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<td>MC</td>
<td><em>Martin Chuzzlewit</em></td>
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<td>ED</td>
<td><em>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</em></td>
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<td>OCS</td>
<td><em>The Old Curiosity Shop</em></td>
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<td>OMF</td>
<td><em>Our Mutual Friend</em></td>
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<td>PI</td>
<td><em>Pictures from Italy</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td><em>The Pickwick Papers</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>TTC</td>
<td><em>A Tale of Two Cities</em></td>
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Dickens's Life and Letters

References in the text to frequently cited items are to the following editions:


INTRODUCTION

DICKENS, WORK AND THE VICTORIANS

In the Introduction to *Willing Slaves*, a recent study of early twenty-first century 'overwork culture', Madeleine Bunting conveys her surprise at the passionate response to an appeal to readers of the *Guardian* to tell her about 'their experiences, opinions and ideas' connected to working life. 'The underlying theme' of her correspondents' accounts, she informs us, was of 'the sheer invasive dominance of work in people's lives, and the price it exacted on their health and happiness'.¹ This 'underlying theme' is one that recurs in contemporary attitudes toward work, or at least those that appear in press reports of official polls, in academic journal articles or in book-length social studies like Bunting's own.² Those at work, such accounts claim, are having to work longer hours and to put more intensive effort into their jobs, but they are also beginning to question the value system that makes work a central or defining life interest. Phrases of the moment like 'work-life balance' show a turning away, a disillusionment with lives dominated by work to the exclusion of relationships, family and relaxation. Bunting's focus is, moreover, not upon 'the worst examples of British employment', but on what she calls 'the burnout of white-collar

² See for instance Jamie Doward's report in *The Observer* on 29 June 2003 that documents an ICM Poll on the hours spent at work and the attitude of those in work towards the demands it makes upon their time. Such issues are also explored in Francis Green's article 'It's Been A Hard Day's Night: The Concentration and Intensification of Work in Late 20th Century Britain', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 39 (2001), 53–80.
Britain'. This kind of pressure and dissatisfaction is being experienced by those who should, perhaps, be expected to enjoy or even value their careers. Bunting eloquently argues that ‘We need to challenge the centrality of work in our lives, and reconsider the price we pay for our wages’. This is a challenge that has to some extent been taken up, not by Bunting’s readers, but by two very different books that do not accept that work should be central to our lives and instead extol the virtues and benefits of idleness: Tom Hodgkinson’s *How to be Idle* and Corinne Maier’s *Hello Laziness*.

This disgruntled resistance to the pressing demands of early twenty-first century work discussed above seems particularly distant from what has been conceived as an important and perhaps defining Victorian attitude: the gospel of work. In his survey of mid-nineteenth-century intellectual and social concerns, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Walter Houghton memorably and confidently states that ‘Except for “God,” the most popular word in the Victorian vocabulary must have been “work”’. He argues that

In a business society, and one that was strongly under Puritan influence, work was an absolute necessity. Without it there was no hope of achieving the twin goals of life—respectability and salvation. Hence, parents and preachers, writers and lecturers, proclaimed as with a single voice that man was created to work, that everyone had his appointed calling in which he was to labor for God and man, that idleness was a moral and social sin.

Work was not just everywhere as a part of the material existence of daily life; it was also elevated to the status of a moral value. This analysis, produced by the distillation of Houghton’s voluminous reading, has understandably been an influential one in

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7 Ibid., 189.
thinking about nineteenth-century reactions to work. The editors of a more recent collection of nineteenth-century writings about work concur, indeed, with his line, suggesting that ‘As did earnestness, work—the distinctive expression of earnestness—came to define the era. Concern with work was pervasive, so much so that it seemed imperative to address the subject and to address it with passion and conviction’.8

An impressive list of nineteenth-century writers did, indeed, engage with work passionately. Those quoted in Houghton’s mini-essay on the subject include John Henry Newman, John Ruskin, Charles Kingsley and most persistently of all, Thomas Carlyle.9 Peter Gay suggests that ‘one could easily compile a little anthology on the subject [of work]’ from Carlyle’s writings.10 While this, to an extent, sidesteps the difficulties inherent in his endlessly fascinating writings, it is certainly true of Past and Present (1843). Adopted as a kind of replacement religion (‘the one God’s voice we have heard in these two atheistic centuries’11) Carlyle casts work as a solution to all of the social ills that have created the current ‘condition of England’: ‘All work, even cotton-spinning is noble; work is alone noble’.12 It is viewed, indeed, as the very founding stone of civilisation itself: ‘It is all work and forgotten work, this peopled, clothed, articulate-speaking, high-towered, wide-acred World’.13 It functions too as a panacea for personal moments of doubt and indecision:

[E]ven in the meanest sorts of Labour, the whole soul of a man is composed into a kind of real harmony, the instant he sets himself to work!

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12 Ibid., 1, 132.
13 Carlyle, Past and Present, 114.
Doubt, Desire, Sorrow, Remorse, Indignation, Despair itself, all these like helldogs lie beleaguering the soul of the poor dayworker, as of every man: but he bends himself with free valour against his task, and these are stilled, all these shrink murmuring far off into their caves.14

Here, Carlyle does not as such defeat or rationally reject any objections to his cause, but instead simply ignores them. The power of his conviction is such that even when the complexities of work challenge other aspects of his worldview, he retains his faith in the glory of labour. His dislike of mere money making, of what he calls ‘Mammonism’, is thus tempered when hard graft is involved: ‘There is endless hope in work, were it even work at making money’.15

‘Passion and conviction’, then, are the keynotes of Carlyle’s pronouncements on work, and also often of other preachers of the gospel of work. The strength of its expression perhaps begins to account for the fact that, while there has not been a full-length study on the subject16 or an uncontroversial critical line, many Dickens critics have straightforwardly aligned his position on work with the kind of enthusiastic praise shown above. Alexander Welsh suggests that the ‘novels [...] espouse work as a value but not as an experience’.17 Valerie Purton mentions ‘Dickens’s commitment to the Gospel of Work’ which ‘emerges [...] as a major philosophical underpinning of the novels’.18 William Oddie argues that ‘Both Dickens and Carlyle believed in the gospel of work’.19 In an introductory essay to a section of their anthology of

14 Carlyle, Past and Present, 169.
15 Ibid., 126.
16 There has, though, been rising interest in work as a subject for critics of nineteenth-century literature and art. Three books on the topic were published in 2005: Tim Barringer’s Men At Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain, Rob Breton’s Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell and Martin A. Danahay’s Gender at Work in Victorian Culture. Breton and Danahay both have things to say about Dickens, but the analysis they carry out is far from exhaustive and often open to reinterpretation. Given that these studies were all published towards the end of the research done for this thesis, my argument is not framed by their insights but does respond to individual points they make.
nineteenth-century writings on work, David Bradshaw and Suzanne Ozment claim that ‘Dickens shared the basic assumptions underlying almost all the selections below: that work is, generally, good’.20

There is some truth to these critical generalisations. In letters of 1850 to Emmely Gotschalk, a young Danish woman, we see Dickens emphasising the spiritual importance of activity and work and sounding very like Carlyle in the process:

I apprehend it is because we are placed here to work (all of us in our spheres of action can work, whatever those spheres be) that it is so natural to us to dismiss the contemplation of that end that must come in the fullness of God’s time. [...] Action, in an earnest spirit, is the refuge from Gloomy thoughts (Letters VI, 244).

As the Pilgrim editors point out, however, this ‘stressing [of] the “gospel of work”, gives us [only] a rare glimpse of his ultimately confident philosophy’ (Letters VI, xiii). The gospel of work is also preached in the fiction, but only relatively sparingly and in a matter-of-fact way. There certainly seems to be little real imaginative engagement with it as there is for a figure like Carlyle. Alexander Welsh’s analysis, unlike many mentioned above, notices that the gospel of work is present in Dickens’s novels only in the most general sense: ‘The doctrine enters into his fiction, up to a point, much as we should expect’.21 Thus in Bleak House (1852–53), John Jarndyce advises Richard Carstone to ‘Trust in nothing but in Providence and your own efforts. [...] Constancy in love is a good thing; but it means nothing, and is nothing, without constancy in every kind of effort’ (BH, 213). Jarndyce’s words are worthy enough, but curiously formulaic and unconvincing. It is significant too that Allan Woodcourt, the representative of such an ethos who is ‘pointedly contrasted’ with Carstone,22 is merely an ideal type: a hard-working medic who excites neither the reader nor

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20 Bradshaw and Ozment, The Voice of Toil, 199.
21 Welsh, City of Dickens, 76.
22 Ibid., 76.
Dickens himself. Bruce Robbins confirms that he is ‘a character so thin that in effect’, Esther ‘is not so much marrying a man as his work’. Similar things might be said about Dickens’s first-person narrators in *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and *Great Expectations* (1860–1). Both David and Pip eventually learn the value of hard work. Yet as Welsh notes this is delineated not ‘as an experience but as a moral score’. It is a moral that is, moreover, often explained in rather cursory terms. The way that Pip flatly intones the description of the work that he finally begins at the end of *Great Expectations* is a good example of such unenthusiastic adherence to the gospel of work in reduced form: ‘We were not in a grand way of business, but we had a good name, and worked for our profits, and did very well’ (GE, 480).

Pip’s perfunctory commitment to the work ethic is, this thesis proposes, indicative of wider tensions in Dickens’s life and art. As a result, I argue against the claims made by the several critics mentioned above that the attitude to work presented in Dickens’s writings is merely a tranquil reflection of prevailing views that might be categorised as a gospel on the subject. Analysing the relationship in such a way has the effect, I would suggest, of flattening out much of the complexity both of glorifying accounts of the positive value of work from the period, and of Dickens’s response to them. Especially in the first chapter of my thesis, but also throughout its pages, I show Dickens not just to be passively adopting pronouncements by such thinkers as Thomas Carlyle, but rather negotiating his own distinctive position in relation to them. Taking this approach will enable me to consider what implications Dickens’s position on work has upon a broader assessment of the nature of his art.

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24 Welsh, *City of Dickens*, 78.
resist, therefore, the narrow identification of his writings with what Sally Ledger calls ‘Humphry House’s [influential] 1941 evaluation of Dickens as an essentially middle-class writer committed to middle-class values’. I do not go as far as Ledger, however, in arguing for ‘an altogether less respectable, more truly disruptive, more popular radical genealogy’. The Dickens I stress in what follows is one poised between sympathy for those suffering the human costs of hard work (although, as we shall see in the next chapter, such a position is not necessarily in opposition to a belief in the positive effects of work) and confirmation of dominant middle-class values ascribing the benefits of purpose and hard graft. This central aspect of my argument culminates in Chapter 3 on professional work; I show Dickens’s response to be a divided one, possessing elements both of what Ledger would call his popular radicalism and approbation of the ideals of the middle-classes.

It is necessary first to say more precisely what this thesis will mean when it discusses ‘work’, its central term. Two recent attempts at defining the concept have shown how difficult this can be. In his study Gender at Work in Victorian Culture, Martin Danahay makes the point that ‘Work is a term that can encompass the whole range of human activities, and is a complex signifier that shifts with context’. Keith Thomas begins his Introduction to The Oxford Book of Work by wryly stating that “Work” is harder to define than one might think’. He notices specifically ‘the absence of any single, universally acceptable definition of work’ and, as a result, the bewildering variety listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, which ‘gives the noun

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28 Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 12.

“work” no less than thirty-four different meanings and the verb thirty-nine’.30 His admission that in ‘the compilation of this anthology’ he ‘has had to proceed pragmatically’31 is thus an understandable one; a similar strategy will be followed here. In my first four chapters, I categorise ‘work’ in the fairly broad terms outlined in one of the principle definitions to be found in the *OED*: as ‘a means of gaining one’s livelihood; labour, toil; (one’s) regular occupation or employment’.32 I do not discuss every occupation followed by Dickens’s characters; given that one critic has calculated that the novels include a total of ‘1024 occupations and vocations for males and 137 for females’ that would be a task of Herculean proportions and the work of a catalogue rather than a thesis.33 I range more selectively instead over a variety of kinds of work, grouped thematically within the categories of manual work (done by men and women), brain work and domestic management.34 In my last two chapters, ‘work’ is defined more abstractly to encompass the broader meaning of any ‘action involving effort or exertion directed to a definite end’.35 This allows me to reconsider biographical and fictional responses to inactivity and idleness, both areas in which received views prevail, and both areas which bring us to approach the issue of work from a different perspective.

The breadth of my definitions is deliberate. The tendency of significant critical accounts that treat the subject as part of a wider consideration of Dickens’s art is, perhaps understandably, to restrict the types of work discussed. Both George Orwell’s important essay on Dickens and the chapter on work in Alexander Welsh’s *City of

31 Ibid., xvi.
32 *OED*, 2nd edn, s.v. “work, n.”
34 By categorising the management of the home as work, I align myself with the recent work of critics like Monica Cohen, who read a growing ‘professionalization of the home’ in nineteenth-century literature and culture. See Monica F. Cohen, *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work, and Home* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9. The issue will be discussed further in Chapter 4.
35 *OED*, 2nd edn, s.v. “work, n.”
Dickens centre almost exclusively on what the male middle-class protagonists of the novels do (or do not do) for a living. Orwell’s attention is fixed even more narrowly on heroes from the early fiction like Nicholas Nickleby and Martin Chuzzlewit. By focusing selectively on a much wider range of different kinds of work, I hope to deepen our knowledge of the subject both in Dickens’s writings and the period, while also bringing together material usually considered separately. This approach is also central to my choice of primary texts. Novels such as David Copperfield, Bleak House, Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend (1864–65), all assured of a place in the Dickens canon, will be discussed and reinterpreted at some length. Less well-trodden critical paths are also followed; alongside a representative selection of the novels from the span of Dickens’s career between The Pickwick Papers (1836–37) and The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870) I analyse on equal terms some more unfamiliar items from his varied literary output. The selection includes some of the shorter fiction, specifically Christmas stories such as ‘Somebody’s Luggage’ (1863) and ‘Mugby Junction’ (1866), a range of the travel writing stretching from Pictures from Italy (1846) to the playful collaborative effort with Wilkie Collins, ‘A Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’ (1857), and a pertinent selection of journalistic writings from the Morning Chronicle, Household Words and All the Year Round. Reading these works in tandem with the writings both of well-known figures from the period such as Carlyle, Ruskin and Mayhew and also with a variety of other contemporary sources including sketches, pamphlets, medical texts and primers, advice literature and household manuals will lead to the treatment of work as a three-dimensional concern.

George Orwell suggests that ‘What [Dickens] does not noticeably write about [...] is work’. He is right up to a point. What Dickens does explore, however, is not work in the abstract or through concrete details, but rather its human dimension. It is this observation—that Dickens’s writings show an interest in the impact of work upon the lives of those engaged in it—that shapes the following thesis and connects its wide-ranging choice of material. Such a claim, if with different emphases, has already been made by Dickens critics. Most notable perhaps is Humphry House’s well-known point that ‘Nearly everybody in Dickens has a job: there is a passionate interest in what people do for a living and how they make do. [...] Work plays an important part in the characters’ approach to life’. In my first chapter especially, this observation is subtly altered by considering the impact of work upon personality within the wider conspectus of contemporary writings on the subject. What House calls ‘a passionate interest in what people do for a living’ in Dickens extends, moreover, into a concern with the dehumanising or imprisoning effects that a job can have upon personality. House makes the further point that having an ill-defined purpose leads to personal dissatisfactions: ‘The typical rootless, baffled person is one who, like Richard Carstone, cannot settle to a profession and make good’. He is right about Carstone, but in the closing chapters of this thesis I argue that Dickens responds much more favourably than is commonly assumed to drifting and to drifters who are not necessarily defined by what they do.

The typical view of Dickens’s own attitude to authorship suggests his healthy and happy self-definition through it. While John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson claim that ‘Much is known about Dickens’s habits at the desk’, biographical accounts

37 Orwell, ‘Charles Dickens’, 60.
39 House, The Dickens World, 55.
continue to pass down a unified, uncomplicated version of how Dickens spent, and
reacted to, his life as a writer. In *Dickens*, for instance, Peter Ackroyd reads a
particularly restrictive pattern into the 'shape' of Dickens's working day. He quotes
Dickens's sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth and his son Charley as authorities to
demonstrate the strictness of Dickens's habits. The latter, Ackroyd reports,
said that "no city clerk was ever more methodical or orderly than he; no
humdrum, monotonous, conventional task could ever have been
discharged with more punctuality or with more business-like regularity,
than he gave to the work of his imagination and fancy".41

With its reliance upon limited perspectives, this reconstruction seems more like the
tranquilly ordered fictionalised explanation David gives for his writing 'success' in
*David Copperfield*. He claims: 'I never could have done what I have done, without the
habits of punctuality, order, and diligence, without the determination to concentrate
myself on one object at a time, no matter how quickly its successor should come upon
its heels, which I then formed' (DC, 560).

The reality seems somewhat more disorderly than Ackroyd's version of
events allows, going beyond what might be called the Copperfield myth. It is true that
Dickens kept a tight, methodical schedule at certain points during his career by getting
up at seven, breakfasting at eight and remaining at his desk between nine and two.42
Yet as Richard Lettis emphasises, retrospectively forming such a fixed pattern is
problematic since 'Dickens made no definitive statement about how long he laboured
or when he rested in a month while writing a book'.43 A less-routinised picture of
Dickens at work emerges in other accounts. In *Dickens and the 1830s*, Kathryn
Chittick offers a context for such reconsiderations by questioning the assumption that

42 Ibid., 590.
43 Richard Lettis, "'How I Work': Dickens in the Writer's Chair", *Dickensian* 89 (1993), 7. Lettis also
quotes a statement by Dickens's daughter Mamie that suggests 'The amount of work he could
accomplish varied greatly at certain times' (7).
Dickens's growth into a world-famous author was 'inevitable', offering instead 'an account of the uncertainties of the young reporter in the parliamentary press gallery of 1833—when Dickens hardly knew whether or not he should turn out to be the hero of his own life'. A reminiscence made in 1868, reported by the Boston friends who heard the story, captures some of the exciting precariousness of Dickens's reporting life in the mid-1830s. He is described with

[A] bag of sovereigns on one side of his body and a bag of slips of paper on the other, writing, writing desperately all the way.... At each station a man on horseback would stand ready to seize the sheets already prepared and ride with them to London. Often ... this work would make him deadly sick, and he would have to plunge his head out of the window to relieve himself....

John Drew makes the important point, moreover, that it is possible to read this account of Dickens's hurried working life as a young reporter as 'something of an allegory of his writing life'.

Paying even cursory attention to Dickens's published correspondence underlines the fact that difficulty and uncertainty were also hallmarks of his later years as a writer. George Gissing focuses in upon the

Passages numberless [that] might be quoted from his letters, showing how he enjoyed the labour of production, how he threw himself into the imaginative world with which he was occupied, how impossible it was for him to put less than all his splendid force into the task of the moment.

This certainly seems overhasty in its emphasis on Dickens's enjoyment of his art. He was, admittedly, undeniably enthusiastic about the merits of close attention to the details of his profession, or as Joel Brattin puts it 'a careful, methodical, and

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46 Ibid., 26.
painstaking artist'. He tried too to pass on this kind of care and attention to aspiring writers who approached him for advice. A representative example of such writerly guidance is provided by a letter written to the father of Georgiana Craik, dated 2 June 1852:

I would found it on my own blotted and corrected sheets, and guard her against supposing that successful Fiction is to be written easily. Patience, attention, seclusion, consideration, courage to reject what comes uppermost, and to try for something better below it—these are the stones I have found in the road and have learnt to pave the road with (Letters VI, 689).

This certainly seems to be measurable within the parameters of the Copperfield myth that is outlined above. Yet such efforts are always conceived of in terms of difficulty. As Richard Lettis points out, ‘we note that hard is one of the words often found in Dickens’s comments on his writing’. Agony rather than enjoyment appears the dominant mood. The ‘rigorous confinement’ that Lettis rightly claims as one of Dickens’s ‘condition[s] for writing’ is, in this light, often categorised in his correspondence not just as seclusion, but rather more negatively as a kind of imprisonment.

Allowance should be made for the fact that this string of images referring to Dickens’s imagined incarceration is often playful. It is striking, nevertheless, how frequently he presents time spent composing his novels in such terms. Before he has even begun, he describes the writing of Dombey and Son (1846—48) as ‘my approaching bondage’ (Letters IV, 617). Towards the end of the process he laments that ‘Tomorrow I shall be forced to imprison myself the whole day long, finishing’ (Letters V, 212). During the writing of Bleak House four years later, he describes ‘being a prisoner all day’ (Letters VI, 544—45) and the experience of feeling ‘shut up

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49 Lettis, ‘“How I Work”’, 8.
50 Ibid., 11.
in Bleak House from 10 to 5' (Letters VII, 8). *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) held him in similar confinement. In a letter to Hans Christian Andersen in the early stages of writing the novel he states that he is ‘hard at work at Little Dorrit’ and that ‘She will hold me prisoner for another 9 or 10 months’ (Letters VIII, 145). Writing to the same correspondent in the following year he looks forward to his upcoming release, and thus becoming ‘in the summer quite a free man’ (Letters VIII, 307). Dickens voices similar sentiments in relation to later novels too. He describes being ‘kept in actual bondage for weeks together’ by the demands of *Great Expectations* and the 1861 Christmas number for *All the Year Round* (Letters IX, 387), and is ‘bound to work’ in the drive to complete *Our Mutual Friend* (Letters X, 408). The point here is not to claim Dickens never enjoyed novel writing, since there are several points in his correspondence where he expresses pleasure in the task. It is, rather, to look forward to the difficulties ahead and, through a sceptical reading of his response to his own literary labours, to begin to disprove the easy assumption that ‘work is, generally, good’ in his art as well as his life.

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51 See, for instance, Letters III, 452 and Forster, 625. It is interesting, though, that Dickens seemed to enjoy most those pieces of writing he saw as an escape from the regular confining business of the novels, the annual Christmas issues of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. Of his sections of ‘The Wreck of the Golden Mary’, the 1856 number, he claims ‘I never wrote anything more easily, or I think with greater interest and stronger belief’ (Letters VIII, 222).
CHAPTER ONE

‘IN THE VERY GRAIN OF THE MAN’?
WORK AND THE SHAPING OF PERSONALITY

I ‘Trades, [...] and the way they set their marks on men’

In an often-quoted extract from ‘The Natural History of German Life’ George Eliot launches into an eloquent but pointed attack upon what she thinks are the major deficiencies of Dickens’s art. Even positives are marshalled effectively against Dickens as evidence that his view of things is superficial and underdeveloped:

We have one great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population; and if he could give us their psychological character—their conceptions of life, and their emotions—with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies.¹

The wider ideological implications of Eliot’s remarks are discussed ably elsewhere.²

Its literary judgements feed into an issue that, according to one critic, ‘has dominated commentary on Dickens’s fiction from the first enthusiastic responses to Sam Weller to the most recent studies of his art’.³ The question of how best to assess Dickens’s rendering of his characters’ lives has certainly energised much discussion of him as a

² John Bowen claims that ‘Eliot’s objection to Dickens’s morality is also a political one, which raises at its heart the question of the causes and possibilities for social change. For Eliot, “high morality and refined sentiment” cannot grow out of harsh social relations, and Dickens is foolish to pretend they can’. Other Dickens, 22.
narrative. By considering how the work that they do does (and does not) shape the lives of Dickens's characters, this chapter represents a contribution to such a debate. It proposes through such a discussion that the high realist view pursued by Eliot and others—that Dickens's art was a shallow one, bewitched by surfaces but inferior in its exploration of any kind of depth—is not a productive or accurate position to take.4

Denigrations of Dickens's inadequacy in the department of psychological realism have, nevertheless, been influential, even determining the insights of critics who might be ranked amongst Dickens's admirers. Thus in a judgement of the defining role of work in Dickens's characterisation, Andrew Sanders focuses on the brilliance of his attention to external detail rather than anything more significant or deeply mysterious: 'In many instances in Dickens's fiction work defines character. It certainly determines circumstances, residence, clothes, and patterns of speech, all of them aspects of the delineation of character in which Dickens excels'.5 It is certainly true that the impact of work on personality is tracked in detail in Dickens's novels. The presence of such surface occupational characteristics, however, should not limit our understanding of his characters. In this chapter I argue that Dickens's control of characterisation is much subtler than that; he may delineate surfaces brilliantly, but he is also intensely interested in depths and in what is going on 'inside' his characters, itself often distinct from the worldly concerns of their jobs.

Two scenes in particular from the novels act as a useful starting point for my argument, since in them Dickens's stance on the determining effects of work upon

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4 Other examples of this kind of reading of Dickens's characters include Henry James's strongly critical 1865 review of Our Mutual Friend in which he argued that Dickens 'has created nothing but figure. He has added nothing to our understanding of human character'. Reprinted in Norman Page, ed., Hard Times, Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend: A Casebook (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), 155. E. M. Forster claims similarly that 'Dickens' people are nearly all flat'. His subsequent judgement, however, that there is also 'a wonderful feeling of human depth to them', suggests how perplexing and difficult Dickens's fictional creations really are. It is an observation that will be pursued and explored in this chapter and throughout the thesis. For Forster's claims see his Aspects of the Novel (London: Edwin Arnold, 1947), 98–99.

5 Sanders, Dickens and the Spirit of the Age, 150.
character is revealed to be surprisingly sceptical. The possibility that a separation between the occupation and the man might reap benefits is first mooted by Harold Skimpole in an early scene from *Bleak House*. Under the watch of the gruff debt collector Neckett, the airily idle Skimpole speculates that something more attractive must lie beneath such a matter-of-fact exterior:

Don’t be ruffled by your occupation. We can separate you from your office; we can separate the individual from the pursuit. We are not so prejudiced as to suppose that in private life you are otherwise than a very estimable man, with a great deal of poetry in your nature, of which you may not be conscious (BH, 97).

Skimpole’s wordily empty contributions to the novel may not seem the most natural barometer of what it values, or what is generally valued in Dickens’s fiction. It can be argued, after all, that what contributes to Richard Carstone’s demise is the fact that he does not find an occupation to shape and direct his misplaced energies. This is too simplistic a reading of Richard’s character, however; one, moreover, that does not do the novel’s complex discussion of the effects of work upon personality justice. This is an issue to which I will return; for now it will suffice to corroborate Dickens’s scepticism about the value of the shaping of character by work with an example from another novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. Towards its close Mr Inspector, stationed at the bar of the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters, propounds sagely on the effects that a job has on a man:

“Lord bless my soul and body!” cried Mr Inspector. “Talk of trades, Miss Abbey, and the way they set their marks on men” (a subject which nobody had approached); “who wouldn’t know your brother to be a Steward! There’s a bright and ready twinkle in his eye, there’s a neatness in his action, there’s a smartness in his figure, there’s an air of reliability about him in case you wanted a basin, which points out the steward! And Mr Kibble; ain’t he Passenger, all over?” (OMF, 745)

Mr Inspector takes on an unexpectedly comic role here as a nineteenth-century version of the pub bore. Clearly no one is really interested in what he is saying: his is
'a subject which nobody had approached'. The grandeur of his claims is also undermined somewhat by the descriptions of Job Potterson (Miss Abbey's brother) and Mr Kibble that precede them. The former is in reality 'a semi-seafaring man of obliging demeanour', while the latter is merely 'an unctuous broad man of few words and many mouthfuls' (OMF, 745). And Miss Abbey, to whom Mr Inspector's verbal outpouring is addressed, is also dismissive of his hypothesis, claiming emphatically that the link he admires does not exist, assuring him that: 'You do, I dare say, [...] but I don't' (OMF, 745).

Both scenes demonstrate Dickens's conceptions about work and personality not to be static ones, placing him instead at the centre of contemporary debates on the subject. Richard Sennett alerts us to the fact that such concerns were already considerations in the eighteenth century. Discussing specifically the opposing theories of Denis Diderot and Adam Smith on routinised industrial work he claims: 'In the middle of the eighteenth century, it seemed that repetitive labor could lead in two quite different directions, one positive and fruitful, the other destructive'. In the analysis that follows Sennett remains unsure if the latter position—that of Adam Smith—is automatically the right one. A similar conflict is shadowed forth in both Dickens and some of his contemporaries. In her important essay on the role of habit more generally in Dickens's work, Athena Vrettos notices an overtly ambiguous stance in his writings:

If the habit of closely observing character is a positive trait in an author, habit itself, as a psychological phenomenon, is not nearly so productive in the characters he portrays. Throughout *Dombey and Son*, Dickens delineates the deadening effect of routine and provides his most explicit meditation upon and most detailed critique of eccentric and habitual behaviours.

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7 Athena Vrettos, 'Defining Habits: Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition'. *Victorian Studies* 42 (1999), 415. I am grateful to Cameron Dodworth for bringing this article to my attention.
This is also relevant, as I intend to show in the course of this chapter, within the more specific frame of the work-related habitual behaviour of some of Dickens's characters. Dickens does not merely show the determining effects that a job can have on character, but reflects upon them, and ultimately shows their limits.

I

In *Past and Present* (1843) Thomas Carlyle shows himself to be broadly in line with the thinking of Diderot upon habit. Richard Sennett summarises that 'for Diderot, routines did not imply the simple, endless mechanical repetition of a task'.  

Rather, as Sennett explains, Diderot draws out the 'virtues of repetition' by viewing 'industrial labor' as an experience almost preferable to more varied tasks, since it is much like the work of an 'actor or actress [who] gradually plumbs the depths of a part by repeating the lines again and again'. Carlyle takes this and develops it in his own peculiar way: what is a personal narrative here becomes, in his analysis, a grand and universal one. At the start of Chapter 17 of the second book, Carlyle shows himself to be, in essence, a believer in the power of the material world to shape personality when he ponders 'how strangely do modes, creeds, formularies, and the date and place of a man's birth, modify the figure of the man!'. In his attitude towards the value of habit he further underlines his materialism and also demonstrates that it is of a deep, even mystic sort. Habit and custom are seen as nothing less than the root of civilization: 'Habit and Imitation, there is nothing more perennial in us than these two. They are the source of all Working and all Apprenticeship, of all Practice and all Learning, in this world'. The kind of habitual behaviour that Carlyle values is very specifically

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8 Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, 34.
9 Ibid., 34.
11 Ibid., 110.
defined. It should not only show itself on the surface of individuals; it must be intensely present below that exterior too:

Formulas too, as we call them, have a reality in Human Life. They are real as the very skin and muscular tissue of a Man’s Life; and a most blessed indispensable thing, so long as they have vitality withal, and are a living skin and tissue to him.¹²

Without such ‘vitality’ the formulas lose whatever value they had, become empty gestures, or as Carlyle puts it, turn into ‘dead skin, mere adscititious leather and callosity, wearing thicker and thicker, uglier and uglier’.¹³

It is out of this paean to habit that Carlyle’s observations about work and personality grow. Work, in fact, is seen as a form of habit by him and thus deserving of his rich praise. In amazement and wonder he metaphorically scans ‘the long series of faces’ of a ‘miscellany of men’ whose habits have been determined by their occupational existences. He observes that:

Some score or two of years ago, all these were little red-coloured pulpy infants; each of them capable of being kneaded, baked into any social form you chose: yet see how now they are fixed and hardened,—into artisans, artists, clergy, gentry, learned serjeants, unlearned dandies, and can and will be nothing else henceforth¹⁴

It is difficult to know how to take this exclamation. On the surface it suggests an excited awe at the imagined spectacle. Yet it also seems an act of self-persuadal and an attempt to assuage fundamental doubts about the benefits of such a situation. In the next paragraph this ambiguity becomes more obvious. Carlyle continues to sketch out the characteristics of his gallery of typical working men, imploring the reader to:

Mark on that nose the colour left by too copious port and viands; [...]. That is a “Man of Business;” prosperous manufacturer, house-contractor, engineer, law manager; his eye, nose, cravat have, in such work and fortune, got such a character: deny him not thy praise, thy pity.¹⁵

¹² Carlyle, Past and Present, 109.
¹³ Ibid., 109.
¹⁴ Carlyle, Past and Present, 110.
¹⁵ Ibid., 110.
The balance of Carlyle’s syntax in this last phrase shows a complexity of response that is missing from the more abstract praise he pays habit and work elsewhere in *Past and Present*.

The contradictions inherent in Carlyle’s conception of the benefits and value of habits formed by an occupation are shown up most clearly once he turns his attention to the physical labourer:

Pity him too, the Hard-handed, with bony brow, rudely-combed hair, eyes looking out as in labour, in difficulty and uncertainty; rude mouth, the lips coarse, loose, as in hard toil and lifelong fatigue they have got the habit of hanging [...]. In such imprisonment lives he, for his part; man cannot now deliver him: the red pulpy infant has been baked and fashioned so.¹⁶

He may deserve only ‘Pity’ and lives in the hard and demanding ‘imprisonment’ that is proclaimed by his physical form. Carlyle, nevertheless, sees a kind of strange beauty about his figure in the following rhetorical question. He asks: ‘hast thou seen aught more touching than the rude intelligence, so cramped, yet energetic, unsubduable, true, which looks out of that marred visage?’¹⁷ He suggests elsewhere that ‘Industrial work, still under bondage to Mammon, the rational soul of it not yet awakened, is a tragic spectacle’.¹⁸ As the reverent account of the ‘Hard-handed’ above suggests, however, his dislike of mechanised industrial labour has important reservations. Beneath it, like Diderot, he can still see work in its ideal form: ‘Labour is not a devil, even while encased in Mammonism’.¹⁹ He ignores, therefore, the potential degradations and suffering of industrial work. Within Carlyle’s schema the ‘Hard-handed’ is noble and good simply because he works and is defined by what he does, even if it is by physically demanding repetitive labour. In the other direction lies only the prospect of doubt and spiritual ennui since ‘the more completely cased with

¹⁷ Ibid., 111.
¹⁹ Ibid., 178.
Formulas a man may be, the safer, happier is it for him’. If not, a life of idleness and dissipation awaits. For Carlyle this is only ever configured negatively: ‘The unredeemed ugliness is that of a slothful People’. The unworking dandy, in contrast to the ‘fixed and hardened’ forms of workers, is denied any kind of physical or actual existence, and is viewed critically as an ‘Elegant Vacuum’ whose ‘Nonentity [is] laboriously attained’.

As P. D. Anthony makes clear, the outline of John Ruskin’s thinking on the issue of work owes something to the writings of Carlyle, a man ‘whose work he admired’: ‘Much of Ruskin’s conception of labour is that it is important precisely because it is miserable, hard, necessary, dangerous’. As Anthony puts it elsewhere, its ‘constant ingredients’ seem the particularly Carlylean ones of ‘tragedy and pity’. Yet Ruskin’s views also move away from those of Carlyle in subtly distinctive directions. He seems aware to a much greater degree of the difficult realities of working life; this is made strikingly evident in a statement he makes in *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866):

> There is rough work to be done, and rough men must do it; there is gentle work to be done and gentlemen must do it; [...] it is of no use to try and conceal this sorrowful fact by fine words, and to talk to the workman about the honourableness of manual labour and the dignity of humanity. Rough work, honourable or not, takes the life out of us.

Seen in the light of this remark the praise that Carlyle pays to honest manual toil appears duplicitous, an attempt to hoodwink the workingman with ‘fine words’. For Ruskin this is a ‘sorrowful fact’ and one that ignores the essentially alienating nature
of ‘rough work’ that literally ‘takes the life out of us’. Although not a socialist, in this
his thought is strikingly like that of Karl Marx in his *Economic and Philosophical
Manuscripts* of 1844 (first published in 1932). Here Marx claims that salaried,
capitalistic mechanised labour undertaken for another individual stifles rather than
improves the worker’s personality; it is ‘a labour of self-sacrifice’.\(^\text{27}\) Within this
framework, the labourer ‘does not confirm himself in his work, he denies himself,
feels miserable instead of happy, deploys no free physical and intellectual energy, but
mortifies his body and ruins his mind’.\(^\text{28}\) Ruskin’s forthright statement in *The Crown*
also brings to mind the more famous passages from the chapter on ‘The Nature of
Gothic’ in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53). Ruskin notes that,

> We have much studied and much perfected, of late, the great civilized
> invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not,
> truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men:—divided into mere
> segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that
> all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to
> make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the
> head of a nail.\(^\text{29}\)

Ruskin’s solution to these dehumanising effects is not, as is often assumed, the
regressive deployment of pre-industrial working practices. It is, rather, to passionately
insist that the problem of divided labour can

be met only by a right understanding, on the part of all classes, of what
kinds of labour are good for men, raising them, and making them happy;
by a determined sacrifice of such convenience, or beauty, or cheapness as
is to be got only by the degradation of the workman; and by equally
determined demand for the products and results of healthy and ennobling
labour.\(^\text{30}\)

Ruskin suggests that ‘in the make and nature of every man, however rude and simple,
whom we employ in manual labour, there are some powers for better things; some

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\(^{28}\) Ibid., 88.


\(^{30}\) Ibid., 196.
tardy imagination, torpid capacity of emotion, tottering steps of thought, there are, even at the worst'.\(^{31}\) We need, he suggests, 'to look for the thoughtful part of them'.\(^{32}\) By doing so, 'you have made a man of him. [...] He was only a machine before, an animated tool'.\(^{33}\)

P. D. Anthony calls Ruskin's 'discussion of the human element of work [...] unique' and 'radical'.\(^{34}\) By showing that Dickens is equally interested in work's 'human element', I contend in this thesis that Ruskin's analysis is not as 'unique' as Anthony suggests. Ruskin's work has not often been considered a strong influence upon Dickens. In his entry on the writer for the *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, for instance, Philip Collins mentions mainly Ruskin's judgements upon Dickens, giving only brief notice to Dickens's sparse reading of Ruskin: 'he is recorded as having read his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* [1849] but nothing else'.\(^{35}\)

Yet Francis O'Gorman has recently highlighted the possibility that Dickens was more familiar with Ruskin's work than previously thought. Taking up Collins's claim, O'Gorman states that as well as having read *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* Dickens owned a copy of the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice*.\(^{36}\) There is no direct evidence to suggest that he did in fact read it,\(^{37}\) although it is possible that he refers to it indirectly; this is an issue to which we will return at the very end of this chapter. What I want to stress more broadly here, is however much Ruskin Dickens had or had not read, the fundamental spirit of one aspect of the engagement of both men with the issue is much closer than we might think.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 191.
\(^{34}\) Anthony, *John Ruskin's Labour*, 53.
\(^{36}\) Francis O'Gorman, 'Dickens's Reading of Ruskin', *Notes and Queries* 51 (2004), 160.
\(^{37}\) O'Gorman suggestively informs us that 'Dickens left them unannotated'. Ibid., 160.
Implicit within such a claim is a deliberate attempt to further qualify Dickens's relationship to the writings of Thomas Carlyle. A substantial amount of scholarship has been produced on the possible influence of Carlyle upon Dickens. Two full-length studies, numerous journal articles and passing references in more general critical works have explored the connection between the two writers in some detail. Much of this critical thinking, well summarised by William Oddie, casts Dickens almost as a slavish follower of the Carlylean worldview: his 'influence upon Dickens is profound', Dickens 'took a great deal from Carlyle', the influence of Carlyle upon Dickens was 'overwhelming'. These assertions seem sensible enough when we read some of Dickens's letters to Carlyle in which he comes across as a rather earnest fan. Clear and specific lines can and have been drawn between Carlyle's work and two novels in particular: *Hard Times* (1854) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). The larger question of how much Carlyle did influence Dickens, however, is ultimately a more difficult one to settle. William Oddie is rightly sceptical about the value or usefulness of making the relationship too rigid. Dickens, according to his reading, is far from being the 'humble disciple' of Carlyle of general repute. Carlyle's influence upon Dickens can be seen instead in much more general terms, typical of
the extensive influence of the former 'over his whole age' rather than especially revealing about the perspective of the latter.43

II

Raymond Williams has claimed that Toodles and Cuttle are 'subjected' by Dickens 'who defines their whole reality in the jargon of their job'.44 He did, it is true, take some care in forming an accurate picture of the right occupational context for one of these characters from Dombey and Son. As a letter to Augustus Tracey written during the composition of the novel shows, the precision of such occupational detail mattered to Dickens. He invites himself to Tracey's 'fortress' in order 'to ask [...] a question on one or two little nautical points, in order [to] be quite right in Dombey' (Letters V, 205). Dickens's informal fact-checking and research certainly shows in the delineation of the externals of Ned Cuttle. We learn that he is a retired sailor, though what kind exactly does not really seem to matter: he 'had been a pilot, a skipper, or a privateers-man, or all three perhaps' (DS, 97). He remains, despite this fact, 'a very salt-looking man indeed' (DS, 97) and retains the typical garb and 'accoutrements' of a sea-faring gentleman, being usually dressed 'in a wide suit of blue, with a hook instead of a hand attached to his right wrist' (DS, 96–97). Further, it is noted that 'He wore a loose black silk handkerchief round his neck, and such a very large coarse shirt collar, that it looked like a small sail' (DS, 97). Externals seem to hint at what lies within since: 'The captain was one of those timber-looking men, suits of oaks as well as hearts, whom it is almost impossible for the liveliest imagination to separate from any part of their dress, however insignificant' (DS, 179). This is a problem that

43 Oddie, Dickens and Carlyle, 3.
Walter experiences, indeed, on an occasion later in the novel when he goes to visit Cuttle at his Brig Place lodgings. The following thing occurs:

Knowing the regularity of the Captain’s habits, Walter made all the haste that he could, that he might anticipate his going out; and he made such good speed, that he had the pleasure, on turning into Brig Place, to behold the broad blue coat and waistcoat hanging out of the Captain’s open window, to air in the sun (DS, 278).

As the narrator adds: ‘It appeared incredible that the coat and waistcoat could be seen by mortal eyes without the Captain, but he was certainly not in them’ (DS, 278–79).

This does seem a kind of imprisonment, or a ‘subjection’ as Williams has it, and it is also the case that Dickens gets lots of comic mileage out of Cuttle’s ineptitude in running Sol Gills’s nautical instrument shop. It should be admitted that under Sol Gills’s watch, the business is floundering somewhat already. Things do not get much better under Cuttle, who bravely tries to bring himself round to the ways of commerce, but instead manages to reinscribe a nautical air to his dealings. Thus,

As a tradesman in the City, too, he began to have an interest in the Lord Mayor, and the Sheriffs, and in Public Companies; and felt bound to read the quotations of the Funds every day, though he was unable to make out, on any principle of navigation, what the figures meant (DS, 439).

With ‘on any principle of navigation’, a self-consciously watery conceit is employed to signify the persistence of his occupation in determining his thought processes. He tries to take on the air of one who is in ‘the Instrument Trade’ and ‘had felt it appropriate to take to spectacles’ (DS, 553). This despite the fact that ‘his eyes were like a hawk’s’: the effort remains for (comic) show only (DS, 553). He also courageously attempts to institute an efficient routine of book-keeping.

In these [books] he entered observations on the weather, and on the currents of the wagons, and other vehicles; which he observed, in that quarter, to set westward in the morning and during the greater part of the day, and eastward towards the evening (DS, 629).
As this extract suggests, the ledger he keeps resembles a captain’s logbook rather than the carefully marshalled accounts of a man of business.

Yet it is also a tribute to Dickens’s fictional creation that aspects of Cuttle’s character cannot be attributed to the influence of his job. His presentation does at times transcend such material limitations. He possesses a surprising amount of skill in domestic matters, for instance, and this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, which concerns itself with domestic work undertaken by both men and women.

More to the point here is what might be called his ‘heart’, but is elsewhere labelled as his ‘transparent simplicity’ and ‘true and simple spirit’ (DS, 298, 553). Almost like his aquatic namesake the cuttlefish, he has a hard, slightly knobbly exterior and a squishy emotional core. His sincere and soft heart emerges most clearly when he is nursing Florence towards the end of the novel. It is pointed out that

Unlike as they were externally—and there could scarcely be a more decided contrast than between Florence in her delicate youth and beauty, and Captain Cuttle with his knobby face, his great broad weather-beaten person, and his gruff voice—in simple innocence of the world’s ways and the world’s perplexities and dangers, they were nearly on a level. No child could have surpassed Captain Cuttle in experience of everything but wind and weather; in simplicity, credulity, and general trustfulness (DS, 776).

Such ‘simple innocence’ is ordinarily what might be called a ‘Dickensian’ characteristic. In this novel, with its focus upon the duplicitous scheming of Carker and emotional aridity of Mr Dombey himself, Cuttle’s hearty simplicity is even more refreshing—and distinctly different from his gnarled, sea dog exterior.

Cuttle is the first of three characters that I have chosen to consider together in this section as Dickens’s ‘innocent men’. George Rouncewell and Joe Gargery are the other members of the trio, and will be discussed in due course. As fictional creations Cuttle and George may not seem overtly similar. George, after all, is handsome and possesses broad manly shoulders; when we see ‘his muscular arms developed by
broadsword and dumbbell, weightily asserting themselves through his light shirt-sleeves’ he resembles nothing more than a military pin-up (BH, 721). Yet there are important points of contact in the portrayal of these supporting figures. All show themselves to have been defined, even formed by the job that they do (or did). This is hardly a startling claim; it has been made already by Humphry House and underlined by Andrew Sanders. What I suggest here, as a result, is that there is no automatic link between this fact and the ‘goodness’ of the ‘innocent men’; this point also has implications both in assessing Dickens’s literary technique and his attitude to the ways in which work informs personality.

Humphry House is right to suggest that often in the novels, ‘the insistence on professional status becomes tedious, and shows Dickens in his weakest habits, anxious to play upon a theme’.45 He claims particularly that ‘The continual soldierhood of George Rouncewell is bad’.46 George functions, in this way, as a comic type: the hearty soldier who becomes so accustomed to the discipline of army life that he is unable to quite shake it off as a civilian. His soldierliness is repeatedly, even repetitively, stressed. His typical gait is, unsurprisingly enough, a ‘march’, and references to this facet of his behaviour litter the text (BH, 417, 418, 438, 543). Other activities are as equally subject to military influence: as he walks, he blows ‘like a military sort of diver just come up’ (BH, 417); when he speaks he does so with ‘military brevity’ (BH, 434); he has a ‘martial appearance, broad square shoulders, and a heavy tread’ (BH, 544); even his legs are described as ‘martial’ (BH, 417). In one of the novel’s great comic set-pieces he visits Astley’s theatre and demonstrates his critical reactions to be informed by his army days (BH, 349).

46 Ibid., 57.
On one important occasion, however, George’s bluff and upright soldierly manner becomes more than mere comic diversion. When he is mistakenly arrested for Tulkinghorn’s murder, his response is a stubbornly dignified one. As ‘a mere trooper with a blunt broadsword kind of a mind’ (BH, 797) he sees honesty as the best policy:

I have stated to the magistrates, “Gentlemen, I am as innocent of this charge as yourselves; what has been stated against me in the way of facts, is perfectly true; I know no more about it.” I intend to continue saying that, sir. What more can I do? It’s the truth (BH, 795).

John Jarndyce’s response to this is an exasperated, strangled, ‘But the mere truth won’t do’ (BH, 795). Jarndyce urges him to get a lawyer, even offers to hire one himself, but George refuses: he does not ‘take kindly to the breed’, mainly because of his dealings with Mr Tulkinghorn and Chancery’s treatment of his friend Gridley (BH, 797). He suggests, in addition, that hiring a counsel would declare finally his guilt rather than innocence: ‘Now, suppose I had killed him. [...] What should I have done as soon as I was hard and fast here? Got a lawyer’ (BH, 797). Rather than doing so he is stubborn enough to claim that ‘I would rather be hanged in my own way. And I mean to be!’ (BH, 797). This adherence—to the limit—to a strict soldierly code of honour might seem puzzling or infuriating. But in a novel full of dangerous secrets and lies, George’s honesty can be positively valued, and is an aspect of his character that makes a strong demand for the praise of both Dickens and the reader.

At the same time George’s plain dealing fails ultimately to confront or vanquish the corruption and suffering that is at the heart of the effete society that the novel portrays. He is, in the end, associated with the old aristocratic values of Chesney Wold when he retreats there to work as a kind of valet for Sir Leicester Dedlock. In the way, moreover, that almost everything he does is modulated through the lens of his former occupation, he can be placed alongside work-obsessed characters in the novel like Mr Tulkinghorn and Mr Vholes who have taken on the
essence of the dusty documents they work with rather than seeming to be fully alive
human beings. Andrew Sanders distinguishes between instances in which work
defines personality positively, and ‘negatively, as in the case of his lawyers’.47 When
the latter happens, ‘it is because Dickens associates a particular professional language
or entrenched and conservative professional mores with a kind of social parasitism
rather than with his own progressive ideals’.48 This seems too clear cut a division,
however; it is certainly challenged by the moral uncertainties of a novel like Bleak
House. Rob Breton has recently pointed out how problematic Esther’s commitment to
industriousness is when seen in the context of characters like Vholes who strive in
pursuit of much murkier motives.49 As a result, ‘In Bleak House, Dickens can only
“resolve” the conflict between self-serving and self-denying work ethics by removing
Esther and Allan from competitive London and insisting on the importance of moral,
individual change’.50 In the light of this reading, any straightforward division between
the positive and negative definition of personality through work is a much trickier
task.

One of the novel’s supporting characters brilliantly exemplifies that
resourceful redefinition of one’s role and place should be valued as positively, if not
more so, than the self-definition of character through an occupation. Phil Squod,
George’s assistant at the shooting gallery, has been marked quite literally by the
heavy and dangerous trades he worked at before being rescued by his ‘guv’ner’ (BH,
421):

[W]hat with a dozen years in a dark forge, where the men was given to
larking; and what with being scorched in a accident at a gasworks; and

47 Sanders, Dickens and the Spirit of the Age, 150.
48 Ibid., 150.
49 Rob Breton, Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell (Toronto:
University of Toronto Press, 2005), 72.
50 Ibid., 72.
what with being blowed out of winder, case-filling at the firework business; I am ugly enough to be made a show on! (BH, 421).

Phil might be a gruesomely comic figure, deserving of our pity as much as our amusement. Yet his resilience and adaptability also demands respect. Despite having been left deeply scarred by industrial accidents, at the gallery it is Phil who leaves his mark on the place: ‘a smear all round the four walls, conventionally called “Phil’s mark”’ (BH, 351). He takes delight, too, in being the ‘mark’ for the shooting gallery’s customers: ‘If a mark’s wanted, or if it will improve the business, let the customers take aim at me. They can’t spoil my beauty. I’m all right’ (BH, 422).

It is George, of course, who gives his fellow vagabond shelter, and the chance to imaginatively recreate himself and put his damaged form to new use. He sees beyond the external marks that have been left by Phil’s difficult working life, thus freeing the identity of this individual from narrow identification with his job. It is possible too to find a larger textual life for George: there is certainly more to him, and more that is interesting about him, than the ‘continual soldierhood’ that House maligns. His warmth and generosity, especially in providing shelter and support for needy characters in the novel like Jo, Gridley and Miss Flite, are qualities with no immediate connection to his old job. Clues emerge elsewhere, moreover, that George’s existence was not always an occupationally defined one. The dreams that Phil tells his ‘guv’ner’ he has about the country provoke a moment of reflection: ‘There’s not a bird’s note that I don’t know […]. Not many an English leaf or berry I couldn’t name. Not many a tree that I couldn’t climb yet, if I was put to it. I was a real country boy, once’ (BH, 419). We learn, then, that behind (or before) this well-disciplined military man lies a rough-and-tumble ‘country boy’ and favourite son to Mrs Rouncewell. It is true, however, that his final act of kindness—becoming Sir Leicester Dedlock’s support while he recovers—can be interpreted as an act that
reinforces his need for military discipline. As he explains to his brother the ironmaster: ‘You are not used to being officered; I am. Everything about you is in perfect order and discipline; everything about me requires to be kept so’ (BH, 957).

Yet at the same time it is possible to playfully suggest an alternative influence upon George’s behaviour. Given that she is described in almost as military terms as her wayward son, being ‘as upright as the house itself’ and, George wagers, ‘near as upright as me, and near as broad across the shoulders’ at 90 (BH, 110, 419), it might be that his bearing is one that has been inherited rather than acquired through experience.

Issues surrounding the fixity of social position arise again in the portrayal of the most nuanced version of the ‘innocent men’, Joe Gargery in Great Expectations. Two critics in particular have framed him within contemporary debates about gentility and gentlemanliness. In his Introduction to a recent Everyman edition of the novel Robin Gilmour argues that ‘In the 1850s writers were starting to canvass the possibility of an essentially classless notion of gentlemanliness’. Gilmour suggests, however, that there is some resistance to this strain of thinking in the way that Dickens conceives of Joe. He is characterised as a ‘gentle man’ but not a ‘gentleman’: ‘when Pip blesses Joe in his illness he calls him “this gentle Christian man”’, which may well be better but is not the same thing as a “Christian gentleman”’. Vincent Newey, who sees the relationship slightly differently, notices too in the novel ‘the theme of what makes a gentleman, which much preoccupied Dickens and his contemporaries’. In his reading ‘the conception of Joe as a low-born exemplar brings a deeply interesting turn’. Newey adds, however, that this is a fairly

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52 Ibid., xxvii.
limited 'turn': Joe remains an exception: 'a sound working and family man but not a sufficient working model'.\textsuperscript{54} Joe turns out to be much more challenging, as we shall see, when considered within other contexts: his occupation and the characters I have been discussing so far.

There are, as with Cuttle and George, overtly comic elements to his construction. He is, in many ways, a fondly foolish sort of man who struggles awkwardly outside of his fixed occupational and social place. This is illustrated best, perhaps, by what is also a fraught measure of social position for other characters in the novel: his clothes. In his 'working clothes', 'Joe was a well-knit characteristic looking blacksmith; in his holiday clothes', on the other hand, 'he was more like a scarecrow in good circumstances, than anything else. Nothing that he wore then, fitted him or seemed to belong to him' (GE, 23). This comes during a fairly early scene and we are tempted to laugh at Joe. There is also a great deal of humour in the portrayal of his visit to London in Chapter 27, when again Joe's discomfort at being out of his 'working clothes' is made apparent. As he admits to Pip, 'I'm wrong in these clothes' (GE, 224). Yet it is a testament to the complexity of Joe generally and this scene particularly that it can be read in multiple ways. We do empathise to an extent with Pip's embarrassment at the arrival of this rough relative. As Gilmour pointedly puts it: 'The account of Joe's visit to London in Chapter 27 is wonderfully funny and touching but only those who have never been embarrassed at some time or other by an older relative are entitled to call Pip's behaviour here snobbish'.\textsuperscript{55} Understanding, though, is tempered by the sense that Pip (both for the reader and, to an extent, his older narrating self) is wrong to treat Joe as he does here and heartless (if honest) in his sentiment that 'If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would

\textsuperscript{54} Newey, \textit{The Scriptures of Charles Dickens}, 211.

\textsuperscript{55} Gilmour, Introduction to \textit{Great Expectations}, xxviii.
have paid money' (GE, 218). Joe’s behaviour, and what he says to Pip, in contrast, bespeaks ‘a sort of dignity’ (GE, 222): a characteristic that Pip must learn to attain in the course of the novel.

In his reading of the scene in Chapter 27 Vincent Newey highlights the potent artificiality of Joe’s long speech:

If this reads like the set speech of someone playing a part, that is because Joe is being situated by Pip at the heart of his life story and the moral scheme it affords. Accordingly, Pip himself never misses an opportunity to point either Joe’s merits or his present capacity to appreciate them.\(^5^6\)

Joe’s role as a kind of moral compass in the novel is a fixed one. But it is my intention to show here that it is not fixed upon his occupation. That is, admittedly, the impression that we get from the important speech that Joe makes. It even seems to impinge upon his philosophy:

Pip, dear old chap, life is made of ever so many partings welded together, as I may say, and one man’s a blacksmith, and one’s a whitesmith, and one’s a goldsmith, and one’s a coppersmith. Divisions among such must come, and must be met as they come (GE, 224).

His general point fades into the specific situation in which he and Pip are involved:

You and me is not two figures to be together in London; nor yet anywheres else but what is private, and beknown, and understood among friends. [...] I’m wrong in these clothes. I’m wrong out of the forge, the kitchen, or off th’ meshes. You won’t find half so much fault in me if you think of me in my forge dress, with my hammer in my hand, or even my pipe (GE, 224).

Joe’s self-awareness of his own limitations and boundaries here is particularly striking, and sets him apart from the other two ‘innocent men’. Captain Cuttle may be a good-hearted and loving man. But a certain amount of naïvety that creeps into his portrayal also means that he remains a predominantly comic figure. The delight he takes in his ‘own name over the door’ of the instrument shop ‘is inexhaustible’ (DS,

and warmly funny rather than admirable. Joe, on the other hand, is to be respected for steadfastly knowing his place.

And yet there is more to him than that. He shows himself elsewhere to be not just an honest blacksmith but a surprisingly well-developed human being. In Chapter 57 (which deals with Pip's recuperation) the contradictions of both Joe and the innocent men I have been tracing are especially clear. We learn that 'Evidently Biddy had taught Joe to write' (GE, 464). His 'writing' is heavily informed by his trade as a blacksmith:

Joe now sat down to his great work, first choosing a pen from the pen-tray as if it were a chest of large tools, and tucking up his sleeves as if he were going to wield a crowbar or sledge-hammer. It was necessary for Joe to hold on heavily to the table with his left elbow, and to get his right leg well out behind him, before he could begin, and when he did begin he made every down-stroke so slowly that it might have been six feet long, while at every up-stroke I could hear his pen spluttering extensively (GE, 464).

It is difficult to decide how exactly to read this. There is an element, certainly, of slightly cruel humour in the evident fun that the passage takes in delineating Joe's heavy-handed penmanship. Yet this is countered somewhat by a sense of fond pathos that sees Pip loudly sobbing at his brother-in-law's honest efforts. Things are complicated further by the fact that in the very same scene (the previous paragraph in fact) Joe undertakes another unfamiliar skill, but in this case with great assurance: nursing Pip. He is certainly not clumsy in the way that he undertakes these duties, and behaves not at all like a misplaced blacksmith. He seems, instead, the model nurse:

There Joe cut himself short, and informed me that I was to be talked to in great moderation, and that I was to take a little nourishment at stated frequent times, whether I felt inclined for it or not, and that I was to submit myself to all his orders (GE, 464).

He is much more suited to the job than the 'professional' nurses Betsey Prig and Sarah Gamp of whom Dickens is so critical in Martin Chuzzlewit. That is perhaps
because he is not really professional at all, treating Pip instead as a loving father figure would:

For, the tenderness of Joe was so beautifully proportioned to my need, that I was like a child in his hands. He would sit and talk to me in the old confidence, and with the old simplicity, and in the old unassertive protecting way, so that I would half believe that all my life since the days of the old kitchen was one of the mental troubles of the fever that was gone (GE, 466–67).

Pip is, of course, idealising those ‘days of the old kitchen’. The times in which he is nursed back to health by his tender brother-in-law are ones that Pip says he ‘shall never forget’ (GE, 471); they ultimately represent too, perhaps, a state of happiness that he cannot have. This does not detract from the point that Joe’s ‘innocent heart’ (GE, 470)—like those of Captain Cuttle and George Rouncewell—is valorised by the novel. It is an innocence (a knowing one in Joe’s case) that highlights the essential humanity of these characters, something that is much more important to Dickens than the way they have been shaped by their occupations. The same can be said, in a different context, of the working-class narrators for the collaborative All the Year Round Christmas numbers, as we shall see next.

II ‘It is wonderfully like the real thing, of course a little refined and humoured’: Occupational Sketches and Working-Class Lives in the Christmas Stories

I

Philip Collins speculates that, in producing the framing narratives of the collaborative Christmas issues of All the Year Round in the 1860s as monologues, Dickens ‘sometimes did so with half an eye, at least, towards producing a text which could be adapted for performance [as a public reading]' 57 Collins’s qualifications here show that his claim is a plausible, if difficult to prove one. The circumstantial evidence is

certainly on his side since these are relatively short pieces of writing that patently mimic the speech patterns of one person. It is possible, nevertheless, to consider these often-neglected seasonal extra numbers within another also enlightening context: that of the occupational sketch written by other writers and also occasionally by Dickens. This kind of writing, it should be said, is also a relevant influence upon the characters I have just been discussing. Described as ‘sketches of types representing various trades and callings’ by Michael Slater, this largely-forgotten genre was ‘much favoured by the Romantic essayists, especially Leigh Hunt, and one with an ancient lineage going back all the way via La Bruyère and Sir Thomas Overbury to Theophrastus’. The rigorous scholarship of John Drew tells us that, as well as having read widely in the essay form, Dickens knew Hunt’s writing specifically. (Drew informs us that an edition of Hunt’s essays was ‘holiday reading’ for Dickens in 1839.) It is almost certain, then, that Dickens was familiar with the kind of work Hunt did in this vein, and reasonable to suppose, especially given his liking for the essay form, that he encountered similar pieces by other writers too. What, then, are the typical features of an ‘occupational sketch’?

One relevant characteristic is the important affinities they show with caricatures in visual form. As the following taste of Hunt’s character sketches from various points in his career demonstrates, the subjects are not individualised, but reduced to recognisable types including ‘The Maid servant’, ‘The Waiter’ and ‘The Butcher’. His ‘Maid servant’, then, predictably has among her belongings: ‘an odd volume of Pamela, and perhaps a sixpenny play, such as George Barnwell or Mrs Behn’s Oroonoko’. His ‘Butcher’ too is expectedly hearty: ‘The beef mingles kindly

60 Leigh Hunt, Essays and Sketches (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 36.
with his animal nature. He goes fat with the best of it, perhaps with inhaling its very essence'.

In another collection of occupational sketches to which Hunt contributed, edited by Douglas Jerrold and entitled *Heads of the People* (1840–41), the woodcuts by Kenny Meadows in fact preceded the accompanying essays. These are distinctive illustrations; it is unsurprising that Henry Vizitelly said that Meadows had a ‘quaint way of viewing things’. The written pieces may not quite match up to the quirkiness of the engravings. They nevertheless include what Michael Slater calls some ‘highly effective vignettes of common scenes’, in which, for many of the characters portrayed, what they do turns into what they are. Like the rather smug-looking figure in the accompanying illustration, we read that ‘From being continually consulted and appealed to [the solicitor] attains a certain look of self-satisfaction [and] a perfect reliance on his own acumen’. In the case of the portrait of the capitalist a piece of occupational detail is extended to the point of ridiculousness in a description of his eye. It is defined against everything that it is not:

> It is not piercing and restless, like the lawyer’s; it is not stolid and staring, like the parson’s; it is not veiled and blinking, like the shopman’s; but it is a good, clear, bright eye—nine times out of ten, grey, or greyish blue—clear and firm, but mild and quick.

In a law clerk’s account of a colleague, his faithfulness to the job is so strong that it influences the kind of art and entertainment that he favours to the exclusion of all else:

> He had never read any book but a law book since he had left off studying “Vyse on Spelling;” and if he read a newspaper, it was that interesting portion headed *Nisi Prius*. His knowledge of fine arts was confined to the pictures of the judges in the Court of Chancery; and he went to the play

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61 Hunt, *Essays and Sketches*, 64.
63 Quoted in ibid., 114.
64 Slater, *Douglas Jerrold*, 115.

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but once, at half-price, attracted by the trial-scene in “The Merchant of Venice” and “Love, Law and Physic.”

This extract is broadly comic. But it becomes much darker when seen in the context of the life of the clerk who is narrating it. He feels that he is being imprisoned by his job and that he is ‘rapidly becoming a mere thing of pen and fingers—a producing power—a copying-machine’. In this particular case, the essay achieves greater effect than the illustration, perhaps even contradicting it, by showing a real human concern for its subject.

The Heads of the People and other sketches of the kind do not merely distort the occupational tics of characters; they also play an important part in the creation of such types in the Victorian city. The point that Mary Cowling makes about visual caricature, that it ‘plays a central role in the formulation of human types’, can equally be applied to the literary forms of the art already discussed. They also, it should be said, perform what Peter Ackroyd calls a ‘deciphering’ function: a way of identifying and categorising the bewildering range of perceptions represented by the nineteenth-century city. Ackroyd further informs us that:

Volumes have been written about these London [trade] cries, and we also have images of the tradespeople who uttered them. This identification was another way of deciphering the chaos of the city and of creating out of the poor or “lower order” a gallery of characters.

A connection can also be made to the ‘deciphering’ function of the century’s best-known accounts of the occupations of a particular part of its society, Henry Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor (1861–62). As Tim Barringer points out, ‘The organising principle of Mayhew’s London Labour was categorisation by occupation

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67 Leman Rede, ‘The Lawyer’s Clerk’ in Heads of the People, I: 28.
68 Ibid., 32.
[...] he was concerned with types rather than individuals'. This suggests a certain amount of dehumanisation, explained in part by the fact that Mayhew began his study of the itinerant workforce of the East End with high scientific ideals. In a letter to the editors of *The Morning Chronicle* in 1850 comparing himself to ‘a natural philosopher or a chemist’, he claims that ‘I must say I did most heartily rejoice that it should have been left to me to apply the laws of the inductive philosophy for the first time, I believe, in the world to the abstract questions of political economy’. As Humpherys points out, however, Mayhew’s social science was never particularly rigorous: ‘None of his social surveys were finished as projects, and they periodically displayed the intellectual laziness characteristic of his other work’. His application of ‘theory’, moreover, turned out to be based ‘upon a weak anthropological analogy’, one that seems to jar with the less judgemental tone of the reports themselves.

This highlights a contradiction in Mayhew’s work. Despite his best attempts at producing a scientific typology of the street workers of London, he also identified with them and sought to individualise them. This is shown best, perhaps, by what Humpherys calls his ‘“microscopic” technique’ in which ‘each individual grew in stature until he became a full-size human being for the reader’. This humanising side of Mayhew’s work is best viewed not in a scientific context but rather in the journalistic one that is explored in greater detail above. Michael Slater makes the connection between the two explicit by stressing the similarities between Douglas Jerrold’s series of occupational sketches called ‘Full Lengths’ and Mayhew’s *London*

73 Ibid., 14–15.
74 Humpherys, *Travels Into Poor Man’s Country*, 71.
75 Ibid., 62.
Labour: ‘Whatever their stylistic shortcomings [...] the “Full Lengths” were at least based on observed life and retain the same sort of interest that Mayhew’s characters do’. This kind of writing is, then, a normally unnoticed influence on Mayhew’s attempt at an occupational taxonomy. Yet there is also an important distinction between the two: Mayhew’s work purports to represent the poor ‘in their own “unvarnished language”’, while most (but not all) of the sketches discussed above are third-person accounts by literary men. The use of working-class narrators in Dickens’s *Christmas Stories*, to be considered next, shows an attempt to balance the two approaches.

II

In letters to Forster Dickens insists upon the verisimilitude of the narrators he has created for the 1862 and 1865 Christmas numbers of *All the Year Round*. He writes that in ‘Somebody’s Luggage’ (1862): ‘[Christopher the Waiter’s] account of himself, includes (I hope) everything you know about waiters presented humorously’ (Forster, 726). Three years later, Dickens claims of ‘Doctor Marigold’s Prescriptions’ that ‘If people at large understand a Cheap Jack, my part of the Christmas number will do well. It is wonderfully like the real thing, of course a little refined and humoured’ (Forster, 745). As the qualifier ‘a little refined and humoured’ suggests, however, the kind of accuracy Dickens achieves is of a relative sort. This is a problem, as Matthew Bevis points out, that confronted Henry Mayhew too: ‘his evidence was often toned down for the sake of his middle-class audience: “in every instance the author and his coadjutors have sought to understate, and most assuredly never to exceed the truth”’. Like Mayhew, Dickens shows his working-class narrators to be more than just

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76 Slater, *Douglas Jerrold*, 56.
77 Quoted in Barringer, *Men At Work*, 45.
occupational automatons. But their portrayal and sources are complex ones: he also
frames them in some senses as types within the context of the character sketch genre
discussed earlier.

Aside from Collins's guess that the monologues were written 'with half an
eye' toward reading performance, it is difficult to give an immediate reason why
Dickens favoured the form at this stage of his career. He had, however, very briefly
tried the technique once before with 'A Poor Man’s Tale of a Patent' published in
Household Words on 19 October 1850. Old John, the titular poor man of the tale, has
often been seen as a precursor to the inventive engineer Daniel Doyce in Little Dorrit.
We learn something about his trade, and his self-effacing and bluff
straightforwardness is conveyed skillfully by the 'plain' style of his delivery (DJ II,
285). Yet he functions ultimately as a mouthpiece for Dickens's critique of the
confusing and expensive bureaucracy of English patent law.79 As a working-class
narrator he is best understood within the context of other dramatic monologues
written in the early years of Household Words, of which there are a surprisingly high
number.80 These, as Michael Slater points out, do not focus closely or deeply on
color but are 'satirical social-comment pieces' in which 'we are given a strange
but illuminating perspective on some aspect or aspects of the contemporary scene'
(DJ II, xx).

Slater further suggests that 'These monologues also look forward to the great
triumphs in this genre that Dickens was later to achieve in his Christmas Stories' (DJ
II, xx). This is true in terms of their technical virtuosity. It misses, however, the

79 John Drew argues that Dickens’s character sketches in the ‘Our Parish’ section of Sketches by Boz
(1836) are equally motivated by satirical ends rather than real interest in the characters themselves. See
80 Examples include 'Perfect Felicity in a Bird's Eye View' (6 April 1850), 'The Ghost of Art' (20 July
1850), 'Lively Turtle' (26 October 1850) and 'Bill-Sticking' (22 March 1851). All are reprinted in
important differences of purpose between Dickens's excursions into the form here as opposed to in the Christmas numbers of *All the Year Round*. In pieces like 'A Poor Man's Tale of a Patent', as is suggested above, the element of satiric comment outweighs the character development of its narrator, although this is nevertheless handled in an assured way. In the frame narratives of 'Somebody's Luggage' and 'Doctor Marigold', however, almost the reverse is true. Philip Collins argues in his Headnote to the reading version of 'Doctor Marigold' that 'As in some of his other minor pieces [...] he has here been much more successful in imagining a character than in devising a story worthy of him'. There will be more to say about this later. It is certainly true that his *All the Year Round* narrators exceed the confines of the story they are telling. Unlike modest 'Old John' they are natural talkers who work in public —versions indeed of Dickens as popular writer and platform performer of his own work. The connection between the author and the character whose thoughts he is voicing is a complex one. As the following discussion aims to show, his sympathy and identification are balanced by a comic puncturing of their self-regard.

In the early phases of 'Somebody's Luggage' Christopher the Waiter conforms to the comic waiter type. The first half of 'His Leaving It Till Called For', the opening part of the collaborative piece's frame narrative, is what Dickens calls Christopher's 'account of himself' and is essentially a formulaic, if stylistically assured, first-person occupational sketch. Christopher's identity is apparently almost entirely shaped by the fact that he is a waiter. He even has a lineage in waitering, 'having come of a family of Waiters, and owning at the present time five brothers who are all Waiters, and likewise an only sister who is a Waitress' (CS, 450). In his 'biographical experience', conveyed in the second-person, we learn that his

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upbringing prepared him well for such a life: ‘your innocent mind surrounded by uncongenial cruets, dirty plates, dish-covers, and cold gravy; your mother calling down the pipe for veals and porks, instead of soothing you with nursery rhymes’ (CS, 453). The ‘untoward circumstances’ of his early life are, then, served up in a predominantly comic way. Dickens has a lot of fun too with Christopher’s apparent humility about his calling. His claim to offer ‘a few words respecting’ it, or alternatively merely ‘the present humble lines’ (CS, 450–51) turns out to be merely a Heepesque ‘humble’ front. He is in reality very (comically) defensive of his own occupational terrain, and very clear on those public servants who are ‘not waiters’ since ‘You must be born to it’ (CS, 451). He bemoans too that ‘the public interest’ in waiters ‘is but too often very limited’ and that they ‘are not generally understood’ (CS, 454).

Much of this suggests some distance between author and narrator. Christopher makes himself (or Dickens makes Christopher) seem pompously ridiculous at times and something like one of the truculently comic waiters from his fiction. There is still a general likeability to him, though, and perhaps more interestingly, more to Christopher than is demonstrated in the paragraph above. Having propounded on ‘the general subject’ of his trade he tells us what in essence is his story—‘the particular question’ of ‘His Leaving It Till Called For’ (CS, 457). This may be a slight and playfully comic narrative written, as Dickens puts it in a letter to Wilkie Collins, in ‘comic defiance of the difficulty of a Xmas No.’ (Letters X, 129). It does show Christopher to be capable of things other than waitering, however, and is at least a partial challenge to Philip Collins’s remark that in writings like The Christmas Stories Dickens was ‘more successful in imagining a character than devising a story worthy of him’. In his ‘investigations’ that make up the story’s second section he turns into
something of an amateur sleuth (CS, 459). The skills he has learned waiting on tables, such as a good memory for things, are readapted to alternative and more dynamic ends.

The shape of Doctor Marigold’s narrative in ‘Doctor Marigold’s Prescriptions’ follows a similar pattern to Christopher’s story. Marigold is in many senses a typical example of an itinerant street salesman. There is even more attention paid to externals here: Marigold wears the typical cheap jack garb of ‘cords, leggings, and a sleaved waistcoat’ with an apron, and he is also ‘partial to a white hat, and […] a shawl round [his] neck wore loose and easy’ (CS, 568). He has a lineage in the trade too: his father ‘was a Cheap Jack before’ him (CS, 568).82 Important life events are also mediated through it; he tells us, for instance, that ‘I courted my wife from the footboard of the cart’ (CS, 574). The most significant marker of his occupation, though, is his energetic and witty patter. Henry Mayhew notes more generally that Cheap Jacks in nineteenth-century London were known for such verbal virtuosity:

The Cheap Jacks […] are among the most celebrated and humorous of this class [of patterers]. The commercial acts and jests of some of these people, display considerable cleverness. Many of their jokes, it is true, are traditional […], but their ready adaptation of accidental circumstances to the purposes of their business, betrays a modicum of wit far beyond that which falls to the share of ordinary “low comedians”.83

This certainly matches up with Marigold’s humorous speed and ability to improvise at will, an example of which is his ‘adaptation’ for the pitch of an unfortunately conspicuous butcher (CS, 578). It also points to the fact that in his ‘acts and jests’ Marigold is not just a salesman, he is also a showman.

82 This, we can assume, was not typical. Mayhew in fact observes more generally of the street-seller class that ‘The patterers […] have for the most part neither been born and bred nor driven to street life—but have rather taken to it from a natural love of what they call “roving”’. Henry Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor, 4 vols (London: Griffin Bohn, 1861–62), I: 213.
83 Ibid., 214.
His patter only convinces to a point, however. Philip Collins, in his account of the reading version of the text, notices that the 'pronunciations' recorded by W. M. Wright ‘confirm that Marigold was a Dickensian Cockney’.\(^8\) In a recent sophisticated reading of ‘Doctor Marigold’ Matthew Bevis tracks the modulations (and their social effects) in Marigold’s accent and phrasing.\(^8\) As Bevis puts it, ‘mimetic fidelity struggles with social propriety’.\(^8\) This ‘struggle’, as Bevis notices, aligns Dickens with Mayhew’s difficulties in transcribing the lives of the poor without offending middle-class opinion too much. Bevis’s implication, however, that Dickens is less judgemental here than Mayhew is a little hasty.\(^8\) It misses the very contradictoriness of Mayhew’s uneven social study; the descriptive introductory matter (which Bevis quotes in this instance) often conflicted with what would follow in the interviews. As Anne Humpherys points out of Mayhew’s section on the pattering class, his ‘opening remarks […] portrayed them as an almost subhuman species. […] Yet in the series of interviews […] one finds very little moralism or negativism’.\(^8\) The relationship between the portrayal of the poor in the work of both authors is closer, according to this evidence, than Bevis suggests.

Dickens’s engagement with this fictional cheap jack is certainly a complex, even contradictory one. The scene in which he teaches Sophy, a deaf and dumb girl whom he has recently adopted, to read shows him to be adaptable to an activity not directly connected to his trade, and is also a warmly comic one. The teacher at the deaf and dumb school, where Marigold eventually takes Sophy, calls him ‘a clever fellow and a good fellow’ (CS, 583). This might seem sentimental, and it is true that an aspect of the story softens the hardness of the life of the poor. But this is also

\(^8\) Collins, Headnote to ‘Doctor Marigold’s Prescriptions’, *Public Readings*, 381.
\(^8\) Bevis, ‘Dickens in Public’, 345–49.
\(^8\) Ibid., 345.
\(^8\) Bevis, ‘Dickens in Public’, 346.
\(^8\) Humpherys, *Travels Into Poor Man’s Country*, 73.
leavened by something much darker. Bevis notes the surprisingly unflinching attention that is paid to domestic violence in the story. It should be added that there is a dark complexity to Marigold’s motivations in most things. He is certainly not just an impressively achieved but disembodied voice. He says at one point that he ‘like[s] to be the owner of things’ (CS, 585). A disturbing aspect of his relationship with Sophy is that he ‘buys’ her and gives her the name of his late daughter ‘to put her ever towards me in the attitude of my own daughter’ (CS, 581). Selfishness and loneliness are what motivate him here as much as inherent goodness. He even admits to being selfish in regard to Sophy later in the story (CS, 602).

‘Mugby Junction’, the Christmas number that was published the year after ‘Doctor Marigold’s Prescriptions’, debates again whether workers should be seen merely as embodying the jobs they do. The framing narrative is not, like those I have been discussing, a monologue, but rather a story about an unhappy traveller called ‘Barbox Brothers’, ‘a man who had been shut up within narrow limits all his life’ (CS, 658) who seeks to learn to widen such ‘narrow limits’ by ‘cast[ing his] interest into [...] the common stock’ (CS, 633). Yet, perhaps because of his previous confined existence, Barbox Brothers (otherwise Mr Jackson) lacks the ability to empathise with the working men that he encounters as anything more human than their occupational functions—this despite the fact that the essential similarity of Lamps and Barbox is noted in their early exchanges (CS, 611). The trade of Lamps, the lamp foreman at Mugby Junction, has undoubtedly left its mark on the man:

He had a peculiarly shining transparent complexion, probably occasioned by constant oleaginous application; and his attractive hair, being cut short, and being grizzled, and standing straight up on end as if it in turn were attracted by some invisible magnet above it, the top of his head was not very unlike a lamp-wick (CS, 611).

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89 Bevis, ‘Dickens in Public’, 346-47.
Yet it emerges that he is also a ‘poet’, or at least a composer of ‘little Comic-Songs-like’ (CS, 611). Jackson is generally dismissive and is described as eyeing Lamps ‘with great disfavour’ and being generally ‘disconcerted’ by the fact that Lamps is more than just his job. It is striking too that when he later meets the lamp foreman in a private capacity, he is not interested in hearing his name, and would rather objectify him by his occupation:

“And first of all, that you may know my name—”
“Stay!” interposed the visitor, with a slight flush. “What signifies your name! Lamps is enough for me. I like it. It is bright and expressive. What do I want more!”
“Why to be sure, sir,” returned Lamps. “I have in general no other name down at the junction; but I thought on account of you being here as a first-class single, in a private character, that you might—”

The visitor waved the thought away with his hand (CS, 624).

In not wanting to know his name Jackson denies Lamps his humanity.

There is of course a problem with this. The text does not assign Lamps his proper name either and therefore colludes, to an extent, with Jackson’s position. Jackson’s paean to divided labour that follows later is equally problematic. He wonders at:

How the many toiling people lived, and loved, and died; how wonderful it was to consider the various trainings of eye and hand, the nice distinctions of sight and touch, that separated them into classes of workers at subdivisions of one complete whole which combined their many intelligences and forces, though of itself but some cheap object of use or ornament in common life; how good it was to know that such assembling in a multitude on their part, and such contribution of their several dexterities towards a civilising end, did not deteriorate them as it was the fashion of the supercilious Mayflies of humanity to pretend, but engendered among them a self-respect, and yet a modest desire to be much wiser than they were (CS, 632–33).

Philip Collins sees this as ‘indifferent Dickens, exclamatory and generalizing’ which ‘must be regarded at the level of opinion, not art’. He also speculates that what he calls a ‘turgidly-expressed rejoicing in the separation of workers into classes […]’

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intelligible only as a direct challenge to Ruskin’s basic tenet about such “division of labour”.91 Collins’s remarks, however, are premised on the understanding that what is expressed here directly represents Dickens’s opinion. This is problematic at any time but especially so here given that the scene is from the perspective of Jackson and that it is possible, as I have done above, to interpret his behaviour in a negative light. Yet is there a turnaround, a conversion that allows him to see working people as individuals? Lamps’s daughter Phoebe, by whom Jackson is entranced, opens his eyes to the possibility of even mundane work being a pleasure, and of the benefits of being ‘always contented, always lively, always interested in others’ like her (CS, 625). It is perhaps her imaginative transformation of work that Jackson applies to the ‘many toiling people’ above and that allows him to see their essential humanity, even if it is compromised and not separated out from their occupations. That humanity, as we have seen over the course of the chapter, is what defines the respectful and appreciative portrayal of working characters as individuals in Dickens’s writings.

CHAPTER TWO

GENDERING THE LABOURING BODY

I 'The man is [not] now a man': The problematic spectacle of the male labouring body

For many ideologues and artists in the nineteenth-century the connection between work and masculine identity was an entirely obvious one. As Samuel Smiles simply states in his *Life and Labour* (1887): 'Every man worth calling a man should be willing and able to work'.¹ This remark, with its insistence on seeing work as a marker of masculinity, is typical of a trend that saw active labour as a sort of heroism. Seen, indeed, in the light of other verbal and visual traces of the period which celebrate the lusty labouring body as a spectacle, Smiles’s is a mild expression of the tendency. More emphatically Thomas Carlyle claims that 'even in the meanest sorts of Labour' male identity is forged and 'The man is now a man'.² Physical labour is energetically praised in the same piece of writing:

Show me a People energetically busy; heavy, struggling, all shoulders at the wheel; their heart pulsing, every muscle swelling, with man’s energy and will;—I show you a People of whom great good is already predictable; to whom all manner of good is yet certain, if their energy endure.³

Carlyle here sees a kind of beauty in the (overtly masculine) body at work. It might even be tentatively suggested that there is an undercurrent of homoerotic desire to

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³ Ibid., 178.
Carlyle's prose and that what he writes above represents a strangely abstract sort of pornography of effort. This is true too, perhaps, of another large-scale celebration of the labouring male form from the period, Ford Madox Brown's painting *Work* (1852–65). One recent critic has compared the pose of the picture's central navvy to that of the Apollo Belvedere: 'The navvy's aquiline profile facing to the right, and extended left arm, even the muscles of the neck, pay clear homage to the famous sculpture, indicating [...] a possible homoerotic subtext to Brown's image'. If this may seem to be pushing the point, there is little doubt about the importance of these manual workers to Brown's composition and conception of work. Brown himself states that the central navvy 'occupies the place of hero in this group'. This is founded upon his belief that

seeing and studying daily as I did the British excavator, or navvy, as he designates himself, in the full swing of his activity (with his manly and picturesque costume, and with the rich glow of colour, which exercise under a hot sun will impart), it appeared to me that he was at least as worthy of the powers of an English painter, as the fishermen of the Adriatic, the peasant of the Campagna, or the Neapolitan lazzarone.

The workingman becomes pivotal both ideologically and aesthetically as an object of beauty, deserving of the gaze of those (predominantly middle-class) viewers of the painting.

This very visible form of the male working body gives particularly striking confirmation to the division of labour along gender lines into 'separate spheres'. As Tim Barringer puts it, 'the male becomes masculine through working and being seen to work, the female, feminine through abstaining from work in the public sphere, but (where the economic need exists) performing invisible domestic labour'. Yet, as

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much recent literary and historical scholarship has shown, this separation is an
artificial one, ‘an easily identifiable and perhaps reassuring trope [...] [that] ran
wildly counter to everyday social experience’. It is a ‘trope’, perhaps surprisingly,
that Dickens’s fiction does not always confirm. Chapter 4 will discuss the complex
engagement with gender roles and domestic work in his writings. Developing claims
that I have already made in Chapter 1 about the ways in which Dickens explicitly and
implicitly questions how deeply an occupation ‘leaves its mark on a man’ I argue in
this chapter that the gendering of the working man in his fiction is far from
conventional. The connection between manual labour and masculinity is not an
automatic one. Particular kinds of manual work are idealised, as we shall see, in
distinctive fashion. I suggest, however, that such glorifications of manly labour are
underpinned by Dickens’s own anxieties about the feminising of his own role as a
brainworker plying his trade within the confines of the home. As the second half of
the chapter also shows, Dickens takes up prevailing worries in the 1840s about the
degrading effect of (particular kinds of) manual work upon women labouring outside
of the home. By the 1860s, however, his position emerges as a more complex one.

There is certainly little large-scale celebration of the image of the male
labouring body in his work. The little that there is is fleetingly done. Rouncewell’s
workers in Bleak House ‘are very sinewy and strong, [...] —a little sooty too’ (BH,
952); that, however, is almost all that we learn about them. It is usually the case that
when men doing industrialised physical work appear in other novels, their masculinity
is stripped away to reveal either a kind of monstrous inhumanity or unmanly

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8 Barringer, Men At Work, 32. For sceptical accounts of the concept of ‘separate spheres’ from critics
interested in either feminism or masculinity studies see Mary Poovey, Uneven Developments: The
Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England (London: Virago Press, 1989); Monica F.
Cohen, Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work, and Home (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1998); John Tosh, A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class
Home in Victorian England (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). The issue will be
considered at greater length in relation to portrayals of domestic work in Chapter 4.
femininity. The former is well illustrated in the depiction of industrial scenes in a
fictionalised Birmingham in Chapter 44 of The Old Curiosity Shop (1840–41). The
critical consensus on the chapter is that it portrays a horrific nightmare into which
Nell and her Grandfather are plunged. Critics commonly analyse it in dream-like or
hellish terms. Steven Marcus, for instance, notes the 'hallucinatory intensity with
which the aversiveness [of Nell and her Grandfather] is registered'.9 R. C. Terry
describes it as a 'hellish scene',10 while Sheila Smith sees 'a nineteenth-century
version of the medieval Hellmouth'.11 It is very much within such a context that the
scene's portrayal of its workers should be placed:

[...] moving like demons among the flame and smoke, dimly and fitfully
seen, flushed and tormented by the burning fires, and wielding great
weapons, a faulty blow from any one of which must have crushed some
workman's skull, a number of men laboured like giants (OCS, 334—35).

It is difficult to know exactly how to take this. There is certainly a sympathy and even
fascination to the scene that raises it above more formulaic examples of what might be
labelled the industrial sublime.12 Yet there is also the sense that this work has warped
the masculinity of these metal workers and given it, to borrow Marcus's term, a
'hallucinatory intensity'.

In the same chapter that these disturbing scenes appear a rare individualised
portrait of an industrial worker shows a very different kind of degradation. As an

9 Steven Marcus, Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson,
1974), 47.
10 R. C. Terry, "'Have at the Masters!' Working-Class Stereotypes in Some Nineteenth-Century
Novels', in John Morris, ed., Exploring Stereotyped Images in Victorian and Twentieth-Century
11 Sheila M. Smith, The Other Nation: The Poor in English Novels of the 1840s and 1850s (Oxford:
12 Herbert Sussman uses the term 'technological sublime' as a label for this Curiosity Shop sequence.
summary of reactions to industrialisation see Marcus, Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class, 30–
66. The tradition carries on into the twentieth century. In The Road to Wigan Pier George Orwell notes
the 'sinister magnificence' of 'a town like Sheffield': 'Through the open doors of foundries you see
fiery serpents of iron being hauled to and fro by redlit boys, and you hear the whizz and thump of the
1840 letter to Forster informs us, the character of the firewatcher who gives shelter to Nell and her Grandfather was one in which he took a creative interest. In the letter Dickens puts it to his friend that: ‘I shall be curious to know whether you think there’s anything in the notion of the man and his furnace-fire. It would have been a good thing to have opened a new story with, I have been thinking since’ (Letters II, 131–32). He did not, of course. He did, however, include other kinds of ‘firewatcher’ in his later fiction. Contemplative young women like Louisa Gradgrind and Lizzie Hexam might seem unrelated to a character like the firewatcher. It is, nevertheless, possible to claim that his character and occupation possess feminine attributes. He shows a caring, even motherly, concern for Nell in particular by ‘gently’ touching her clothes and ‘Carrying her as tenderly, and as easily too, as if she had been an infant’ (OCS, 334). This hardly seems typical behaviour for a muscular working man. Hablot Browne’s illustration ably demonstrates that much the same is true of the character’s externals; he is not ‘sinewy and strong’ like Rouncewell’s hands in Bleak House and looks instead haggard and care-worn. Rather than being the focus of the gaze, moreover, he is a gazer who is constantly occupied by his observation of the furnace-fire. His observation is particularly passive and centred upon what he is watching. It is so ‘motionless’, in fact, that Nell ‘feared he had died as he sat there’ (OCS, 335). Even Nell notices the contrast between the firewatcher and the other men when she says to him that ‘The other men are all in motion, and you are so very quiet’ (OCS, 335). The work of the other men in the scene is agitatedly active and noisy; the labour of the firewatcher is of a quieter more reflective sort. His own conception of his relationship with the furnace can indeed be read in a way that further feminises his work. As he puts it: ‘It’s like a book to me, [...] the only book I ever learned to read;

13 For a discussion of the motif of ‘fire-gazing’ in Dickens’s fiction, see Garrett Stewart, Dickens and the Trials of Imagination (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 160–70.
and many an old story it tells me. It’s music, for I should know its voice among a thousand, and there are other voices in its roar. It has pictures too’ (OCS, 337). His occupation seems less like physically difficult manual work than the typically feminine pursuit (at least amongst the middle classes) of novel reading.

The portrayal of Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*, another isolated depiction of a particular industrial labourer in Dickens’s work, shows him to be an equally ordinary (rather than heroic) specimen of the working man. Physically unprepossessing, Stephen is ‘forty years of age. [...] [And] looked older, but he had had a hard life’ (HT, 68). It is his brain rather than his body that appears well developed when we first encounter:

A rather stooping man, with a knitted brow, a pondering expression of face, and a hard-looking head sufficiently capacious, on which his iron-grey hair lay long and thin, Old Stephen might have passed for a particularly intelligent man in his condition (HT, 68).

Even this is illusory since,

He took no place among those remarkable “Hands”, who [...] had mastered difficult sciences, and acquired a knowledge of most unlikely things. He held no station [either] among the Hands who make speeches and carry on debates (HT, 68).

What he can do is stated simply and strongly: ‘He was a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity’ (HT, 69). He is not a forceful and independent character like Nicholas Higgins in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854–55), published immediately after *Hard Times* as the lead serial in *Household Words*. He possesses instead the ‘rugged earnestness of his place and character’ (HT, 151). Though this stoical, uncomplaining working everyman was admired in some critical quarters at the time of the novel’s publication, Stephen has, in general, not been received well by critics, being often viewed as a worthy but lifeless attempt. George

Orwell, for instance, judges Blackpool ‘a merely pathetic figure’.15 Stephen J. Spector suggests that ‘Dickens bestows hardly a single spark of his vitalizing genius upon Stephen’16 and Rachael his lover. In more measured tones John Ruskin claims that ‘Stephen Blackpool [is] a dramatic perfection instead of a characteristic example of an honest workman’.17

While these may be valid enough critical judgements, they miss some of the complexity of Stephen, or at least they miss what is more interesting about him. R. C. Terry perceptively notices that ‘Dickens makes him [Stephen] a prisoner of the machine and yet distinct from it’.18 When at his work amongst the machines it is his quiet, even dignified humanity that is emphasised:

Stephen bent over his loom, quiet, watchful, and steady. A special contrast, as every man was in the forest of looms where Stephen worked, to the crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism at which he laboured (HT, 73).

This might be pushed further, and the gracefulness and calm ease with which Stephen undertakes his labour categorised as almost feminine. It is certainly contrasted clearly enough with the descriptions of the almost out-of-control machine at which he works, with its ‘crashing, smashing, [and] tearing’. When away from ‘his loom’, however, he finds it harder to shake the influence of industrial work upon his consciousness. Thus we see ‘Old Stephen […] standing in the street, with the odd sensation upon him which the stoppage of the machinery always produced—the sensation of it having worked and stopped in his own head’ (HT, 69). His face has been made a generally ‘attentive’ one ‘like the faces of many of his order, by dint of long working with eyes and hands in the midst of a prodigious noise’ (HT, 81). His perception of the natural

18 Terry, ‘“Have at the Masters!”’, 183.
world as 'he listened to the great noise of the wind' becomes mechanically influenced so that he hears it only as 'the working of his loom' (HT, 89). This is a pattern that has already been noticed by Herbert Sussman who usefully points out that *Hard Times* focuses on the effects of mechanized labor on the workers' minds.\(^{19}\) He continues by claiming that 'Although the book never describes a factory interior, it abounds with attempts to describe the psychological state of a machine-tender'.\(^{20}\) To say that the novel 'abounds' with these is perhaps overstating the matter a little. They are, however, certainly descriptions, coloured by what seems to be an anthropological and distanced rather than sympathetic interest in Stephen. Limited interventions they might be, but they certainly show Stephen to be much more than just 'one of the outstanding versions of the stereotype of the common man'.\(^{21}\)

At the beginning of Chapter 10 of *Hard Times* the narrator intrudes with an opinion: 'that the English people are as hard-worked as any people upon whom the sun shines' (HT, 67). Stephen's marital difficulties have much to do with the fact that he has 'had a hard life' and seems prematurely decrepit (HT, 68). The novel implies too, though, that the mechanised work that he does has in part formed him as he is. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as we have seen, the firewatcher is similarly degraded by his labour, and shows that it is not only intellectual work that feminises the worker. Both of these portraits, then, challenge the notion of the manly and vigorous manual worker promulgated by the writings of Carlyle and present in Ford Madox Brown's *Work* which were mentioned at the very start of this chapter. Yet they also describe a very different kind of working experience to that enjoyed by Brown's heroic navvy, if not Carlyle's totalising vision. The non or pre-industrial manual labourers in Dickens's

\(^{19}\) Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, 67.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 67. It is interesting as a point of contrast that, although he may be considered (to borrow E. M. Forster's formulation) a 'rounder' character, that Gaskell does not attempt this with Higgins in *North and South*.

\(^{21}\) R. C. Terry, "'Have at the Masters!'", 183.
fiction, in contrast, are depicted as manly and heroic figures. This fact, however, does not contradict my earlier statement that Dickens's work contains a relatively scanty amount of celebration of the image of the male labouring body. Nor does it straightforwardly align Dickens with Brown or Carlyle. These working men, as we shall see, are hardly ever muscular presences; their manliness is displaced from the site of the body and instead conveyed through the sound of their work.

II ‘The sound but little fury’: Working noise and masculinity

In his engaging essay ‘Breaking the Sound Barrier’ Peter Bailey claims that ‘Bravura noise-making was an essential signal of masculine identity for much of this era’.22 His point of reference is not work but the social interaction of men, often within the spheres of entertainment or music hall. This perhaps explains why it is difficult to corroborate his generalisation in relation to scenes of labour, especially those in Dickens’s fiction. A better starting point in this context is the distinction Bailey makes between noise and sound:

In technical terms noise can be distinguished from other sounds by its lack of any exact or discrete pitch, its lack of what musicologists identify as tone. In communication theory, noise is the general villain, denoting anything that interferes with an intended signal. In social terms its various properties are perhaps best described as disorderly. Thus to echo Mary Douglas on dirt as “matter out of place”, we might call noise “sound out of place”.23

Working noise in Dickens is generally ‘disorderly’, even aberrant. It is usually produced, as in the following fleeting scene from The Pickwick Papers, during mechanised labour: ‘the whirl of wheels and noise of machinery shook the trembling walls. [...] The din of hammers, the rushing of steam, and the dead heavy clanking of engines, was the harsh music which arose from every quarter’ (PP, 667). At best this

23 Ibid., 195.
is a discordant ‘din’ that fades into a ‘harsh’ kind of industrial melody. In marked contrast, the auditory product of work done in the pre-industrial, often forge-based trades is—to the point of idealisation—much more harmonious, and often transcribed as a kind of hearty music. For Dickens, it seems, it is bravura music-making rather than noise-making that signifies manliness in the workplace.

It is possible to cite a biographical source as impetus for the musicality of Dickens’s interpretation of noises made by idealised manual workers. His attitude to ‘noise’ when he was writing was certainly negative. To work ‘he needed quiet, dead quiet; in Devonshire Terrace an extra door was added to keep out the noise’.24 In two colourful letters written to Angela Burdett Coutts while spending the summer in Broadstairs in 1843, he vents his frustration about the noises distracting him from work. He complains in one that:

I have been here six years, and have never had a Piano next door; but this fortune was too good to last, and now there is one close to the little bay window of the room I write in, which has six years’ agony in every note it utters. I have been already obliged to take refuge on the other side of the house, but that looks into a street where the “Flies” stand, and where there are donkeys and drivers out of number (Letters III, 538).

Barely a month later the situation is not much better: ‘The piano is gone […]. But a barrel organ, a monkey, a punch, a Jim Crow, and a man who plays twenty instruments at once and doesn’t get the right sound out of any one of them, are hovering in the neighbourhood’ (Letters III, 554). It is difficult to know how seriously to take Dickens here. It is entirely possible that he is merely adding newsy atmosphere in this letter to his well-positioned friend, especially since he tells her earlier that he ‘sat down to Chuzzlewit quietly, and [is] now at the heart of it’ (Letters III, 554). Still, however playful his account seems, Dickens was not alone in battling the distractions posed by ‘The sounds of the city’. As John M. Picker has recently pointed out, the

disturbance caused by street noise was a common concern for the nineteenth-century intellectual working (quietly) from home.\textsuperscript{25} It may even, Picker argues, have brought about the death of Dickens’s close friend and illustrator of \textit{A Christmas Carol} (1843), John Leech.\textsuperscript{26}

Picker underlines, moreover, another important aspect to this enthusiastic defence of professional work space within the home: anxiety about gender roles. He rightly claims that ‘The middle-class Victorian man who embarked on a home-based occupation requiring silence had, it would seem, quite an uphill battle if he were to convey the separateness and, indeed, noisiness of masculinity’.\textsuperscript{27} Dickens attempted to deal with some of these difficulties in his own writing life by recasting in his correspondence his own sedentary intellectual labours as lusty and noisy attempts at the literary anvil, the work of a wordsmith in the most literal sense. In one tranche of letters he sees himself specifically as some kind of literary blacksmith. In correspondence concerned with the progress of \textit{Martin Chuzzlewit} (1843–44), for example, he says that he has been ‘hammering away, and at home all day’ (Forster, 292) and ‘in great spirits, and powdering away at Chuzzlewit’ (Letters III, 452). The composition of \textit{Copperfield} is accounted for in similar terms, and Dickens describes himself to ‘have been hammering away all day’ on it, or later that he dramatically has the ‘most powerful effect in all the story, on the anvil’ (Letters V, 620; Letters VI, 171). The metaphor is changed slightly by the time of \textit{Great Expectations}, but is still imagined within the context of manual work. In a letter to Wilkie Collins he tells his


\textsuperscript{26} Picker, ‘The Soundproof Study’, 427. Thomas Carlyle was another well-known sufferer. Characteristically he did not meekly admit defeat by dying, but rather more actively railed against the intrusion of neighbourhood noises into his Chelsea home. Picker recounts the intriguing account of his commissioning of a soundproof study (and its ultimate failure) in his above-mentioned essay ‘The Soundproof Study’, 428–30 and 435–37.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 435.
friend and occasional collaborator that ‘Four weekly numbers have been ground off the wheel, and at least another must be turned off, afore we meet’ (Letters IX, 330). In another that discusses the alterations he made to the end of the novel after the advice of Edward Bulwer Lytton, he writes similarly that he has ‘resumed the wheel, and taken another turn at it’ (Letters IX, 428). Describing his existence elsewhere as ‘the life of a Labourer in Art’ (Letters VIII, 256), the rhetorical strategy of categorising his desk work as strenuous manual labour that is outlined above shows Dickens’s uneasiness about the perception that his home-based intellectual work might be unmanly. In her important study Uneven Developments, Mary Poovey notices the basic similarity in the roles played by literary man and housewife:

Like a good housekeeper, the good writer works invisibly, quietly, without calling attention to his labor; both master dirt and misery by putting things in their proper places; both create a sphere to which one can retreat—a literal or imaginative hearth where anxiety and competition subside, where one’s motives do not appear as something other than what they are.28

Seen in the light of this statement, Dickens’s transformation of his work into noisy and demonstrative manual (and manly) labour shows an uneasiness on his part, at least metaphorically, about the nature of his domestic and therefore feminised labour. His enthusiastic but indirect identification with traditional craftsman in this way helps explain why the literary portrayal of these workmen is so positive—and also why it is so stylised and ultimately not very believable. There is little here, for instance, that resembles a Ruskinian celebration of craftsmen who do their work heartily but imperfectly.29 The idealisation of the scenes represents instead a defensive move, made in response both to the difficult challenges of cacophonous, degrading industrial

29 For a discussion of the grotesque and the comic in relation to gothic architecture and the men who produced it, see P. D. Anthony, John Ruskin’s Labour: A Study of Ruskin’s Social Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 162.
work, and to the anxieties of Dickens and others about perceived threats to the manliness of their own labours.

The auditory element of working scenes from two of Dickens's 1840s novels is particularly marked. Both show a very expressive and impressionistic take on manual work. The hammering of Gabriel Varden in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6, is not noisy therefore but (and this is stated explicitly) rendered as music: 'From the workshop of the Golden Key, there issued forth a tinkling sound, so merry and good-humoured, that it suggested the idea of some one working blithely, and made quite pleasant music' (*BR*, 337). In an early scene from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the sounds made in a 'village forge' are equally 'pleasant'. The keynote in the aural description of the forge is of happy and vigorous activity: 'The lusty bellows roared Ha ha! to the clear fire, which roared in turn, and bade the shining sparks dance gaily to the merry clinking of the hammers on the anvil' (*MC*, 19). The exchange of sounds in this extract is harmonious, but artificial too. Its anthropomorphic touches simultaneously humanise the workplace and make it less real. As further detail from the sequence shows, moreover, the sounds of this 'merry clinking' of hammer on anvil is characterised as a particularly manly, even quasi-religious act. We are told that 'The strong smith and his men dealt such strokes upon their work, as made even the melancholy night rejoice' (*MC*, 20).

The connection between masculinity and the joyful 'clink of metal upon metal' is made equally explicit in Dickens's later work. Specifically, the depiction of Doyce's factory in *Little Dorrit* shows some striking similarities with the sequences discussed above. What might at first seem a surprising claim can be explained in part by the geographical situation and technological peculiarities of the factory itself. Its location in London is particularly significant since, as Gareth Stedman Jones tells us,
'The effect of the Industrial Revolution upon London was to accentuate its "pre-industrial" characteristics.'\(^{30}\) Trey Philpotts gives us more information on the actual function of the workshop: 'Doyce and Clennam are "in the machinery and foundry way" (as Flora Finching shortly remarks). The foundry would have produced the machine parts and tools necessary to bring new engineering ideas to fruition'.\(^{31}\) As this suggests, the Bleeding Heart foundry is by very nature a small-scale operation. The factory is in part mechanised, as is made evident by the presence of a 'steam-engine' to power some of its tools. Yet the aspects of the workshop that Dickens values above others are the pre-industrial and non-mechanical ones. In its hearty, robust manliness, the work of the foundry workers does not seem at much of a remove from the work of a typical blacksmith at the village forge. The purposeful sounds of their metal work are again prominently celebrated: we hear the 'busy hum' of it 'interspersed with periodical clinks and thumps' (LD, 263). With a typical touch of animism we see 'The patient figures at work [...] swarthy with the filings of iron and steel that danced on every bench and bubbled up through every chink in the planking' (LD, 263). In the first description of the factory, moreover, the fact that it is hearty rather than mechanical is effectively stressed: 'At this end of the Yard and over the gateway, was the factory of Daniel Doyce, often heavily beating like a bleeding heart of iron, with the clink of metal upon metal' (LD, 139). This image chimes, of course, with the naming of the neighbouring bleeding heart yard. But in a chapter entitled 'Machinery in Motion' that plays with notions of machines and mechanisation, that the factory is rather peculiarly described as a kind of mechanical heart achieves much greater significance. It is implicitly contrasted with the work that both Clennam and Pancks undertake: Clennam discharges his book-keeping 'mechanically' (LD, 270),


while we see ‘Some heavy labouring on the part of Mr Pancks’s machinery’ (LD, 271). With its recourse to the image of a fleshy, pulsating heart, Dickens makes the work done in Doyce’s factory the least mechanical in the chapter. That it is, in fact, never designated as ‘mechanical’ is an important rhetorical move by Dickens that, in its promulgation of a rather nostalgic view of this kind of manual work, is a textual alternative to the troubling effects of mechanisation.

Importantly, much of what we see of Doyce’s factory is filtered through the perspective of Arthur Clennam. It is true that he is, as the firm’s hired brainworker, at some remove from the actual work that is being carried on there. As a result: ‘The noises were sufficiently removed and shut out from the counting-house to blend into a busy hum, interspersed with periodical clinks and thumps’ (LD, 263). This may in part account for the novelistic turning away from the complications inherent in the often feminised position of intellectual workers that has already been discussed. Also important to an understanding of the scene is its significant place in the trajectory of Arthur’s character development tracked by the novel. Disappointed and world-weary on his return from China, he is beset by so many doubts and worries (including perhaps more mundane financial ones) that he feels an urgent need to get work, calling this in one chapter, ‘the subject seldom absent from his mind, the question what he was to do henceforth in life; to what occupation he should devote himself, and in what direction he had best seek it’ (LD, 189). It is hardly surprising that he finds solace in what is described as the ‘fanciful and practical air’ of the bold and hearty labours of Doyce’s workmen (LD, 263). As the text states explicitly the sights and sounds of the factory are ‘a welcome change’, and re-invigorate his own work: ‘as often as he raised [his eyes] from his first work of getting the array of business documents into perfect order, he glanced at these things [the work of the factory] with
a feeling of pleasure in his pursuit that was new to him’ (L.D, 263). The immediate
demands of the novel shape, to an extent, Dickens’s formulation of working sounds in
this instance. They also play an important role in the presentation of work noise in
another late novel, to be discussed in due course.

The connection between working sounds and masculinity also develops in
other directions in Dickens’s later writings. Another context, for instance, is important
when considering ‘Chatham Dockyard’ (29 August 1863), an *Uncommercial
Traveller* piece which celebrates the sounds of ship-building in particularly distinctive
style. John Drew summarises the argument made by the linguistic critic Randolph
Quirk ‘that Dickens’s minor writings (examples are taken from ‘The Uncommercial
Traveller’ and *Mrs Lirriper’s Lodgings*) show him experimenting “rather more
radically and to a more sustained degree” than in his novels, with such flexible forms
as free indirect style and stream-of-consciousness’.\(^{32}\) His transcription of the yard’s
working sounds displays evident pleasure in such experimentation. That the narrating
traveller comes upon this labouring cacophony is a surprise for both him and the
reader, since the first part of the essay is devoted to detailing his ‘summer idling’ at
‘some small out-of-the-way landing-places on the Thames and the Medway’ (DJ IV,
289). A paragraph containing observations about the ‘clean-swept holiday air’ of the
place is immediately followed by the dizzying effects of the following one:

Ding, Clash, Dong, BANG, Boom, Rattle, Clash, BANG, Clink, BANG,
Dong, BANG, Clatter, BANG BANG BANG! What on earth is this!
This is, or soon will be, the Achilles, iron armour-plated ship. Twelve
hundred men are working at her now; twelve hundred men working on
stages over her sides, over her bows, over her stern, under her keel,
between her decks, down into her hold, within her and without, crawling
and creeping into the finest curves of lines wherever it is possible for men
to twist. Twelve hundred hammerers, measurers, caulkers, armourers,

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\(^{32}\) John M. L. Drew, *Dickens the Journalist* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 159–60. See also
Harry Stone, ‘Dickens and Interior Monologue’, *Philological Quarterly* 38 (1959), 56–65 for an
account of the linguistic experimentation of what he calls Dickens’s ‘lesser-known later pieces’. 

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This is Dickens at his most artificial, but also at his most brilliant. It bears little resemblance to the actual sounds themselves, but is an accurate impression in language of what is being heard in the mind of the listener. It seems to have more in common, indeed, not with the transcriptions of working sounds above, but with fragmented records of other sensory experience made by Dickens. One such representative account is an early instance from *Pictures from Italy* in which Dickens recounts the rolling of a carriage ‘over a horribly uneven pavement’ (Pl, 11–12). Critics of the sequence are divided upon the effectiveness of the sequence. Kate Flint sees it as an example of all that is bad about Dickens’s style: ‘his repetitions, his longueurs, his capacity to sound pompous, to sound patronizing, to transcribe sounds, and to prolong the sense of a sentence way beyond its comfortable natural life’ (Pl, xvi). Harry Stone and Grahame Smith, on the other hand, admire its almost modernist attention to conveying the experience rather than the scene itself. The above extract from ‘Chatham Dockyard’ seems of a similar nature and equally as likely to divide critical response.

It is not only the scale of the project that is impressive (‘Twelve hundred men’ are involved), but the sheer exertion that it requires. The energy of these men carries, moreover, what seems a quasi-sexual charge, impressionistically rendered when the workers are described ‘crawling and creeping’ into the noticeably feminised ‘finest curves of [the ship’s] lines wherever it is possible for men to twist’. Considered as a whole, then, Dickens’s preconceptions about working sounds converge upon this passage. That such noisy work is a characteristically masculine act for him is only

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emphasised by its association with this penetrative motion. The noises that these workers make, further, is implicitly signalled as being part of their identity. Thus they are not just ‘hammerers, measurers, [and] caulkers’, they are also emphatically ‘dingers, clashers, dongers, rattlers, [and] clinkers’.

And yet there is an important difference between this and the other sonic paeans to the gloriousness of work that we have been discussing: this is a scene of mass, mechanised work rather than individualised manual labour. It is significant too that other parts of the essay show a fanciful interest in what is going on in the ‘tributary workshops’ that are clustered around the docksides. Some of the machines in them are ‘monsters’ but particularly humanised monsters who are ‘Obedient’ and ‘Dutiful’ (DJ IV, 292). Later in the essay the traveller ventures on a long defamiliarised description of ‘intricate machines, set with knives and saws and planes’ which leads him to conclude that there is an ‘exquisite beauty and efficiency in this machinery’ (DJ IV, 293). Philip Collins reads this essay as evidence that Dickens was ‘a man sold on mechanization’, although elsewhere his article takes a more measured view, seeing ‘Dickens’s apprehensions of industrialism and his judgements upon it’ as ‘various’. ‘Chatham Dockyard’ certainly complicates the argument that has been mounted here so far. Given what was discussed in the first section of this chapter, it is perhaps more plausible to claim not that Dickens was ‘sold on mechanization’ but that he was fascinated by machinery.

In *Great Expectations* the pattern I have been tracing takes a much darker turn. The happy sounds of metal hitting upon metal are silenced: there is little (visual or aural) detailed description of the forge, or the work going on around it, within the novel. Few parallels can be drawn (perhaps thankfully) with the already-discussed

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35 Ibid., 657.
workshop scenes in *Barnaby Rudge* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Several factors account for this. One is the novel’s relative contraction: given that it was delivered in weekly instalments, it shows (arguably) greater symbolic tightness and less volume of descriptive detail than the longer monthly part books. Another is that the multilayered creation of Joe, as has been pointed out in Chapter 1, problematises any simple understanding of him as an honest and manly blacksmith.36 Joe’s strength and physicality may be a matter of pride for Pip, who claims that ‘if any man […] could stand up long against Joe, I never saw the man’, and remembers his ‘muscular blacksmith’s arm’ and ‘broad chest’ (GE, 115, 141).37 But then so are his kindness and effectiveness as a nurse. The most interesting influence upon the novel’s scarcity of noisy scenes of forge work is, however, its retrospective narration by Pip. His relationship to his trade, workmates and the forge itself is always a difficult and ambiguous one; one, moreover, that diverges markedly from the idealising perspectives of outsiders that have been discussed so far. Again and again he stresses his youthful dissatisfactions with the blacksmith line: he has ‘a strong conviction’ that he ‘should never like’ it; is ‘dissatisfied’ with it; and continues ‘at heart to hate [his] trade’ (GE, 106, 116, 125). Yet on his eventual return, it is the very spirit of the place and the job that he so yearns (importantly) to hear:

[T]he forge was a very short distance off, and I went towards it under the sweet green limes, listening for the clink of Joe’s hammer. Long after I ought to have heard it, and long after I fancied I had heard it and found it but a fancy, all was still. […] The clink of Joe’s hammer was not in the midsummer wind (GE, 478).


37 We should remember too that Orlick exhibits exactly these kinds of physical attributes. He is first described as ‘a broad-shouldered loose-limbed swarthy fellow of great strength’; one importantly, though, who is ‘never in a hurry, and always slouching’ (GE, 112). Although it would be hasty to claim that we should feel no sympathy for this resentfully languorous journeyman, he certainly represents to an extent the (physical) threat of the disgruntled manual worker.
The short scene is an important one in underlining the pessimism of the novel’s world view. This specific working sound—‘the clink of Joe’s hammer’—has come to represent the positive values which Pip associates with the man himself. All of Joe’s honest strength seems to be embodied in the clink of metal upon metal. Importantly, of course, this sound and all that it represents remains firmly outside of the mature Pip’s grasp. Pip’s desire to hear Joe’s hammer is frustrated three times, and eventually remains only obsessively in his ‘fancy’. The scene also seems to do more than that, to refer back to those already-mentioned slightly stereotypical recordings of work sounds with the double realisation that they should be celebrated, but at the same time that it is a world and a way of life that represents a nostalgic and unworkable dead end.38

III ‘To make them so many weaker men’: Women, work and femininity

It is commonly assumed that it is the domestic angel rather than the working girl that is the model of ‘womanliness’ most valued in Dickens’s writings. Some of Dickens’s statements on female employment outside of the home do, admittedly, confirm such a supposition, and are easy targets for caricature. In the 1859 Christmas number for All the Year Round, ‘A Haunted House’, for instance, he is particularly disparaging about efforts by Adelaide Procter in her campaigning work for the Society for the Employment of Women.39 She is addressed in fictional form as Belinda Bates, ‘a most intellectual, amiable, and delightful girl’, and advised

in respect of the great necessity there is, my darling, for more employments being within the reach of Woman than our civilisation has yet assigned to her, don’t fly at the unfortunate men who are at first sight in your way, as if they were the natural oppressors of your sex; for trust me, Belinda, they do sometimes spend their wages among wives and

38 Vincent Newey argues similarly that the forge functions as ‘a comforting sidelight rather than a beacon for any real present or future’. See The Scriptures of Charles Dickens, 209.
39 For useful background on this see Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J.M. Dent, 1983), 332–34.
daughters, sisters, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers; and the play is, really, not all Wolf and Red Riding-Hood, but has other parts in it (CS, 323–24).

Slater suggests that 'One can imagine few passages more likely to infuriate a modern feminist than this mixture of arch rallying and patronizing patriarchal smugness'. If anything, this is understating the matter, as even a cursory glance at the above extract’s toe-curlingly superior use of the qualifiers ‘darling’, ‘trust me’ and ‘really’ makes very clear. In their response to women’s work in the public sphere, then, these two examples confirm Slater’s supposition that ‘In Dickens’s view, the only really satisfactory destiny for a woman, is a domestic one’.

Harriet Martineau’s remark in her Autobiography (1855) that Dickens ‘ignored the fact that nineteen-twentieths of the women of England earn their bread’ seems, however, an unjustified one. John Drew claims that ‘Martineau’s complaint [...] is inaccurate of the journal [Household Words] as a whole, and faintly obtuse, since she records that its immediate provocation was a proposal from Wills that she contribute a series of papers “on the Employments of Women”’. It is also ‘inaccurate’ of the novels too, since, as Ella Westland points out, ‘As in Victorian Society, women in the novels are realistically shown pursuing a great range of female employment’. This is true enough, but avoids the difficult issue of how and to what ends women’s work is actually categorised in Dickens’s novels and in his public writings. In a recent essay Joellen Masters takes what is a more productive measured view by underlining ‘Dickens’s contradictory or ambivalent stance about women’s employment’. She cites his involvement in setting up Urania Cottage and the fact that

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40 Slater, Dickens and Women, 334.
41 Ibid., 335.
42 Cited in Drew, Dickens the Journalist, 126.
43 Ibid., 128.
he owned Josephine Butler’s *Women’s Work and Women’s Culture* (1869) as positive
evidence that he saw an inherent worth in women’s non-domestic work, but also
stresses that a belief in the sanctity of the separate spheres was enforced in speeches
given to worker’s institutions.\(^{45}\) An intriguing statement made by Kate Perugini at the
Lyceum Club in April 1910 seems to give more straightforward corroboration of the
former view. It, in fact, complicates the issue further. According to his daughter,
Dickens ‘had the strongest possible sympathy with women writers, women painters,
and indeed with all women who work in order to gain a livelihood for themselves and
those dependent upon their exertions’.\(^{46}\) Kate’s statement can be read in a number of
ways. At face value, it suggests that Dickens had an amount of respect for the
working woman, and believed, moreover, that the workplace was an appropriate place
for women. But it can also be defined much more narrowly, and read in a very
different way. Dickens, in light of such an interpretation, broadly identifies with the
plight and struggle of the working woman, but also sees any work outside of the home
as an essentially unwomanly act. Which position, then, is confirmed by the evidence
we have on the topic?

I Lowell Revisited: Dickens and the working girl

Journeying across the United States on his American tour, Dickens made a day’s
excursion to the fast-developing textile town of Lowell, Massachusetts on 3 February


\(^{46}\) Quoted in Masters, “‘Let herself out to do needlework’”, 54. Claire Tomalin interestingly quotes Kate’s views alongside opposing ones on female employment by her sister. In a letter to Annie Fields of 6 February 1913 Mamie strongly states that ‘Every kind of Employment which is women’s work and not man’s, I am too thankful they should have—and the education to be companions and even the instructors of men, but I don’t see what other “Rights” they have a claim to, that they have not got—or nearly all’. If Mamie had been asked to give an interpretation of her father’s attitude to women who worked, it is tempting to guess that her answer would have been very different to Kate’s. See Claire Tomalin, *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* (London: Penguin, 1991), 249.
‘The object of [his] visit’ was, as often on the trip, to acquaint himself with the workings of a particular institution, in this case the town’s factory system (AN, 75). His experiences were later written up to appear in published form in his account of the four and a half month journey in *American Notes* (1842). The framing of the day he spent at Lowell in the travel book suggests, moreover, that it had some significance for him which he wanted to convey to the book’s readers; he purposely sets out the fact at the very start that: ‘I assign a separate chapter to this visit; not because I am about to describe it at any great length, but because I remember it as a thing by itself, and am desirous that my readers should do the same’ (AN, 72).

The contours of Dickens’s day at Lowell are, then, well-known. Chapter 4 of *American Notes*, in which Dickens’s visit is retold, has even attracted the attention of two notable critics. Engaged in an intriguing debate within the pages of a special issue of the *Dickens Quarterly* on Dickens in America, they offer opposing readings of the significance of this short day. Natalie McKnight, on the one hand, judges the importance Dickens initially places upon the experience to be plausible. She argues that Dickens’s visit to Lowell ‘inspired him and helped to shape his own efforts as a writer’. It follows, then, that ‘After Lowell, Dickens began creating more interesting, active, and independent female characters than he had before’. Jerome Meckier, in marked contrast, questions the prominence Dickens gives the Lowell material. He sees it therefore not as an imaginative turning point, but rather as an unilluminating dead end. In summary, he argues that ‘His afternoon in the mills survived as a pleasant memory but shrank in significance to an isolated experience,

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47 Jerome Meckier, ‘Chapter Four of *American Notes*: Self-Discovery in Lowell; Or Why Little Nell Would Have Been Happy There But Dickens Was Not’, *Dickens Quarterly* 19 (2002), 123.
49 Natalie McKnight, ‘Dickens and Industry’, *Dickens Quarterly* 19 (2002), 134.
50 Ibid., 138.
with which he could do little creatively except award it a chapter of its own'.\textsuperscript{51} He proposes, indeed, that Dickens's account is so uninspired and bland that 'One does not question Dickens's sincerity in chapter four so much as marvel that his enthusiasms prove so lackluster—un-Dickensian in style and spirit'.\textsuperscript{52}

In what follows in this section I add to this critical discussion about a seemingly small episode in Dickens's life and writing. There is yet more to be discovered about Dickens in general, I propose, by returning again to the impressions of the time spent in Lowell recorded in the fourth chapter of \textit{American Notes}. What I want to draw attention to in particular is that the contrasting and equally convincing interpretations Meckier and McKnight make either omit or play down what seems a very significant part of the story: that the factory workers in Lowell are working women. As we shall also see, even more intriguing is the fact that the mill girls maintain markers of femininity in Dickens's account. This represents a challenge to preconceptions we might have about Dickens's views on women in the workplace; the anomaly that it reveals makes more sense when Dickens's work is considered not just within the frame of his growth as a creative artist but also within the context of the intense response to women's work that marked the early 1840s, to which Dickens himself contributed as journalistic 'skirmisher and sharp-shooter' par excellence.\textsuperscript{53}

Several critics working in gender studies have recently explored what has been broadly described as 'the explosive debate that raged around women and industrial labor in the first half of the nineteenth century'.\textsuperscript{54} The six reports made by the

\textsuperscript{51} Meckier, 'Self-Discovery in Lowell', 130.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{53} Thomas Macaulay, quoted in Drew, \textit{Dickens the Journalist}, 53.
Children's Employment Commission in 1842–43 were a key focus for this debate. The first report especially, published on 7 May 1842, provoked public concern about children and women at work in mines and factories across the land. Outrage about the findings was not confined to the drawing rooms and offices of intellectuals and legislators; as Patricia Johnson points out, the report’s controversial illustrations were widely disseminated in the penny press. Commentators have stressed, moreover, that it was the issue of working women rather than children (especially boys) that became the central point of interest for contemporary observers. Thus, 'despite the fact that the commission was specifically delegated to investigate children's work in the mines, it was the work of women and girls that became its central topic'. Or, to put it another way, 'the problem of sex in the workplace threatens to displace the problem of children in the workplace'.

Dickens was closely involved with the progress of the Royal Commission from the very start. In a letter dated 15 December 1840, he thanks Dr Southwood Smith, the chairman of the commissioners, for sending him the instructions for the reports (Letters II, 165). In the same letter, Dickens enlightens Smith about his already existing familiarity with the upcoming work of the Commission, since 'Lord Ashley sent me his speech on moving the Commission, only the day before yesterday' (Letters II, 165). By 30 June of the following year, he is writing to John Forster about his 'solemn pledges to write about [mining] children in the Edinburgh Review' (Letters II, 317). John Drew informs us that 'The promised article on Lord Ashley's

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57 Ibid., 20. By discussing the manipulation of report images in the pages of the *Westminster Review*, Catherine Robson underlines that the sensation also spread into the pages of more august publications. See *Men in Wonderland*, 71–72.
59 Robson, *Men in Wonderland*, 71
Mines and Collieries Bill failed to materialise for the *Edinburgh Review*. But, as Drew continues, the ‘desire to publish on the subject did not abate’. Dickens’s heated intervention was eventually published as an open letter to the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* on 25 July 1842. The appearance of this timely response was ‘imperative’ since the Mines and Collieries Bill was being debated in the Lords on that day after having failed to obtain the support of the government in the House of Commons on 7 June (Letters III, 279n). It is significant that while Dickens’s pen is active here in publicising the predicament of children working in the mines, so long ‘out of sight in the dark earth’ (Letters III, 279), it is the immoral and degrading effects of female employment, so prominent in other contemporary reactions to the findings of the commission, that really seem to grab his attention. Specifically he attacks the practice of women working underground ‘by the side of naked men […] and harnessed to carts in a most revolting and disgusting fashion, by iron chains’ (Letters III, 282). He then continues to emotively outline his objections to women’s mine work in the following lengthy and darkly ironic rebuttal:

> Is it among the rights of labour to blot out from that sex all form and stamp, and character of womanhood—to predestine their neglected offspring, from the hour of their conception in the womb, to lives of certain sin and suffering, misery and crime—to divest them of all knowledge of home, and all chance of womanly influence in the humble sphere of a poor peasant’s hearth—to make them but so many weaker men, saving in respect of their more rapid and irresistible opportunities of being brutalised themselves, and of brutalizing others; and their capacity of breeding for the scaffold and the gaol? (Letters III, 282).

In the way that it takes for granted the existence of an easily definable ‘character of womanhood’ or ‘womanly influence’ while emphasising that such gruelling work merely makes women ‘but so many weaker men’, this trenchant statement reveals Dickens at his most essentialist on gender roles. It implies that women have no

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60 Drew, *Dickens the Journalist*, 57.
61 Ibid., 57.
business being in the workplace—especially one that is dangerous to their collective moral and physical health.

Intriguingly, however, Dickens was suggesting almost the exact opposite that same year about the women of the Lowell Mills. Rather than fearing, as he does with mine work, that it will ‘turn […] women into men’ (Letters III, 282), he declares that:

I cannot recall or separate one young face that gave me a painful impression; not one young girl whom, assuming it to be a matter of necessity that she should gain her daily bread by the labour of her hands, I would have removed from those works if I had had the power (AN, 77).

There are clear reservations here, of course, about the issue of women working outside of the home: they should only do so ‘as a matter of necessity’. It is still striking that Dickens feels able to admit this much—especially in the context of the furore around the subject, of which his letter to the Chronicle discussed above was a part. It is plausible, I think, to read the Lowell episode in American Notes as being in an important sense a direct response both to the findings of the Commission and to the troubled progress of the Mines and Collieries Bill through parliament. According to John Drew, ‘Before his journey [to the United States] he had been sent confidential copies of the Commission’s report by its chairman, Southwood Smith’. We can speculate, then, that the shocking detail of the report was on his mind during the American tour. Even more convincing in reconstructing a direct link between Chapter 4 of American Notes and the contemporary social context on the other side of the Atlantic is the fact that the Pilgrim editors calculate that Dickens ‘had doubtless now just finished his short Ch. 4’ (Letters III, 293n) on 31 July, about a week after he had written so urgently on the developments concerning the Mines and Collieries Bill for publication on the 25th.  

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62 Drew, Dickens the Journalist, 57.

63 My dating must remain ambiguous here since there is the chance that Dickens had written the letter before the 25th. As the Pilgrim editors admit: ‘Whether he post-dated his letter, or wrote it in the early
The fact that both were written within the space of a matter of days suggests a closer interchange of ideas between the *Chronicle* letter and the passages from *American Notes* than has previously been noticed. The reference points of several statements in the travel book account become, in light of this context, much more precise. When Dickens highlights the value of his 'brief account of Lowell, [...] to any foreigner to whom the condition of such people at home is a subject of interest and anxious speculation', for instance, it seems likely that he is referring indirectly to the concerned response to the publication that year of the blue books relating to children's employment (AN, 80). The claim, moreover, that these women do not possess the 'manners' of 'degraded brutes of burden' carries clear echoes of the phrasing that describes the 'brutalised' female mine workers in the *Chronicle* piece (AN, 77–78). More generally too, the distinctive and perhaps surprising womanliness of these foreign factory workers is brought into sharper relief when viewed in the context of Dickens's remarks above on the defeminising effects of non-domestic work in his own country. In her travel book *A Visit to Italy* (also published in 1842), Frances Trollope is surprised by the beauty and 'grace' of some working women she encounters in Florence:

> It is rarely, I think, that the form of a hard-working woman, in any country, reaches its full portion of growth, without losing some portion of its grace, particularly about the shoulders. But this was not the case among the beauties I am now speaking of.⁶⁴

The girls of Lowell may not quite be Florentine 'beauties' like those described here by Trollope. They are, nevertheless, ladylike at the very least. In a letter that Forster quotes in the *Life*, Dickens states that 'The ladies of America are decidedly and unquestionably beautiful' (Forster, 223). And, as the following extract demonstrates,

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*hours of Monday 25th and dispatched it at once by hand, having asked [John] Black [then editor of the *Morning Chronicle*] to be ready for it, is not certainly known’ (Letters III, 279n).

even the country’s factory hands were more feminine than the sort Dickens was used to:

These girls, as I have said, were all well-dressed: and that phrase necessarily includes extreme cleanliness. They had serviceable bonnets, good warm cloaks, and shawls; and were not above clogs and pattens. [...] They were healthy in appearance, many of them remarkably so, and had the manners and deportment of young women (AN, 76).

It is possible, in fact, to interpret Dickens’s interest in the working girls of Lowell as a quasi-sexual one. In speculating what might have caught Dickens’s attention about the scene, Natalie McKnight playfully suggests that Dickens might have experienced a moment of sexual frisson during his visit to the young settlement:

What impressed Dickens in particular in the cotton, carpet, and woollen factories that he visited in Lowell? For starters, hundreds of neatly-dressed, healthy, fresh-faced young women helped. [...] No doubt being pressed on all sides by young, attractive women was not entirely objectionable to Dickens.65

We also get a tantalising glimpse of this side of Dickens’s reaction to them in an 1842 letter to George W. Puttnam, his secretary on the American tour and also an ‘aspiring artist’.66 Dickens urges him to undertake a painting of the women at Lowell:

I have taken it into my head that you must be painting the portraits of the Factory Young Ladies at Lowell. If so,—make them very handsome, and the demand is certain to be brisk. The skilful introduction of a gold-watch occasionally, would be very judicious: and if you can counterfeit satin to the life, your fortune is made (Letters III, 351).

It is significant that, in pushing Puttnam towards idealisation rather than social realism to increase ‘demand’, Dickens calls them ‘Young Ladies’ who should be ‘made very handsome’ and be wearing distinctively feminine apparel rather than just ‘serviceable bonnets’ and ‘good warm cloaks’. In later life Puttnam went on to

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65 McKnight, ‘Dickens and Industry’, 135.
66 N. C. Peyrouten, ‘Mr “Q” Dickens’s American Secretary’, Dickensian 59 (1963), 157. More specifically, Peyrouten informs us that Puttnam was ‘a pupil and somewhat of a protégé of [the artist] Francis Alexander’ and that ‘his painting “The Doctor” was exhibited in 1841 at the Boston Athenæum’ (157).
become an interior decorator rather than a painter of social scenes;\textsuperscript{67} the portraits of
the Factory Young Ladies at Lowell' about which Dickens was so enthusiastic in the
abstract were, as far as I am aware, never produced, and remain instead a ghostly
passing fantasy.

A reading that stresses the sexual charge of Dickens's reaction to the mill girls
can only be a tentative one, however. The measured manner of the account itself
marks Dickens out not as a tourist with a roving eye, but rather more like a factory
inspector on holiday intent on coolly detailing the workers' garb and general health.
He commends, therefore, what seem sensible, even frumpy clothes: their 'serviceable
bonnets' and 'good warm cloaks' and almost admiringly adds that they 'were not
above clogs and pattens'. The most obvious influence upon the chapter's style, then,
is not the colourfully seductive visual rendering of the women imagined in the letter
to Puttnam, but rather a locally-published pamphlet by Elisha Bartlett, a noted medic
and one-time Mayor of Lowell, entitled \textit{A Vindication of the Character and Condition
of the Females Employed in the Lowell Mills} (1841).\textsuperscript{68} The Pilgrim editors tell us that
Bartlett had given him 'an inscribed copy of his pamphlet' (Letters III, 198n). Much
of the detail that Dickens conveys in the chapter matches the evidence Bartlett uses in
his generally objective, fact-based pamphlet; it seems likely as a result that Dickens
had this slim volume beside him as a source of ready information when he was
writing up the impressions of the day he spent there. Perhaps the most notable and
precise fact that he clearly takes from Bartlett's \textit{Vindication} is one concerning the
admirable parsimony of the Lowell women: 'in July 1841 no fewer than nine hundred
and seventy-eight of these girls were depositors in the Lowell Savings Bank: the
amount of whose savings was estimated at one hundred thousand dollars' (AN, 78).

\textsuperscript{67} Peyrouten, 'Dickens's American Secretary', 158.
\textsuperscript{68} For more information on Bartlett see Letters III, 198n.
Turning to Bartlett’s account, there seems little reason to doubt, especially given the relative precision of Dickens’s reference,⁶⁹ that it was the direct source that he used; we are informed that: ‘Of these depositors [of the Lowell Institution for Savings] nine hundred and seventy-eight are factory girls, and the amount of their funds now in the bank, is estimated […] at one hundred thousand dollars’.⁷⁰ This, moreover, is not the only substantial borrowing from Bartlett’s defence of the virtue of the town’s female workers. The attention paid in Dickens’s account to the town’s ‘boarding-house for the sick’ (AN, 77–78), the limiting of the working year to nine months for its younger workers and the healthy provision of ‘churches and chapels of various persuasions’ (AN, 77), to name but three examples, all derive evidently from the detail of Bartlett’s work.⁷¹

More pertinent yet is the influence of Bartlett’s Vindication, most likely alongside his own memories of that day, upon what impresses Dickens so much more generally about the morals and manners of the Lowell women. Bartlett praises them highly for being ‘uniformly—almost without exception, women of perfectly correct moral deportment’.⁷² The model of working womanhood that he admires in the following extract—implicitly that present amongst the working population at Lowell—is as a result neutralised of any threat by becoming desexualised:

I wish that every girl would consult her health and comfort in providing herself with an umbrella, india rubber over shoes, a warm cloak, woollen stockings and flannel for the winter, instead of sacrificing to her pride in the form of parasols, kid shoes, lace veils and silk stockings.⁷³

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⁶⁹ Meckier notes with a strong hint of irony that ‘Dickens for once supplies precise figures behind his encomiums’. ‘Self-Discovery in Lowell’, 125.
⁷¹ The relevant passages in A Vindication can be found respectively on pages 15–16, 16 and 17.
⁷² Bartlett, A Vindication, 8.
⁷³ Ibid., 13.
Dickens's already-quoted approving description of the sensible attire of the female workers at Lowell owes something to this. It must have helped too that manufacturing work is not their ultimate destiny, another fact Dickens most likely learned from the *Vindication*. Instead:

Many of the circumstances whose strong influence has been at work for years in our manufacturing towns have not arisen here; and there is no manufacturing population in Lowell, so to speak: for these girls (often the daughters of small farmers) come from other States, remain a few years in the mills, and then go home for good (AN, 80).

Reassured by the effect of distinctively American social trends upon the patterns of female employment in Lowell, Dickens is able to valorise this kind of work because the women 'go home for good', presumably to marry and do domestic work. His description of their working environment (interestingly one of the few reasonably detailed depictions of the inside of a factory in Dickens's work) is also positive, rendering it not as a place of danger but as a feminised space of domesticity and security:

The rooms in which they worked, were as well ordered as themselves. In the windows of some, there were green plants, which were trained to shade the glass; in all there was as much fresh air, cleanliness, and comfort, as the nature of the occupation would possibly admit of (AN, 77).

The palpable contrast between this and the blue book and press reports of the squalidly inhumane working conditions faced by British mineworkers appearing at the same time should not be ignored; it would have been a context that was familiar both to Dickens and many of his readers.

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74 Bartlett writes: 'these females do not remain permanently here. At the end of a few years, as a general rule, they leave the mills, either for their own homes, or what very frequently happens, for new ones of their own' (*A Vindication*, 11).

75 As Meckier points out, however, this situation was not to last long: 'Beginning in the 1850s, waves of unskilled, uneducated immigrants flooded Lowell, eager to replace Yankee farm girls in the mills'. See 'Self-Discovery in Lowell', 131n.
Citing a pamphlet written by a medical man as an important influence upon Dickens’s thinking about Lowell does not, however, obviously contradict Jerome Meckier’s criticisms of the writing in Chapter 4 of *American Notes*. It might be argued that it confirms them: Bartlett, after all, may have been a prominent physician and author of standard medical texts such as *Fevers in the United States* (1842), but was no creative genius of the stature of Dickens (Letters III, 198n). Any inspiration taken from such a source should, we might think, diminish the distinctive elements of his art. Yet what does this mean exactly? If the account of his time at Lowell is, according to Meckier, both unconvincing and ‘un-Dickensian’, then what can be said to accurately represent the ‘Dickensian’ mode? The question, of course, is a large one, its full exploration beyond my scope in this section. I want to suggest, nevertheless, that Meckier’s bold definition of Dickens’s ‘reformer’s voice—radical, incensed, funny, hyperbolic—a voice recognized the world over as Dickensian’\(^7\) is ultimately too limiting and does not engage fully enough with the variety and multiplicity of styles that Dickens could and did employ in the various forms in which he wrote. It does not, for instance, seem a very good way of categorising the writing that appears in Dickens’s first-person narratives in *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*, arguably some of Dickens’s best. More immediately, it also ignores the context in which Dickens was writing his travel book. As the unpublished Introduction of 1842 informs us, *American Notes* was projected as a work of social and anthropological reportage: ‘a description of the country I passed through; of the institutions I visited; of the kind of people among whom I journeyed; and of the manners and customs that came within my observation’ (AN, 276). In light of this

\(^7\) Meckier, ‘Self-Discovery in Lowell’, 131.
remark its prose can be viewed not as an inferior imitation of Dickens’s ‘real’ literary voice, but rather as an economical, discursive style fitted to his purpose.77

When seen in the context of the moral panic that greeted the publication of the reports made by the Children’s Employment Commission, moreover, the Lowell chapter seems less of what Meckier calls ‘an isolated experience’ and ‘a virtual anomaly’,78 and more of an actively motivated account of an ideal alternative to the sufferings endured by those women ‘out of sight in the dark earth’. It is possible too to locate a plausible fictional afterlife for the Lowell girls. Natalie McKnight argues that ‘After Lowell, Dickens began creating more interesting, active, and independent female characters than he had before’.79 The list that she provides of Dickens’s ‘post-American female characters’ seems, at least to me, too broad.80 Nor does it include perhaps the clearest descendant of the Lowell women: Lizzie Hexam. One of the few working girls in Dickens’s fiction, she embodies the contradictory response to this figure explored above by being “industrious” and “virtuous” (OMF, 278) yet still alluringly “handsome” despite being one of his “Factory Young Ladies”. It is to her, and to two other working women in *Our Mutual Friend*, that I finally turn.

II Three working women in *Our Mutual Friend*

It is surprising that Brian Cheadle’s recent article on ‘Work in *Our Mutual Friend*’ devotes so little space to the working women of the novel.81 Humphry House’s remark that ‘Everybody in Dickens has a job’ might well be archly readapted to read

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77 This position, however, has not found much critical favour. A recent article has observed in *American Notes* ‘a paler Dickens vision of America than in the letters themselves’. See Patricia M. Ard, ‘Charles Dickens’ Stormy Crossing: The Rhetorical Voyage from Letters to *American Notes*’, *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 23 (1996), 35.
78 Meckier, ‘Self-Discovery in Lowell’, 130.
80 Ibid., 138. The rather mixed group includes Sarah Gamp, Edith Dombey, Esther Summerson, Lady Dedlock, Amy Dorrit, Estella, and Bella Wilfer.
'Every woman in Our Mutual Friend has a job'. Aside from the Wilfer sisters and the women of the Veneering circle, the majority of the book’s female characters carry out some form of non-domestic labour. This encompasses a broad range of kinds of work in the lives of many of the novel’s cast of supporting characters, and it is work that is generally valued by the novel. Betty Higden, for instance, in her attempts to remain out of the poor house, sets off ‘Patiently to earn a spare bare living’ by selling knitted items on the road (OMF, 496). Her bravely desperate efforts in ‘maintaining her independence’ (OMF, 496) represent a kind of stoicism that is to be admired rather than mocked. Another very different kind of independent woman is Abbey Potterson. ‘Sole proprietor and manager of the Fellowship-Porters’, she rules her public house with ‘dignity and firmness’ (OMF, 69), proudly stating that ‘It has been hard work to establish order here, and make the Fellowships what it is, and it is daily and nightly hard work to keep it so’ (OMF, 76). Such supporting characters as these usefully confirm Ella Westland’s claim that ‘women in the novels are realistically shown pursuing a great range of female employment’. They do not, at least within these boundaries, counter the view that work defeminises women. Abbey Potterson is, admittedly, described as a ‘tall, upright, well-favoured woman’ (OMF, 69). Having to maintain order amongst rowdy river men has, though, made her ‘severe of countenance’ and more like ‘a schoolmistress than mistress of the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters’ (OMF, 69). The presentation of the novel’s more central female characters forms a more favourable, if still complex, impression that women at work need not be degraded into ‘weaker men’ simply because they work for a living. Continuing the work done by Margaret Flanders Darby in her fine essay ‘Four Women in Our Mutual Friend’, I hope too to show that in the novel ‘woman’s place,

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her roles, even marriage itself, is seen to be profoundly problematic, and the richness of Dickens’s ambivalence is revealed. My focus is upon a part of the ‘roles’ section of that statement, and I discuss three women not four: Pleasant Riderhood, Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren.

Like Abbey Potterson, Pleasant Riderhood works on an independent footing as a businesswoman. Unlike Abbey, her trade is disparaged when we first meet her in the novel and learn that:

Miss Pleasant Riderhood had some little position and connection in Limehouse Hole. Upon the smallest of small scales, she was an unlicensed pawnbroker, keeping what was popularly called a Leaving Shop, by lending insignificant sums on insignificant articles of property deposited with her as security (OMF, 345).

The smallness of her trade, so effectively conveyed in this series of phrases suggesting diminution, also characterises her working environment Thus it is described as ‘a wretched little shop, with a roof that any man standing in it could touch with his hand; little better than a cellar or cave, down three steps’ in which the gathered scanty possessions are memorably called ‘creature discomforts’ (OMF, 346).

In this her first scene with a disguised Rokesmith-Harmon, her manner of measuring up seamen, her ‘prey’, makes her faintly disreputable as well as a figure whose trade is ridiculed. This is a facility, we are to assume, that has been inherited from her father Rogue, a particularly shady river-scavenger. The novel remains deliberately vague about her inheritance, however, informing us that ‘Pleasant Riderhood had it in her blood, or had been trained’ (OMF, 345, my italics). Her good qualities are the ones, indeed, that are emphasised in the account of her habit of sizing up potential prey. In the space of a paragraph, an assessment of her strengths is repeated, and even echoes the phrasing of the previous expression. Thus, ‘Yet, all things considered, she

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was not of an evil mind or an unkindly disposition’ is followed up soon afterwards by ‘All things considered, therefore, Pleasant Riderhood was not so very, very bad’ (OMF, 345–46). There is further comic disparagement of the ‘touch of romance in her’, for it is explained that if ‘she may have had some vaporous visions of far-off islands in the southern seas or elsewhere’ these might involve ‘waiting for ships to be wafted from the hollow ports of civilization. For, sailors to be got the better of, were essential to Miss Pleasant’s Eden’ (OMF, 346). The over-riding impression we get of her in the scene, however, is that she is much more decent than her father, and does not carry on in his fashion. Thus her remark that ‘Fair trade is one thing, […] but that’s another. No one has a right to carry on with Jack in that way’ causes the mysterious stranger to utter ‘The sentiment does you credit’ (OMF, 350). In the exchange that follows it is noticeable too that the ‘strange gentleman’ begins to question Pleasant rather than her truculent father, stating ‘I prefer to speak to her’ (OMF, 357). Her name, then, is not entirely ironic.

In her subtle reading of Lizzie’s skill in rescuing Eugene, Darby emphasises that ‘Lizzie is defined not by her father’s work, but by her own transformation of that work, a transformation that measures her strength and independence from him as well as her moral ascendency’. Pleasant might not quite morally transform her father’s work. But, as has been shown above, she does live her life according to another, better moral code. Both women are daughters of scavengers who grow up in Limehouse Hole, and both are working girls, but despite such surface similarities their essential natures and destinies develop in different directions. It might be said that Pleasant functions as a kind of double or foil for Lizzie, if one who does not possess the moral strength or even beauty of one of the novel’s heroines. That is not to say that she

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possesses no feminine qualities at all. From the narrator, if not Mr Venus, her looks receive, admittedly, rather faint praise. Unfortunate inheritor of her father’s ‘swivel eye’, ‘She was not otherwise positively ill-looking, though anxious, meagre, of muddy complexion, and looking as old again as she really was’ (OMF, 345). There is, though, a surprising vulnerability about her, defined in the novel as ‘her natural woman’s aptitude’, that is revealed when she nurses her father back from near death (OMF, 441). This is hinted at too by one of her defining actions: that of repeatedly ‘twisting [her hair] into place’ (OMF, 346). This is a gesture that is not Pleasant’s alone. We are memorably informed that ‘on the occasion of a fight or other disturbance in the Hole, the ladies would be seen flocking from all quarters universally twisting their back-hair as they came along’ (OMF, 346). It is a preparation that almost seems bizarrely warlike, and one moreover that defeminises these working-class women. Pleasant twists up her hair in similar fashion, as a sign that she means business as an unlicensed pawnbroker or as a response to moments of emotional tension. Stereotypical notions of femininity, it is suggested, are complexly challenged by and in such an environment.

No such conflict arises in the portrayal of Lizzie. In her well-known essay on the novel in *Between Men* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues otherwise, that Lizzie begins *Our Mutual Friend* as a satisfyingly feisty working girl but ends it merely as a good wife:

> Dickens makes no attempt to disguise the terrible diminution in her personal stature as she moves from being the resentful, veiled, muscular, illiterate figure rowing a scavenger boat on the Thames, to being a factory worker in love, to being Mrs. Eugene Wrayburn *tout court.*

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In provocatively pushing her point, Sedgwick is unfaithful to the novel’s presentation of Lizzie. More accurate is Darby’s claim that ‘Lizzie is presented as morally perfect all along’.86 She does not change, and is not diminished because she is not really any of the things Sedgwick says she is. Some critics interpret this lack of change as a weakness, as an implausibility in her character.87 The focus of most of such assertions is Lizzie’s language and bearing, what Vincent Newey calls her ‘technical working-class status, [and] genteel speech and manners’.88 Such reservations might equally be applied to Lizzie’s physical presence. She must be strong to do the work that she does, and certainly shows well-formed fore arms in the Marcus Stone illustration ‘A Bird of Prey’ that accompanies the first chapter. The text itself, however, does not make muscularity a prominent part of her labours. Dickens avoids highlighting this aspect of her work just as he did with the working men with which I began, and Lizzie definitely does not resemble the often muscular working women photographed so enthusiastically by Arthur Munby.89 Lizzie is, at times, portrayed as a rather more unsubstantial figure. When Eugene peers into the Hexam home, she appears as ‘A deep rich piece of color, with the brown flush of her cheek and the shining lustre of her hair’ (OMF, 166), as, in other words, a shimmer of an impression rather than an embodied woman (with nevertheless a ‘flush’ in her cheek). Despite the well-known

89 See Michael Hiley, Victorian Working Women: Portraits from Life (London: Gordon Fraser, 1979), passim.
homoerotic subtext of the novel,\textsuperscript{90} it is clear that Eugene is attracted to Lizzie not as a musculely manly woman, but as a strong and striking one.

In \textit{Women and Work} (1857), Barbara Leigh Smith passionately argues that work and femininity need not be mutually exclusive. Rather:

\begin{quote}
WORK—not drudgery, but WORK—is the great beautifier. Activity of brain, heart, and limb, gives health and beauty, and makes women fit to be the mothers of children. A listless, idle, empty-brained, empty-hearted, ugly woman has no right to bear children.

To think a woman is more feminine because she is frivolous, ignorant, weak, and sickly, is absurd; the larger-natured a woman is, the more decidedly feminine she will be; the stronger she is, the more strongly feminine. You do not call a lioness unfeminine; though she is different in size and strength from the domestic cat, or mouse.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

A polemical essay on the right of women to work might seem an unlikely place in which to find parallels with Dickens. It is opposed, indeed, to the tendency not to associate work with femininity which we have been tracing up to \textit{Our Mutual Friend}. Dickens starts to move away from this model with Lizzie. Not only beautiful, her work is also an important part of how others perceive her. The fact that she is hard-working is repeated often in the novel. We read of ‘her industry’, that she is ‘as industrious as virtuous’, and that she is ‘industrious and faithful’ (OMF, 426, 278, 508). This might give the impression that Lizzie is merely a ‘working girl’ in the abstract, and that Dickens elides the dirty detail of her scavenging work. This is true to an extent, but the novel still sees a kind of beauty and gracefulness in her rowing for her father while he is scavenging, and later in the heroic rescue of Eugene. Perhaps this is not quite right, and the terms are a little too delicate. For, as Darby rightly puts it, ‘Dickens’s vigorous emphasis on her trained skill is so non-feminine, so unrestricted by her femininity, that we are tantalized by the other implications’.\textsuperscript{92}

The dirty work is morally transformed. Even her domestic destiny need not

\textsuperscript{90} For a defining discussion see Sedgwick, \textit{Between Men}, 172–77.
\textsuperscript{91} Barbara Leigh Smith, \textit{Women and Work} (London: Bosworth and Harrison, 1857), 18.
\textsuperscript{92} Darby, ‘Four Women in \textit{Our Mutual Friend}’, 31.
necessarily be seen as a diminution. Newey's sensitive reading of the closing scenes Lizzie has with her new husband underlines the instability of their roles: 'he is the patient' while 'she retains some degree of mobility'. All that the novel provides is 'the germ of an unpredictable future'.

Our last working woman, Jenny Wren the doll's dressmaker, is shown to be equally as skilled at her trade. She may implement it with a much smaller tool than a paddle, as Lizzie does. The comparison, nevertheless, is still a valid one:

The dexterity of her nimble fingers was remarkable, and, as she brought two thin edges accurately together by giving them a little bite, she would glance at the visitors out of the corners of her grey eyes with a look that out-sharpened all her other sharpness (OMF, 223).

Almost embodying the sharp tools that she employs in her work, Jenny is quick-witted throughout the novel. Such close association with her gruelling work does not, however, diminish her femininity. She is, admittedly, rather peculiar looking, and is described as 'a child—a dwarf—a girl—a something' and a 'queer little figure' (OMF, 222). Critics have sometimes not been impressed by such peculiarities. In his review of Our Mutual Friend for The Nation on 21 December 1865, for instance, Henry James calls Jenny 'a little monster; she is deformed, unhealthy, unnatural; she belongs to the troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and precocious children who have carried on all the sentimental business in all Mr. Dickens's novels'. Importantly, though, she is 'queer but not ugly' (OMF, 222). In a letter to the illustrator of the novel, Marcus Stone, Dickens advises that she be drawn with 'A weird sharpness [but] not without beauty' (Letters X, 430). Her womanly side is perhaps demonstrated best by the two occasions on which—rather than winding it up, as Pleasant does—she loosens her 'golden stream of hair' (OMF, 434, 787). When she does it for a second

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94 Ibid., 287.
time Sloppy is impressed enough to exclaim ‘What a lot, and what a colour!’ (OMF, 787)

As Hilary M. Schor points out, moreover, ‘for the first time in a Dickens novel, a daughter is the person of the house’. Schor views Jenny’s ultimate authority, however, as being limited:

Not that Jenny has narrative autonomy. Her life story is written by the incessant and draining labor her father’s drunkenness commits her to. [...] The beaten (and beaten down) daughter, like the grim Pleasant, or like Dickens himself, has only two escapes: more work, and more fiction. It is true that Jenny’s work is often draining. She admits to Charley Hexam that her ‘business’ is ‘Poorly paid. And I’m often so pressed for time! I had a doll married last week, and was obliged to work all night’ (OMF, 223). Much later in the novel she mentions to Riah, with a possible echo of Thomas Hood’s well-known lament for the seamstress figure, ‘The Song of the Shirt’ (1843), that ‘you see it is so hard to bring up a child well, when you work, work, work, all day’ (OMF, 712). Jenny is, as a result, grown-up before her time, and physically debilitated by her work. Yet—and this is what makes Schor’s account of her life story too dark—she is also resourceful and makes the most of her situation. To Abbey Potterson’s ‘astonishment’, for instance, Jenny hands her own business card to her, only for the former to drop it (OMF, 433). Jenny is also very proud of her work, saying to Riah of a ‘dazzling semi-circle of [her] dolls’ in ‘a brilliantly-lighted toy-shop window’, ‘Now look at ’em. All my work!’ (OMF, 430).

Schor’s reading underplays another important aspect of Jenny’s work. In a late exchange with Riah, Jenny hints that her disability preceded her ‘incessant’ work rather than being caused by it: ‘How can I say what I might have turned out myself,

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96 Schor, Dickens and the Daughter of the House, 199.
97 Ibid., 201.
but for my back having been so bad and my legs so queer, when I was young! […] I had nothing to do but work, and so I worked. I couldn’t play’ (OMF, 713). Jenny does ‘play’ though, but through her work. If Lizzie morally redeems the work of her father, then Jenny imaginatively reclaims the work forced upon her by her drunk and feckless child. She tells Eugene:

And yet as I sit at work, I smell miles of flowers. I smell roses, till I think I see the rose-leaves lying in heaps, bushels, on the floor. I smell fallen leaves, till I put down my hand—so—and expect to make them rustle. I smell the white and the pink May in the hedges, and all sorts of flowers that I never was among. For I have seen very few flowers indeed, in my life (OMF, 238).

Consoled by angelic visions in her ‘chilled, anxious, ragged’ childhood, she has been trying to recreate the white dresses that they wear (in miniature for her dolls) ever since (OMF, 238).

It is striking that Dickens looks to a partnership between Jenny and Sloppy at the close of the novel. Sloppy, while not quite as mentally sharp as Jenny, is certainly as dexterous manually. His work, too, at least in the early stages of the novel, is an act that reclaims wasted material: for the children being ‘minded’ by Betty Higden he constructs toys ‘out of nothing’ (OMF, 378). It is impressive enough on one occasion to become a street spectacle: ‘once as many as a dozen people had got together in the lane to see the neatness with which he fitted the broken pieces of a foreign monkey’s musical instrument’ (OMF, 378). Hilary Schor’s comment about Jenny, that ‘for the first time in a Dickens novel, a daughter is the person of the house’, might be reapplied to the developing relationship between Jenny and Sloppy. However strange, it is Dickens’s first marriage of working equals. Its presence in the novel is further testament both to the richness of his art and the subtle undermining of the notion of the separate spheres that recurs in his writings.
CHAPTER THREE

‘A THEATRE OF HEALING OR CRUELTY’?
DICKENS AND PROFESSIONALISM

I ‘You must impose implicit confidence in him’. Defining and questioning the role of the professional man

Dickens has often been censured for his inadequate knowledge of the codes and practices of professional life. George Orwell, for instance, makes the general comment that ‘Dickens knows very little about the professions his characters are supposed to follow’.¹ Others have made particularly pointed claims about the imperfections of his engagement with legal matters. Best known of all, perhaps, is James Fitzjames Stephen’s claim in a strident Edinburgh Review article of 1857 entitled ‘The License of Modern Novelists’ that Dickens’s ‘notions of law, [...] are precisely those of an attorney’s clerk’.² He

knows the physiognomy of courts of justice, and he has heard that Chancery suits sometimes last forty years, though he seems not to have the remotest notion that there is any difference between suits for the administration of estates and suits for the settlement of disputed rights.³

³ Collins, Critical Heritage, 369. Other nineteenth-century Dickens critics also doubt Dickens’s ability to render professionals and professional life subtly and accurately. In a piece for the Quarterly Review, Abraham Hayward is sceptical about the verisimilitude of the novel’s presentation of one of its legal characters, Serjeant Snubbins, sternly judged to be ‘improbable, as well as dull—at least, the only probable thing in it is the Serjeant’s eagerness to get rid of a client who seemed to have no definite object in coming to him’. In a Contemporary Review article of 1869, George Stott reiterates Stephen’s jibe that Dickens has ‘just that smattering of law which a clever attorney’s clerk might pick up’. See Collins, Critical Heritage, 60–61, 498.
It is arguable whether such attention to professional minutiae that Stephen is so provocatively demanding from 'modern novelists' would be to the aesthetic benefit of any novel. His criticism certainly seems a curious approach to take in relation to the qualities of Dickens's art. In outlining what (according to Stephen) is one of the limitations of Dickens's fiction, moreover, such negative comments do not tell us very much about how we should interpret what is actually there on the page.

Yet there is some truth to what Stephen, and those who agree with his vigorous statements, say about Dickens's engagement with professionals and professionalism. It is entirely correct that there is little sense in his writings of a forensic mind at work, exploring the minutiae of procedures in law, medicine and other fields. To claim as much, however, seems to miss the point. As one critical account of legal matters in the Dickens world suggests, it is not the material traces but rather 'the human side' of professional action that interests him.\(^4\) Taking this position on Dickens and professionalism, indeed, offers an intriguing challenge to the system of values we usually consider to be confirmed by Dickens's work. John Bowen sketches such a set of beliefs nicely in *Other Dickens*: 'The virtues that Dickens's novels most admire—benevolence, reciprocity, selflessness, compassion, trust—are essentially collective ones that depend on the existence of a community of others in which to develop and flourish'.\(^5\) A professional ethos, with its emphasis on impersonality, is in some senses antithetical to notions of 'community'. It also responds in important ways to the fracturing of communities brought about by modernising and industrialising forces gathering strength in the century, principally by constructing different versions of some of the virtues Bowen outlines above. In his early fiction Dickens shows a scepticism about the sincerity of such moves by


professionals, rendering them, often in strikingly literal terms, as inhuman. Yet even
here, as we shall see, an awareness of the possible value of the emerging tenets of
professionalism is evident. The thinking of the later novels, moreover, still has a
sceptical turn but also embraces and explores the ethical world in which its
professionals move much more complexly than we might at first suppose.

It is important to state at the outset that during the nineteenth-century
neither ‘profession’ nor ‘professionalism’ were stable or easy-to-define terms. Before
the century began the word ‘profession’ carried much looser and baggier
connotations. As Penelope Corfield notes:

Historically, there was not much semantic distinction between a
“profession” and any other “occupation”. Both terms were commonly
used to describe an individual’s main source of employment. Hence a
reference to the “professions and trades” in the eighteenth-century could
mean simply: all occupations.6

Harold Perkin, another well-known chronicler of the professions, also suggests the
term’s sense was much broader before, and even into, the Victorian era, and that
“Profession” […], originally meant any occupation”.7 He adds a fine distinction,
however, noting that “the more prestigious trades were distinguished by the adjectives
“liberal” (meaning gentlemanly) and “learned” (meaning institutionally educated)”.8
This social separation persisted into the nineteenth-century. But it also began to be
slowly eroded. Henry Byerley Thomson, an observer of the professions at the time,
worriedly noticed this trend: ‘In attempting to define a profession, according to the
modern acceptation of the term, it is almost impossible to set out the limits where a
profession merges into a business’.9 Thomson is anxious here about the creeping
advance and legitimisation of the technical trades onto the territory of the old liberal

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8 Ibid., 23.
professions so that the old boundaries and limits are no longer clear. Dating this process is difficult, but a good indicator of its progression—and the institutionalisation of professional practice—is with the granting of Royal Charters to (often technical) professional associations. There was a spate of these in the 1830s, 40s and 50s\textsuperscript{10}—just when Dickens was coming into the prime years of his literary career—which suggests that it is only in the mid century that the terms (without the 'learned' prefix) begin to approximate their current meaning. Corfield summarises this shift:

With time [...] this term acquired a more precise application which has—in modern times—become its predominant meaning. It came to refer to the skilled service occupations, that entailed a professional training in specialist knowledge to be applied in the service of others. The other usages did not disappear.\textsuperscript{11}

As much of the more measured recent work on professionalism in Dickens has tended to show, this process of legitimisation is one that leaves its mark on his fiction.\textsuperscript{12}

Another important context provides a useful route into what is, this chapter argues, one of the predominant ways in which professional action is characterised in Dickens's fiction. Seeing the entire world as a stage (the \textit{theatrum mundi}) has a long tradition as a reading of social and cultural action. Dramaturgical accounts of social life stretch from the renaissance stage to twentieth-century work in sociology by the

\textsuperscript{10} W. J. Reader suggests that 'An occupation's rise to professional standing can be pretty accurately charted by reference to the progress of its professional institute or organisation'. He then goes on to list the granting of Royal Charters to some of the professional associations: Royal College of Surgeons, 1800; Institute of Civil Engineers, 1828; Law Society, 1831; Institute of British Architects, 1837; Pharmaceutical Society, 1844; Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 1847. See Reader, \textit{Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England} (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 163–64.

\textsuperscript{11} Corfield, \textit{Power and the Professions}, 19.

likes of Harré and Habermas.\textsuperscript{13} Several accounts of the history of medicine also employ a performative model in their analysis of professional procedure; an example of such scholarly work will be used to frame much of the discussion that follows. In \textit{Bodies Politic} Roy Porter, with typical stylistic flair, perceives the role of the medic, especially before the nineteenth century, as a markedly theatrical one. What makes it most useful here, however, are the ideological implications of this theatre of the professions. Medical practice

was commended or condemned as performance and presentation, a theatre of healing (or cruelty) in which the doctor was a showman (or conman), and rhetoric and ritual were intrinsic to the art. In medicine show, style, gesture and a studied bedside manner all counted—and even performed cures.\textsuperscript{14}

As Porter’s linguistic playfulness highlights for us there was often little difference between condemnation and commendation, between showmanship and confidence trickery. The subtle line between the two is one that is travelled often in the course of Dickens’s career. In this chapter I track a gradual shift between Dickens’s earlier and later novels in the strengthening of the hold that the performance of professionalism has over individual identity. This is not just a narrative of simple progression, however. Elements of professional theatre and even satire persist in novels such as \textit{Little Dorrit} and \textit{Great Expectations}. Dickens shows himself, therefore, to be caught in a moment of transition for the professions, simultaneously looking back to an age


\textsuperscript{14} Roy Porter, \textit{Bodies Politic: Disease, Death and Doctors in Britain 1650–1900} (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 171. Jens Lachmund and Gunnar Stollberg provide a similar reading, positing ‘a sociology of medical practice that was essentially a dramaturgic one’. See Jens Lachmund and Gunnar Stollberg, ‘The Doctor, his Audience, and the Meaning of Illness. The Drama of Medical Practice in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’ in Lachmund and Stollberg, ed., \textit{The Social Construction of Illness: Illness and Medical Knowledge in the Past and Present} (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), 53. For a more critical view of this performative reading of professionalism see Ivan Illich, \textit{Disabling Professions} (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), 28: ‘professionalism […] is a powerful ritual which generates credence in the thing it does’.
of distrust and satire (to be discussed briefly in due course) and forward to the gradual legitimisation and defence of professional power.\(^{15}\)

II Bob Sawyer’s Spectacles: professionalism as performance in *The Pickwick Papers*

Steven Marcus claims that: ‘Behind the portrayal of the law in *Pickwick Papers* are the justices and bailiffs in *Roderick Random*, Thrasher in *Amelia*, and the entire representation of the law and its minions in *Jonathan Wild*’.\(^{16}\) Equally discernable but less often noticed is a clear link between the novel and professional satire in prints, plays and poems from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Caricatures of devilish lawyers and death-bringing doctors abound in prints engraved by the likes of James Gillray, Thomas Rowlandson and George Cruikshank.\(^{17}\) Examples from the drama of the period were often not much subtler. As his name suggests, Mr Wolf is a disreputable and profiteering lawyer, and titular target of the legal satire *The Pettyfogger Dramatized* (1797). Even in the lighter and more popular farce *Love, Law and Physic* (1813) the barrister character is called Flexible and is not exactly morally upright.\(^{18}\) It should be added that Dickens’s acquaintance with dramatic writing in this vein, and with this play in particular, was not just a passing one. In Forster’s *Life* we learn that Dickens had played Flexible in *Love, Law and Physic* ‘before his days of

\(^{15}\) Although if we are to follow David Trotter’s convincing argument this leads eventually only to ‘a psychopathy of expertise’. See *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8 and passim.


\(^{17}\) Dozens of such engravings are to be found in the British Satirical Prints collection at the British Museum. See F. G. Stephens and M. D. George, ed., *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires: Preserved in the British Museum, 1660–1830* (London: British Museum, 1936).

\(^{18}\) Equally heavy-handed critiques of the professions can be found in unremembered poetry including *The Pettifoggers. A Satire in Hudibrastick Verse* (London, 1723) and *The Professions: With Other Pieces in Verse* (London, 1836). Both are anonymous. Also for a useful general account of professional satire in the period see Corfield, *Power and the Professions*, 42–69.
authorship' and also reprised the role in a series of benefit performances for James Sheridan Knowles in 1848 (Forster, 275, 469).

This begins to explain the vividness of the fictional creations that are Dodson and Fogg, a pair of villainous lawyers to some extent informed by the spirit of the professional satires mentioned above. As a result their portrayal hardly seems subtle. They are maligned with labels which would not seem out of place in the bluntest of anti-professional satire. Variously, they are described as 'great scoundrels', 'two grasping attorneys' and most emphatically as 'a well-matched pair of mean, rascally, pettifogging robbers' (PP, 409, 244, 708). Not just morally dubious, they are physically unprepossessing too. Fogg especially is pinched and unhealthy-looking: 'an elderly, pimply-faced, vegetable-diet sort of man' (PP, 263). Even in the depiction of this most disreputable of professional duos, however, there are hints that another approach to assessing the professionals in *Pickwick* and in the novels more generally will be a productive one. At the very least, Dickens's account of them develops away from such material into distinctive (if still negative) directions. Fogg's inhumanity, for instance, is emphasised in an arrestingly literal way: he 'seemed to be an essential part of the desk at which he was writing, and to have as much thought or sentiment' (PP, 263). The account of their entrance into the courtroom during the trial of *Bardell v. Pickwick* only emphasises this lack of humanity further since their actions show that their professional concern is merely a (particularly cynical) performance. They purposely draw attention to themselves: 'An extra sized umbrella was then handed in by Mr Dodson, and a pair of pattens by Mr Fogg, each of whom had prepared a most sympathising and melancholy face for the occasion' (PP, 448). Their 'faces' are apparently convincing enough to convince the gathered spectators. They even receive
an appreciative review from Perker who whispers to Pickwick that they are 'Capital fellows' with 'excellent ideas of effect, my dear Sir, excellent' (PP, 449).

In *The Pickwick Papers*, Dodson and Fogg might be satirised as cold and selfish creatures. But within the benevolent world of the novel this is a satire that is carried through not with world-weary virulence, as it is in the later novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*,¹⁹ but with much broader humour. The final emphatic dressing down that they receive from Pickwick when he labels them ‘Robbers!’ does not really reflect badly on them. The joke is instead (as is evident from the barely suppressed giggling of the scene’s audience, Perker and Lowten) on the ridiculousness of Pickwick’s out-of-character behaviour (PP, 708–9). It is not possible to argue that the last mention of them in the text sanctions their behaviour exactly: ‘Messrs. Dodson and Fogg’, it is stated, ‘continue in business, from which they realise a large income, and in which they are universally considered among the sharpest of the sharp’ (PP, 753). It might be claimed, however, that, since they are so obvious about their unscrupulous intentions (although the trial scene is something of an exception), they are portrayed at least in a partly positive light. As Steven Marcus has rightly pointed out, Dickens censures those characters too quick to proclaim morality, whilst concealing darker motives. With specific focus on *Martin Chuzzlewit*, he notes that ‘Dickens never uses the words “moral” or “morality” in any but an ironic sense […] , he regarded all claims made in the name of morality with skepticism’.²⁰ Dodson and Fogg palpably do not claim that their actions are good or ‘moral’. Thus there seems to be a curious

¹⁹ In *Chuzzlewit* an even more debased form of professional theatre is on show. To invoke Roy Porter it is a sham put on by conmen rather than a performance acted out by showmen. This fact is demonstrated best, perhaps, by the great set-piece account of Anthony Chuzzlewit’s funeral in Chapter 19. Labelled, with the novel’s characteristic sense of skewed irony, a ‘pious and truthful ceremony’ the excessiveness of the funereal accoutrements gathered together to perform the gloomy spectacle only show up further how empty it is as a ritual (MC, 309).

²⁰ Marcus, *Pickwick to Dombey*, 236. See also John Bowen’s comments on the novel: ‘Acting on moral principle is […] a much more tricky affair in early Dickens. Almost anyone who expresses a moral principle […] is a hypocrite of one sort or another. […] Those who claim to know and speak for the moral law are invariably selfish and egotistical’ (*Other Dickens*, 21).
kind of respect for the stark honesty and professional competence of these lawyers, even if their professional practice lacks any real human concern.

It is only possible to play devil’s advocate with this legal duo to a point, however. They remain, in the thorough grip of professionalism, villains of the piece. The same is not true, on the other hand, of the novel’s most prominent medic, Bob Sawyer. He manages to be genuinely likeable despite his general lack of scrupulousness in a medical role, evident from the very start at his new practice in Bristol. He invests much value in a ‘professional’ exterior as possible: ‘I put on a black suit of clothes, and a pair of spectacles, and came here, to look as solemn as I could’ (PP, 508). His motives are, however, not very ‘solemn’ ones; professional disinterestedness, and the desire to selflessly do good do not seem a particularly pressing concern. Instead, as he readily admits, financial gain is his aim. In an exchange with Ben Allen, it appears at first that his motivations might be more altruistic. Bob notes ‘It’s wonderful how the poor people patronise me’, and goes on to detail the work he does for them. Ben suggests that this must be ‘very gratifying’ for Bob, only for the latter to reply pithily ‘Oh very, [...] only not quite so much so as the confidence of patients with a shilling or two to spare, would be’ (PP, 633). His intentions to make money from his profession are also revealed to the reader during his abortive consultation with Benjamin’s aunt when he is memorably described waiting ‘to hear detailed the symptoms of some disorder from which he saw in perspective a long train of profits and advantages’ (PP, 636).

It is often difficult to know if Sawyer is being unscrupulous or is just inept. In his reading of the text John Bowen suggests that it positively values failure. The fact, therefore, that ‘Pickwick is a humbug antiquarian or scientist; Winkle is neither the sportsman or skater he claims to be; Tupman is a failed lover; Snodgrass and Mrs Leo
Hunter are terrible poets'\textsuperscript{21} should not lead us automatically to judge them negatively. The inept actions of these characters are redeemed instead by the 'force of friendship, particularly male friendship'.\textsuperscript{22} Bob Sawyer, as a pretty useless doctor but trusted friend and good company (most of the time) to Benjamin Allen, should be counted amongst their number. Roy Porter puts it another way: 'laddish students in the mould of Bob Sawyer always come good in the end'.\textsuperscript{23} It is his generally good-humoured (and usually slightly inebriated) humanity that is valued in the novel. At a boozy dinner with Winkle in Bristol, for instance, an ineffectual attempt is made to create a professional atmosphere: 'There was no singing, because Mr Bob Sawyer said it wouldn’t look professional' (PP, 514). This pledge does not limit the 'unprofessional' boisterousness that cannot be suppressed by the group. Thus, 'to make amends for this deprivation there was so much talking and laughing that it might have been heard, and very likely was, at the end of the street' (PP, 514). It is in one of the novel's most famous comic scenes, though, that Bob Sawyer leaves aside what has been an ill-fitting appearance of professional gravity. Having given up his practice he joins the Pickwick group on their expedition to see Mr Winkle senior in Birmingham. An amazing transformation takes place:

So long as their progress was confined to the streets of Bristol, the facetious Bob kept his professional green spectacles on, and conducted himself with becoming steadiness and gravity of demeanour, [...] but when he emerged on the open road, he threw off his green spectacles and his gravity together, and performed a great variety of practical jokes (PP, 661–62).

With the symbol of his reluctant trade thrown off, his naturally jovial nature surfaces once more.

\textsuperscript{21} Bowen, Other Dickens, 57.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{23} Porter, Bodies Politic, 274–75.
It is the novel’s treatment of the professional behaviour of Pickwick’s diminutive legal man Mr Perker, though, that goes most intriguingly against expectation. Critics have viewed him as what might be thought of as an anomaly in Dickens’s fiction: a lawyer with some sense of scrupulousness in his professional actions. George Gissing, for instance, highlights his ‘vivacious acuteness and honesty’.

He has been described elsewhere as ‘Decent, able, and reliable’ if ‘nonetheless no match for Dodson and Fogg.’ It is true that his decency is often stressed. He is, variously, ‘good-natured’, ‘good-humoured’ and ‘kind-hearted’ (PP, 537, 623, 699). It is also significant that Pickwick places great trust and faith in his legal adviser. When the Bardell suit is first brought against him, he sees it as a pressingly vital need to consult with him: ‘I shall not be able to get one wink of sleep to-night, I know, unless I have the satisfaction of reflecting that I have confided this matter to a professional man’ (PP, 270).

Yet, often without realising it, Perker shows other sides of himself too. It is doubtful whether claims for his integrity can be confidently supported by his role as one of the agents for the corrupt Eatandswill election in Chapter 13. The claim, also, that he is ‘no match for Dodson and Fogg’ is true enough. It misses, however, an important aspect of how Parker relates to his fellow legal men. One of several similar exchanges between Perker and his clerk Lowten illustrates not their righteous frustration or anger at Dodson and Fogg’s unethical dealings but rather their professional respect for them: “‘The sharpest practitioners I ever knew, sir”, observed Lowten. “Sharp!” echoed Perker. “There’s no knowing where to have them.”” (PP,


There are clear signs that the position they take is not one shared by the novel. It is certainly a trait that is gently punctured. On one occasion, their collective reverie on considering the exceedingly sharp practice of Dodson and Fogg is described as an altered state, a ‘trance of admiration’ (PP, 622). With a surreally comic touch it is noted that:

> [B]oth master and man pondered for a few seconds with animated countenances, as if they were reflecting upon one of the most beautiful and ingenious discoveries that the intellect of man had ever made (PP, 622).

The bathetic, playful irony here clearly suggests that Perker and Lowten’s awed reverence for the sharp practice of Dodson and Fogg is misplaced.

There are other notable points during the novel when the professional ‘dignity’ of Mr Perker momentarily lapses. Having taken Pickwick to see Serjeant Snubbins in preparation for his upcoming trial, he engages in rather unseemly shoptalk with Mallard, Snubbins’s clerk. The pair enjoy a private joke about their own private gain, arising out of the misfortune of others. Perker begins

> “I suppose you’re too busy pocketing the ready money to think of the debtors, eh? Ha, ha, ha!”
> This sally seemed to tickle the clerk amazingly, and he once more enjoyed a quiet little laugh to himself (PP, 411).

That his professional mask has unwittingly fallen in front of his client becomes evident when we later see him ‘suddenly recovering his gravity’ (PP, 411). When Pickwick asks him if Jingle and Job Trotter might be reformed much later in the novel, it seems clear again that Perker quickly adapts his behaviour to match the situation. Pickwick asks

> “What do you think? Is there any chance of their permanent reformation?”
Perker shrugged his shoulders doubtfully, but observing Mr Pickwick’s anxious and disappointed look, rejoined—
> “Of course there is a chance. I hope it may prove a good one” (PP, 704).

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26 See also PP, 273, 458.
What we witness here is a hurried attempt to conceal a lack of interest in the subject raised. His response is formulated, in the end, entirely to please Pickwick. That Perker’s listless professional lack of interest is satirised here is made further evident by a later interruption from the narrator, who pithily notes that ‘these remarks, [...] were delivered in a much more animated and earnest manner than is usual in legal gentlemen’ (PP, 704).

This division in Perker’s portrayal—between a ruthless and self-interested lawyer and a thoroughly decent one—is demonstrated effectively even within the confines of one significant scene of professional action. In Chapter 10 of The Pickwick Papers we follow Perker, Wardle and Mr Pickwick in fast pursuit of Jingle, who is eloping with Wardle’s sister Rachael. They stop at a London coaching inn to question the then-unfamiliar boots Sam Weller about Jingle’s whereabouts. Throughout the scene Perker mystifies what he says with impenetrable jargon:

Ah, Pickwick—really Mr Pickwick, my dear sir, excuse me—I shall be happy to receive any private suggestions of yours, as amicus curiae, but you must see the impropriety of your interfering with my conduct in this case, with such an ad captandum argument, as the offer of half a guinea. Really, my dear Sir, really (PP, 136).

The Latinate legal phrases used here are unnecessary ones made ridiculous by their everyday context. Perker’s subsequent action—he ‘took an argumentative piece of snuff, and looked very profound’—is an equally revealing one that shows his mode of behaviour to be dignified but also rather pompous and forced. It is significant too that Perker’s professional performance appears in the same chapter as Sam’s comic complaint about a baser form of professional action: that of the work of the porters touting for marriage licences in Doctors’ Commons. Their gulling of Sam’s father

27 As Roy Porter notes in a different professional context the ‘Resort to extravagant or enigmatic expressions to blind with science has long been the target of medical satire’. See “‘Perplex’t with Tough Names’: The Uses of Medical Jargon” in Peter Burke and Roy Porter, ed., Languages and Jargons: Contributions to a Social History of Language (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 43.
Tony is of a very different order from Perker’s flummoxing of Pickwick. Yet they still show a pretence of respectability (enough for Tony at least) by showing him into ‘a little back office’ in which there is ‘a feller sat among dirty papers and tin boxes, making believe he was busy’ where Tony’s ‘lawyer’ promises to make out an affidavit for him (PP, 132). The presence of this degraded form of professional behaviour just a few pages before Perker’s supposedly more reputable sort encourages us to ponder what exactly the difference between them is, if there is any at all.

There is more to the sequence, however, than just straightforward satire. It is possible during its progress, indeed, to see new professional codes struggling into being. Both Dickens and his characters seem unsure of how best to read them. Despite the fact that during the exchange Perker attempts to impose the safely pre-determined shape of a professional consultation, the other participants in this professional mini-drama seem unfortunately unaware, to great comic effect, both of the roles that they must perform and the lines that Perker expects them to deliver. Pickwick himself is the first to stumble by interrupting the diminutive legal man and usurping what the latter sees as his role in the capacity as legal adviser; Perker, as a result, delivers the following sharp reprimand:

[T]he very first principle to be observed in these cases, is this; if you place the matter in the hands of a professional man, you must in no way interfere in the progress of the business; you must impose implicit confidence in him (PP, 136).

The self-importance of Perker’s demeanour here hints at an anxiousness to defend his own under-threat professional status. And as his subsequent very funny failure in controlling interruptions from Wardle and also being foiled by Sam’s easy wit demonstrate this anxiety certainly seems justified (PP, 136–42). These misunderstandings, moreover, reveal a lack of awareness of what the professional game is about by those excluded from it. Perker frustratedly reiterates later: ‘I’m quite
certain you cannot be ignorant of the extent of confidence which must be placed in professional men' (PP, 136). It appears, though, that they are ignorant of this notion, one of the developing tenets of professionalism, and would instead rather sort out problems personally.

In surveying the ranks of characters that make up the cast of *The Pickwick Papers* George Gissing notes that ‘Significant as any, with regard to the author’s future achievements, is Mr. Perker’. Gissing goes on to discuss Perker’s fundamental decency. While that has been questioned here, his original point still holds true for my argument. Perker is a surprisingly interesting character and is certainly ‘significant’, especially in making a first step towards a re-evaluation of his author’s engagement with professionalism in the novels. His attitude to professional life can be rather cold and self-interested and might even be categorised as inhumane. It is also possible to read his ‘good-natured’ qualities as merely surface ones, part of the construction of an astutely kind and benign professional veneer. Yet it is difficult to dismiss entirely Gissing’s perception that his ‘acuteness and honesty’ are often sincere. In the way that he manages to be both kind-hearted and professionally savvy, moreover, he prefigures professionals in the later novels who show evidence of having divided personalities. The gap between the two modes of being is simply more obvious and more comic in this instance. I will return subsequently to professionals in the later novels. Now my focus shifts from the professional performance itself to what comes before: finding the right professional role in the first place.

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III What Shall My Son Be? Shaping personalities and choosing professions

From the early 1850s Dickens was preoccupied with finding the right professional roles for his sons. Such a fact seems peculiar when seen alongside the view that his work is only naively critical about professional abuses. It emphasises, however, the precariousness of his position, critical to an extent of bourgeois professional culture yet keen to embrace it for the benefit of his offspring. In the section that follows I consider both the biographical detail of the professional education of Dickens’s sons and the dramatisation of the issues surrounding the choice of a profession in the novels within the context of contemporary literature that deals with the preparation of male children for the professions. This will show Dickens’s approach to the issue to be a distinctive one. It also underlines that the novels themselves are as worried as the advice books about the importance of determining character (and the dangers of not doing so) at an early age.

One of the defining texts dealing with the choice of and preparation for a professional path was R. L. Edgeworth’s *Essays on Professional Education* (1809). Edgeworth’s book attracted a good deal of critical attention in some of the weightier periodicals of the period, and its systematic style marked a change in approach to the subject. Nothing is left to accident in Edgeworth’s schema and the earliest start possible is viewed as an advantage: ‘In each profession there are certain principles essentially conducive to success; [...] the earlier the discipline is commenced, it will the sooner become easy and habitual’. Before the journey begins, Edgeworth recommends that the parents of the candidate seeking entry into the professions should try to match up the strengths and aptitudes of (almost invariably, at least mid-century) their son with a particular profession. Such traits may even be as arbitrary as

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the child’s physical type. He specifically notes ‘that bodily strength is less requisite for a physician than for a soldier or a lawyer’.

Both their physical and mental attributes, however, as Edgeworth goes on to claim, must be rigorously trained with an eventual professional destination in mind. Acting as a kind of guide for the worried middle-class parent, he systematically sets out the various characteristics of mind that should be encouraged and regimes introduced before entry to the church, law, medical or armed professions. He suggests, for instance, that in one ‘intended for a physician’, ‘an instinct of credulity, [...] should be strenuously counteracted from earliest infancy’ since ‘for a practising physician [...] the habit of doubting appears to be desirable’. Edgeworth even recommends that a child’s leisure hours should be devoted to preparation for his eventual calling. Po-faced, he asserts of budding medics that ‘To relieve and amuse the mind in intervals of serious study, the lives of eminent physicians may be read’.

This may strike the present day reader as disturbingly controlling parental behaviour. It is even satirised in the way that Eugene Wrayburn’s ‘Respected Father’ in Our Mutual Friend restricts the future lives of his children. This fringe character provides ‘(as he calls it) for his children by pre-arranging from the hour of the birth of each, and sometimes from an earlier period, what the devoted little victim’s calling and course in life should be’ (OMF, 149). Philip Collins hypothesises that there may be an element of knowing self-satire by Dickens in this, his last completed novel. It is certainly possible that this is a last gasp of self-mockery on Dickens’s part. Other evidence, however, points in the opposite direction and suggests that Dickens’s parenting was more in line with the sort recommended by Edgeworth. Or more

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31 Edgeworth, Professional Education, 203.
32 Ibid., 207.
33 Edgeworth, Professional Education, 208.
34 Ibid., 233.
accurately, since securing the right profession for one’s son continued to be a fraught issue for the middle-class parent later throughout the century, it was in accord with popular advice literature available at the time, ranging from pamphlets delivering basic information intended to aid parents preparing sons for entry into the professions via examination, to more substantive accounts like Edgeworth’s detailing ways in which sons might more generally be educated for a specific calling. Broadly, the emphasis of this strain of writing is still placed upon specific, early training. Yet a writer like Francis Davenant also stresses that the decision should also take into account the particular preference of the child as well as the leanings of the parent. Thus ‘it behoves parents then to consider what is best for their sons to do, not merely with reference to what they themselves wish, but also with reference to what their sons are actually fitted for’. 

Dickens was determined to discover at an early age what his sons were, as Davenant puts it, ‘actually fitted for’. He addressed this concern both directly to the child in question, but also to professional advisers with whom he had entrusted their care. A representative example comes in a letter to the Reverend Matthew Gibson, schoolmaster to his fifth son Sydney. Dickens is curious to know whether Gibson thinks

the gigantic Sydney really has any sort of Call to the Sea Service? He has often talked of it at home here, and has lately written an odd characteristic letter to one of his sisters, entreating her to make the Navy his profession (Letters VIII, 697–98).

He wants to be certain, it is clear, that this ‘ardour is in-bred in the boy’ rather than owing ‘to the frequent appearances here, in the last holidays, of a young Midshipman

37 Davenant, What Shall My Son Be?, 2.
38 See Arthur A. Adrian, Dickens and the Parent-Child Relationship (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1984), 37: ‘To no part of his children’s upbringing did Dickens devote more attention than to their education. Basically he was concerned that it should take into account their individual aptitudes’.
[...] in glorious buttons and with a real steel weapon in his belt’ (Letters VIII, 698). This suggests, then, that Dickens needs reassurance that his son is temperamentally suited—that the calling is, in his own words, ‘in-bred’—rather than simply being fleetingly dazzled by the superficial gloss of surface appearances as evident in this young sailor’s shiny buttons and blade. Once certain that he was ‘fitted for’ the Navy, however, Dickens was keen to start preparing him for his chosen path as early as possible. It was the same with all of his sons.\(^\text{39}\) Philip Collins notes that ‘It seems appallingly young to settle the boys’ future lives, but Miss Coutts as well as Dickens clearly assumes that they must begin making their dispositions so soon’.\(^\text{40}\) As has been pointed out, such early forming of a son’s disposition was not rare among middle-class families—or rather it was what advice literature prescribed. What makes Dickens’s parenting distinctive is its emphasis on the institutionalising of this process. At the age of twelve, for instance, Sydney was enrolled at a naval academy in Southsea. In an 1859 letter to its principal, the Reverend Ashton Burrow, Dickens requested that his son ‘be trained in the meantime [before his qualifying exams] with an immediate and direct view to the pursuit on which he has set his heart’ (Letters IX, 14).

Dickens’s attempts to locate and develop a preference for a specific future professional career in his sons, it should be mentioned, were not always successful. His intentions were generally to the good, but he often found it difficult to come to terms with their lack of drive and self-reliance. This was the case with his third son

\(^{39}\) Walter’s professional education began similarly early when he was just ten. As Philip Collins relates: ‘at ten he went to a military crammer’s at Putney, who prepared boys for Addiscombe and India, and at thirteen for a final two years at Wimbledon, “a great school ... where they train for India and the artillery and engineers”’. He had already been nominated to an Indian Army Cadetship at the age of eight. See *Dickens and Education*, 38.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 38.
Francis. It is in Dickens’s relationship with his eldest son Charley (or at least the version of it presented in his correspondence) that we find the most sustained evidence of Dickens’s struggle, and eventual failure, to set one of his sons on the right professional path. The story begins with Dickens eager to discover toward which profession Charley is aiming. As Collins tells us, ‘When he was fifteen, his father began to ask him seriously about his career’. Dickens recounts such earnest discussions with his son in a series of letters from 1852. The first of these details a ‘great talk’ they have at Dover about Charley’s possible entry into the army. Concerning the dialogue that has taken place, Dickens states that he wanted to put before his son ‘fairly and faithfully the objections to that career, no less than its advantages’ (Letters VI, 808). By the time their discussion has been resumed Charley has ‘come to the conclusion that he would rather be a merchant, and try to establish some good house of business’ (Letters VI, 808). Dickens as a result arranges for Charley to ‘leave Eton at Christmas, and go to Germany after the holidays to become well acquainted with that language—now most essential in such a walk of life as he will probably tread’ (Letters VI, 808), displaying again his belief in early, specific training in practical knowledge.

Dickens realised later that Charley’s late adolescent professional training had come, in any case, too late. His disposition had already been fixed. In an 1854 letter to Miss Burdett Coutts Dickens looks back over his eldest son’s education and its impact upon his personality. He doubts, to begin with, whether Charley’s innate nature is suited to the demands of a professional career, lamenting his ‘indescribable lassitude of character’ and noting with disappointment that he has ‘less fixed purpose and

41 In a letter to his schoolmaster, Rev Matthew Gibson, Dickens admits ‘I am a little puzzled to know what to do with Frank. I cannot quite understand him, and I take that cause to be, that he does not quite understand himself. Before he went to Germany, he was […] all agog to be a Doctor. From Germany, he wrote that he wished to abandon the idea’ (Letters IX, 121).
42 Collins, Dickens and Education, 33.
energy than I could have hoped possible in my son’ (Letters VII, 245). His ‘character’, importantly, has not been altered by his schooling. Dickens seems to regret his choice to send Charley to public school, since he retrospectively sees ‘the Eton system [as] a particularly bad one for such a character’ (Letters VII, 246). For Dickens a relaxed classical education with emphasis on the pleasurable acquisition of knowledge rather than its practical application has only encouraged these deleterious habits of mind.

Such issues surrounding the choice of a profession are raised at about the same time in the novels. The contours of Dickens’s vexations with Charley are reproduced in one particular fictional example, to which we will return. It is worth stopping first to consider more generally the relationship between Dickens’s life and his art in relation to this particular issue. Philip Collins has already speculated that ‘Perhaps […] some of the young men in the later novels reflect his anxiety about his sons, who were then beginning their careers’.43 This is worth pursuing since in the novels up until David Copperfield it is definitely true that there is much less choice—or at least overt discussion of that choice—involving in the professions that their young heroes follow. The career path of Nicholas Nickleby, for instance, is shaped much more by obligation and chance than by a conscious decision. By the time his eldest son was reaching maturity, however, such decisions started to be debated in his fiction. The difficulties he had with Charley, moreover, seem to colour the response of the novels to the issue since none of them show the choice to be an easy or straightforward one.

David Copperfield was written and published before Dickens started energetically discussing Charley’s future career with him. Once David has been rescued for respectability, however, the choice he has to make on what path in life he

43 Collins, Dickens and Education, 29.
should tread preoccupies him (and his Aunt Betsey) in the early phases of his
development. Unsure of which profession to follow, the many discussions he has
with his aunt about his future career end without conclusion. He attempts ‘to find a
satisfactory answer to her often-repeated question, “What I would like to be?’’. Yet
an important stumbling block remains. As David puts it: ‘I had no particular liking,
that I could discover, for anything’ (DC, 258). His initial choice, that of becoming a
proctor, is motivated instead by advice from Steerforth. When David asks him what
he thinks of the decision, his immediate, phlegmatic response is that he ‘may as well
do that as anything else’ (DC, 322). Upon consideration, however, Steerforth
resignedly ‘recommends’ the Doctors’ Commons life since ‘They plume themselves
on their gentility there’ (DC, 323). Ruth Danon argues rightly that David’s initial
choice is a poor one, since it is not healthily self-motivated. As she puts it, ‘He has
neither a real home nor work consistent with his nature’.\(^ {44} \)

Danon’s subsequent claim, that the eventual fulfilment and success David
enjoys as a professional writer ‘is dependent on self-knowledge, on the discovery of
properly chosen work, a vocation’,\(^ {45} \) is not quite as accurate, however. David’s rise to
literary fame is an almost accidental one; it seems that it chooses him rather than he
chooses it. The first step in his writing career, that of becoming a parliamentary
reporter, begins cautiously enough with a second-hand piece of advice that he thinks
might possibly be worth taking up. As David states: ‘I had heard that many men
distinguished in various pursuits had begun life by reporting the debates in
Parliament’ (DC, 487). David’s consideration of this career option values bettering
oneself and becoming ‘distinguished’. Parliamentary reporting is seen, thus, as a
means to an end (the ‘end’ being success) rather than as a route specifically to the

With thanks to Scott Freer for providing me with his copy of this critical book.
\(^ {45} \) Ibid., 61.
writing profession. His eventual turn to full-time authorship is, further, more like a timid leap of faith than an active, self-motivated choice. David meekly confides ‘I have taken with fear and trembling to authorship. I wrote a little something, in secret, and sent it to a magazine, and it was published in a magazine’ (DC, 578). If this is ‘properly chosen work’, as Danon has it, David still seems very unsure of it and himself, since his writing is carried out anonymously behind closed doors, and he refers to it himself pejoratively as ‘a little something’. That they were published at all seems a surprise to him. Even when he does finally become a well-respected literary man, David remains tight-lipped and inexpressive about the details of his writing life, wishing not to ‘enter on the aspirations, the delights, anxieties, and triumphs’ (DC, 776) of his art.

Yet childhood experiences do hint at a literary predisposition in David. At least this is what the adult David suggests in retrospect. In his early imaginative response to the street life he encounters during his time at Murdstone and Grinby’s he sees

an instance [...] of the manner in which I fitted my old books to my altered life, and made stories for myself, out of the streets, and out of men and women; and how some main points in the character I shall unconsciously develop, I suppose, in writing my life, were gradually forming all this while (DC, 164).

This is a powerfully-drawn remembrance but one nevertheless, especially with the telling insertion of ‘I suppose’, that shows a timidity in the conclusions David draws about being marked out as a writer. It is clear that the same insecurities that bothered his author affect David: even from the position from which he is writing, where his status and fame are assured, he still fears the humiliating return to the life of ‘a little labouring hind’ (DC, 150). This always colours his self-effacing attitude to his literary abilities. He categorises his dormitory story-telling at Salem House, for instance, in
similar terms as 'a simple, earnest manner of narrating' and 'rather hard work' (DC, 94). As a reluctant young bard he seems to undertake the task more to please Steerforth than to satisfy any instinctive story-telling urge (DC, 94). About his career as a famous author he is equally modest, professing that he 'laboured hard' (DC, 636) at a book, for instance, or that he 'worked early and late, patiently and hard' (DC, 751). As well as 'nature and accident' (DC, 636), it appears that a great deal of hard work makes David an author.

In *Bleak House*, the novel which Dickens began writing just over a year after he had finished *Copperfield*, Richard Carstone is, like David, indecisive about which profession to follow. Unlike David, however, he is not lucky enough to find his vocation by 'nature and accident'. It is more profitable to look not to the previous novel for an appropriate context for Richard's search, but rather to notice the marked similarities between his difficulty at deciding upon a career and the equally troubled route of Dickens's eldest son Charley into the professions. Both Esther and Jarndyce, as Dickens was with Charley, are in earnest about finding Richard the right profession. Jarndyce thinks it an absolute necessity: 'He must have a profession; he must make some choice for himself' (BH, 121). That the decision should be self-determined is seen as being important. Esther suggests a possible first step: 'Perhaps it would be best, first of all, [...] to ask Mr Richard what he inclines to himself' (BH, 122). This reveals, though, a misunderstanding of Richard's personality. Aside from a vague 'inclination of his childhood for the sea' (BH, 138), he has never shown much interest in following a particular calling. Instead, he shares Charley Dickens's 'indescribable lassitude of character' since he is described by Esther as 'one of the most restless creatures in the world' with a perplexing 'carelessness in his character'

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His eventual (arbitrary) choice of profession only illustrates this 'carelessness' further. After going through a list of professions in which Richard does not show much interest, Jarndyce part flippantly suggests that Carstone might consider becoming a surgeon. In response Richard enthusiastically (if unconvincingly) exclaims 'That's the thing, sir!' (BH, 198). Esther is wary, though, of this enthusiasm. With sad tone, she doubts 'if he had ever once thought of it before'. Further, she judges that

having never had much chance of finding out for himself what he was fitted for, and having never been guided to the discovery, he was taken by the newest idea, and was glad to get rid of the trouble of consideration (BH, 198).

That Richard 'has never had much chance of finding out what he was fitted for' is due, in part, to his implication in the dizzyingly confusing web of legal documentation that is the ongoing case of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce. Indeed, in trying to diagnose Richard's indecision of character Jarndyce himself places a good deal of the blame 'on that incomprehensible heap of uncertainty and procrastination on which he has been thrown from his birth' (BH, 197). Esther thinks, however, that his lack of direction may have more to do with deficiencies in his education, which has not 'guided' him to a future professional destination. It is with Esther's assessment of Richard's education, moreover, that the connections with Charley Dickens become clearest. It seems, indeed, to be a fictional fleshing out of Charley's expensive schooling at Eton, which Esther summarises as follows: 'He had been eight years at a public school, and had learnt, I understand, to make Latin Verses of several sorts, in the most admirable manner' (BH, 197). Esther's typically understated claim cannot hide the fact that there was little else 'admirable' for Dickens about such an education.
This point has important general implications for isolating another element of Dickens’s position on professional education and on the professions generally, and shows him to be part of a key moment of social change. Of Richard Esther ‘feel[s] more and more how much it was to be regretted that he had been educated in no habits of application and concentration’ (BH, 265). It seems sensible to assume that Dickens was of the same opinion, especially given his thoughts on the problems of his son’s own classical education. It is significant that in the nineteenth century the experience of such a form of schooling was one often enjoyed by those who went on to the respectable, liberal professions. In *Bleak House* itself Conversation Kenge makes an implicit link between Richard’s liberal education and the stable professional life that (he wrongly assumes) will follow for him. Having passed his youth in the ‘classic shades’, Kenge judges that he ‘will, no doubt, apply the habits, if not the principles and practice, of versification in that tongue […], to the more eminently practical field of action on which he enters’ (BH, 200). By challenging the usefulness of an education like Richard’s, Dickens is shown to be at his most progressive. In this way his writing both reflects and is an important part of changing attitudes to the old institutions of the learned professions. Inefficient and corrupt in their present form, they would slowly be replaced with better regulated and better trained individuals.

The substance of Dickens’s analysis remains much the same in *Little Dorrit*. His position, if anything, is an even more forcefully negative one, especially in what is one of his bluntest moments of professional satire. Professionals feature strongly in the long list of ‘magnates’ who gather around the personally unexceptional but financially-influential Merdle, seeking to share in the money that they wrongly think

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47 Parallels might be drawn here with Dora in *David Copperfield*, who is unprepared by her education for the realities of running a household. As Mary Poovey puts it, ‘Dora’s French education has given her grace but no practical knowledge or skill’. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), 92. See Chapter 4 for further discussion of domestic work.
he has, or controls (LD, 245). They, significantly, are from the learned professions, in this case the legal, medical and clerical. We, in fact, do not learn a great deal more about them, and they function not as fully-realised characters but as representative of strangely individualised types: as Bar, Physician and Bishop. But then that is Dickens’s point: that, since members of the established professions are in the lap of speculators and money-hungry capitalists, they have descended to inhuman caricatures of themselves, to a collection of empty mechanical gestures such as Bar’s ‘Jury droop and persuasive eyeglass’ (LD, 248). In its spirit of forceful strangeness it echoes and prefigures the angry but fanciful articles Dickens was writing as a journalist at the time for Household Words. What the novel offers in addition to the effective satiric attack in these pieces, though, is a positive account of an alternative kind of professionalism, as it is displayed in the figure of the engineer, Daniel Doyce. Doyce’s professional training seems more like an apprenticeship: he had ‘b[ou]nd himself to a working engineer, under whom he had laboured hard, learned hard, and lived hard, seven years’ (LD, 190). In his actions he is always practical and devoted to his ‘trade’, even to the point of short-sightedness about other affairs. It is this kind of emerging professional in which Dickens’s fiction seems to have faith in the latter years of his career. Doyce’s emigration to a country with ‘energetic notions of How to do it’ (LD, 643) is therefore further confirmation of the growing disillusionment in the later novels with the state of things as they are.

48 Q. D. Leavis suggests that “Physician” in Little Dorrit, [is] named generically like a character in a morality-play—which the scenes in the Merdles’ house would seem to suggest’. F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), 183. My reading of the significance of his generic naming diverges from Leavis’s interpretation that Physician (importantly not the other two) is ‘the truly wise man as well as truly good’ (Ibid., 183).

49 I am thinking specifically of pieces such as ‘The Toady Tree’ (26 May 1855) and ‘Cheap Patriotism’ (9 June 1855) both of which are reprinted in Volume 3 of the Dent Uniform Edition of the journalism. In his Introduction to the volume Michael Slater argues that Dickens’s ‘Household Words articles for 1855–56 can be seen as providing a very pertinent commentary on the novel’ (DJ III, xv).
IV A ‘lowering magazine of dust’: Brain work and professional responsibility in *Bleak House*

Mr Tulkinghorn seems exactly the kind of old-fashioned man from the upper stratum of the professional classes that Dickens satirises in the scenes from *Little Dorrit* discussed above. Memorably described as ‘An oyster of the old school’, he ‘is not in a common way’ of business and is often ‘speechlessly at home in country-houses’ (BH, 158–59). Like the decaying aristocracy that he serves, he is decidedly behind-the-times, and this fact shows itself even in the detail of his chambers:

Like as he is to look at, so is his apartment in the dusk of the present afternoon. Rusty, out of date, withdrawing from attention, able to afford it. Heavy broad-backed old-fashioned mahogany and horse-hair chairs, not easily lifted, obsolete tables with spindle-legs and dusty baize covers, presentation prints of the holders of great titles of the last generation, or the last but one, environ him (BH, 158–59).

His physical form may be more realised than Bar and Physician, but he is equally as lifeless: ‘a hard-grained man, close, dry, and silent’ who is ‘a mystery to everyone’ (BH, 352–53). He is hardly as transparent as them in nestling himself up to whoever holds (or is perceived to hold) power. At one point he claims that his interests are Sir Leicester’s: ‘The sole consideration in this unhappy case is Sir Leicester’ (BH, 657). Yet his unfeeling, extreme secrecy ultimately makes guessing at his motives for pursuing Lady Dedlock so ‘doggedly and steadily, with no touch of compunction, remorse, or pity’ particularly difficult even for the novel’s omniscient third person narrator (BH, 459). In Chapter 29 there is an attempt to determine what these motivations might be, yet as the passage’s excessive conditionality confirms, these remain ultimately ungraspable. A variety of possibilities are mentioned: he is disgusted at ‘her beauty, and all the state and brilliancy surrounding her’, perhaps, or is resentful of his position as ‘a distant beam’ of the ‘splendour’ of the aristocratic world (BH, 459). More simply, he might be driven by sheer ‘love of power’ or is just
‘determined to have nothing hidden from him in ground where he has burrowed among secrets all his life’ (BH, 459). In an important sense none of this matters, however. As we are told at the end of the paragraph detailing what might be pushing him on with such doggedness: ‘my Lady had better have five thousand pairs of fashionable eyes upon her, in distrustful vigilance, than the two eyes of this rusty lawyer’ (BH, 459). His obsessive methods of working are dangerous for Dickens whatever his motivations might be.

The novel is generally critical of the kind of emotionally empty and suspicious intellectual work in which Tulkinghorn takes such a disturbing pleasure. Not only that: this critique of ‘brain work’ (a more detailed consideration of the specifically nineteenth-century meanings of this term will follow later) emerges suggestively in the form of repeated reference to a particular image, that of dust and dustiness. It is usually Our Mutual Friend that is considered Dickens’s dustiest novel; it accumulates in the pages of Bleak House too, however, especially in spaces occupied by the novel’s brain workers. Dust, furthermore, does not only adhere to the locality in which these characters are based; rather there is a kind of synergy between dusty place and dusty inhabitant. Tulkinghorn is perhaps the most obvious example. His chambers are memorably described as a ‘towering magazine of dust’ containing ‘the universal article into which his papers and himself, and all his clients and all things of earth, animate and inanimate, are resolving’ (BH, 352). The image of a ‘magazine’ implies that Tulkinghorn uses dust as a weapon: a means of obfuscating both his work and his self, and of impassively avoiding the need for any human contact. It seems too that his dusty rooms produce dust, and might even be tentatively labelled a factory of

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50 Kate Flint describes Our Mutual Friend as being ‘notoriously permeated with dust imagery’, and also informs us that ‘Dickens considered “Dust” as a possible title’. See ““The Mote Within the Eye”: Dust and Victorian Vision” in Juliet John and Alice Jenkins, ed., Rethinking Victorian Culture (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 48.
the stuff since ‘Plenty of dust comes in at Mr Tulkinghorn’s windows, and plenty more has generated among his furniture and papers. It lies thick everywhere’ (BH, 352). Startling connections (in a novel, after all, primarily concerned with such unexpected links) begin to appear, however, between seemingly disparate but equally dusty characters: Mrs Jellyby, Richard Carstone and even Mrs Snagsby. Thus when Conversation Kenge casts his ‘eyes over the dusty hearth-rug as if it were Mrs Jellyby’s biography’ (BH, 49), it is suggested that dustiness can mingle with an imagined representation of her selfhood. And, much later in the novel, Esther Summerson observes Richard Carstone ‘poring over a table covered with dusty bundles of papers which seemed […] like dusty mirrors reflecting his own mind’ (BH, 784). With the particularly marked repetition of ‘dusty’ here Richard seems to be enclosed in his own cloud of the substance. Another of this group of dusty obsessives, Mrs Snagsby, almost literally manufactures dust. With a great darkly comic touch, Dickens surrounds her with ‘her own dense atmosphere of dust, arising from the ceaseless working of her mill of jealousy’ (BH, 828). In this most extreme of instances, dust is generated entirely by the self.

The symbolic qualities of dust, as has been suggested by Kate Flint, are particularly rich. As she puts it:

> Its long-standing equation with the most reductive form of matter to which we must all return—"dust to dust"—ensures that its evocation was full of metaphorical opportunities.\(^{51}\)

It does not require a great conceptual leap, therefore, to suggest a possible interpretation of the connection between dustiness and this group of cerebral strivers. Simply, the repeated trope suggests, the kind of soulless brain work carried out by the characters at hand creates a kind of spiritual death, or even, in an acute case that I

\(^{51}\) Flint, “The Mote Within the Eye”, 47.
shall investigate later, brings on actual death. The flexibility of dust as a metaphor, as observed by Flint, also allows for a subtler reading. 'Dust', or rather its associated adjective 'dusty' had begun to gather an alternative figurative meaning in the early nineteenth-century linked particularly to intellectual work. Teasing out the precise root of this specific use of the term, though, is difficult. According to the OED it derives from Dryasdust who appears, in different incarnations, both in Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) and Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), though became synonymous with anyone 'who occupies himself with the driest and most uninteresting details'. But it might also be a development of an archaic meaning of 'dusty' dated from the early seventeenth-century signifying 'mean, worthless or vile'. This, however, is not necessarily a problem in interpreting Dickens's use of the term as symbol. Instead, the deeply dusty nature of these brain workers carries with it all of these nuanced, if essentially negative possible readings, and develops a complex sense of intellectual aridity.

Brain work, moreover, is not only rendered suggestively and poetically via its association with dust and dustiness in the novel; Dickens also observes the psychological and even physical dangers of excessive cerebral labour more directly. This places him within a context of contemporary medical interest in what was called 'Brain Work' or 'Over Work'. It was thought that these synonymous problems might lead to 'Brain-Fag'—an archaic term for mental exhaustion—and perhaps an eventual sad, slow decline into the grave. The expression surfaces in varied, sometimes non-specialist mid-century sources. But the issue only really began to

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52 *OED, 2nd edn, s.v. “dusty, a.”*


54 The year of over work's first citation in the *OED* is 1812. In her *Autobiography*, Harriet Martineau mentions the 'incessant rebukes and remonstrances' from her friends 'about [her] over-work'. Excerpted in Keith Thomas, ed., *The Oxford Book of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999),
engage the medical community—at least in the printed literature—in the century’s later years. Although written by a diverse group including respected medics, homeopaths and journalists, the sources do broadly concur in their diagnosis of the causes and subsequent symptoms of the complaint. They do not criticise ‘brain work’ per se; instead often praising it, like Horatio Wood, who claims that ‘Brain-work, if it be not too severe, brings its reward with it in a continual renewal of interest in life’.

Rather, it is a particular kind of excessive intellectual activity, they suggest, that might bring danger to body and soul. The effects of such intense brain work, some members of the medical community believed, might even be as serious as death. That this idea filtered out into the wider culture is memorably, even luridly demonstrated in a Macmillan’s article by journalist W.G. Blaikie, who claims that ‘it is true that overwork is an evil. It is more—it is often a murderer’.

Rereading Richard Carstone’s character in light of this contextual material provides convincing evidence to suggest that such concentrated intellectual work brings about his eventual demise. This may at first seem surprising and even far-fetched; Carstone, after all, appears to be rather aimless, unable to settle to a stable middle-class profession (this particular aspect of his character having been explored earlier) and certainly not the type to be described as a hard worker. While this is probably true of him in the first half of the novel, it is not an accurate assessment of his gradual deterioration at the novel’s close. But before now critics have not aligned this part of the character’s trajectory with the theories of excessive brain work just

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177-78. It is also discussed, if not directly labelled, by Sir Benjamin Brodie in his discursive, speculative series of dialogues concerned with issues of body and mind entitled Psychological Inquiries (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853).


57 For a consideration of how psychological work done on overwork is also relevant to a reading of some of Dickens’s supernatural fictions see David J. Greenman, ‘The Alienation of Dickens’s Haunted Businessmen’, Dickens Quarterly 7 (1990), 384-92.
mentioned. In analysing the causes of his downfall, Robert Alan Donovan suggests that Carstone ‘undergoes a slow moral deterioration because he is gradually seduced into believing in Chancery’.\textsuperscript{58} While this is of course true, it diagnoses the cause rather than the symptoms of Richard’s ‘deterioration’. Donovan continues by separating out the mental from the physical, claiming that ‘though its physiological causes may be as obscure as those of Krook’s death, its psychological causes are palpable and satisfying’.\textsuperscript{59} To disconnect the ‘psychological’ from the ‘physiological’ is, however, anachronistic, since the two were implicated with each other in the medical writings of the nineteenth-century. Reconsidering Carstone’s fall within this context enriches our understanding of both him and Dickens’s take on intellectual labour.

There are, indeed, many close parallels between the portrayal of Richard late in the novel and the actual symptoms described in the contemporary material on brain work. The stress placed on the pitch of excitement and worry rather than the actual quantity of work done applies particularly to Richard. Thus, although Esther finds him ‘poring over a table covered with dusty bundles of papers’ (BH, 784), as with many other actors on the Dickens stage, the actual work he undertakes remains vague. The impact on the self, however, does not. As Richard himself complains ‘I get so tired. […] It is such weary, weary work!’ (BH, 785). There is little doubt of the degenerative effects this kind of work has on his physical and mental well-being, and, in fact, Esther later revealingly describes his sinking ‘into a lethargy of mind and body’ (BH, 936). Another account by her of a fast deteriorating Richard claims that she


\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 96.
found Richard thin and languid, slovenly in his dress, abstracted in his manner, forcing his spirits now and then, and at other intervals relapsing into a dull thoughtfulness. About his large bright eyes that used to be so merry, there was a wanness and a restlessness that changed them altogether (BH, 926).

Turning back to Routh’s diagnosis of premature mental decay brought on by overwork some striking similarities emerge. The typical symptoms of sufferers he lists include ‘general debility of the body, inability to walk even short distances without fatigue, general feeling of languor, unwillingness to any active exertion’. Routh also diagnoses an alteration in the characteristic behaviour of the subject. Thus

A change is gradually observed to come over the man’s mind; and generally some peculiarity develops itself in the character, not previously noticeable in the affected person. [...] He takes, without any apparent reason, likes and dislikes to those with whom he is associated, often his nearest relatives, whose motives he invariably misunderstands.

Tellingly, this switch in personality observed by Routh in sufferers of the malaise in general is particularly apparent in the changed behaviour of Richard. Esther laments that ‘He ate little and seemed indifferent what it was; showed himself to be much more impatient than he used to be; and was quick, even with Ada’ (BH, 926).

The novel importantly offers an alternative to the destructiveness of these various kinds of intellectual work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is work done by the more progressive professionals in *Bleak House* that shows the effectiveness of a more instinctive and emotional (rather than cerebral and calculating) version of professional action. Allan Woodcourt’s work in the ‘miserable by-ways’ of Tom-All-Alone’s, therefore, is imbued with a ‘compassionate interest’ in the lives of the poor and an accompanying deeper knowledge: he ‘seems to understand such wretchedness, and to have studied it before’ (BH, 711). He interacts with the inhabitants of the slum on

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61 Ibid., 15–16.
their own level and possesses ‘A habit in him of speaking to the poor, and of avoiding patronage or condescension, or childishness’ (BH, 711). Woodcourt, moreover, displays effective medical skills that match his conciliatory manner. After putting his patient at ease, ‘He knows that by touching her with his skilful and accustomed hand, he can soothe her yet more readily’ (BH, 712). His doctoring is described with an almost poetic aura of quiet usefulness: ‘He cleanses the injured place and dries it; and having carefully examined it and gently pressed it with the palm of his hands, takes a small case from his pocket, dresses it, and binds it up’ (BH, 712). The prominence of verbs in the line, and the adjectives that go with them, highlight syntactically that Woodcourt’s professional activity is caring and purposeful.

Inspector Bucket, similarly, is rigorous about his professional duties but also tries to carry them out with what Q. D. Leavis calls ‘his everyday good-heartedness’. When visiting the Bagnet family home in order to arrest George, for instance, he so charms the assembled company with his hearty air of bonhomic, and is throughout ‘so pleasant a character’ (BH, 760), that soon enough his ‘blandishments have entirely won the family heart’ (BH, 760). Even a sceptical Trooper George considers Bucket ‘a new and agreeable feature in the evening’ and begins ‘to be rather proud of him’ (BH, 764). And, furthermore, in carrying out his professional duty by arresting George, his agreeable and ‘pleasant’ demeanour remains: he attaches the handcuffs ‘with his upholsterer manner’, or alternatively with the semblance of ‘a most respectable tradesman’ (BH, 767). His personability is also a thread that runs through his pursuit of Lady Dedlock with Esther. The latter notes, for example, that ‘everybody seemed to know and defer to Bucket’ (BH, 870). She further claims that ‘I had heard him ordering drink, making himself agreeable and merry everywhere’ (BH,

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62 Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, 139.
And as the journey progresses, she notices that 'he was up and down at every house he came to; addressing people whom he had never met before, as old acquaintances' (BH, 881). Once more, in carrying out his professional duties, he does so with good heart and human feeling.

This is not the entire picture, however. The demands of professionalism take their toll on the humanity of both of these characters. In an important early scene we meet the novel's medical man for the first time beside Nemo's deathbed. Here, Allan Woodcourt seemingly shows real and human interest in the details of the life of this recently departed individual. He muses 'not unfeelingly, while sitting on the bedstead’s edge, with his face towards that other face, and his hand upon the region of the heart' (BH, 168) about the position from which Nemo has fallen. This, we must assume, is what leads Q.D. Leavis to claim that he is 'shown [...] at Nemo’s deathbed possessed of a humanity conspicuously lacking in Mr Tulkinghorn and Krook who are there too'. But this seems to oversimplify the scene; Woodcourt’s response is an emotional one, but is also in part detached, since ‘the young surgeon’s professional interest in death’ is also ‘noticeable as being quite apart from his remarks on the deceased as an individual’ (BH, 168). Bruce Robbins provocatively confirms such a claim: ‘Even in Woodcourt, whose attachment to the medical profession seems an unqualified ideal, Dickens hints at a certain inhumanity’.

Bucket faces similar challenges since his ‘occupations are irreconcilable with home enjoyment’ (BH, 803–4). Bruce Robbins is also rightly sceptical about how sincere or deeply-held ‘his everyday good-heartedness’ actually is, calling Bucket’s ‘professional callousness [...] both morally questionable and socially powerful’.

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63 Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, 139.
65 Ibid., 225.
profoundly mysterious appearance highlights imagistically the professional enigma that he remains throughout the novel. J. Hillis Miller provides a useful starting point by analysing how Bucket's peculiar intelligence works:

Whereas Tulkinghorn worked retrospectively, piecing together some past event from data uncovered in the present, Bucket, the master detective, is able to act, by a kind of superb logic which works like intuition, in the present.66

'Intuition' captures perfectly an aspect of Bucket's modus operandi. It suggests, in contrast to the novel's other brainworkers, that it is an entirely natural process not requiring overstrained intellectual effort. It also hints at something that is ungraspable and difficult to understand, like he is. The very first time we see him he has a 'ghostly manner of appearing' (BH, 355). More elusively, as he walks with Snagsby to Gridley's, he 'seems in some undefinable manner to lurk and lounge' (BH, 357). Later, in the hunt for Tulkinghorn's killer, he 'pervades a vast number of houses' (BH, 803), the choice of verb here being subtly suggestive of a kind of haunting. Final confirmation of his spectral ubiquity comes with the suggestion that 'Time and place cannot bind Mr Bucket' (BH, 803). With this also follows a sense of almost-immortality, or as Hillis Miller puts it, 'Dickens describes [Bucket] in language which reminds us of that used to define an immanent deity'.67 His ghostly ever-presence may in this manner define itself against the deathly materiality of the dusty characters examined earlier. The very mysteriousness of the 'ghostly manner of [his] appearing', however, suggests that he remains an enigmatic figure morally too.

67 Ibid., 175.
V ‘I hardly knew what to make of Mr Jaggers’s manner’: Pip and the professionals

At one point in *Great Expectations* Pip frankly admits to Wemmick that he ‘hardly knew what to make of Mr Jaggers’s manner’ (GE, 198). Throughout its critical history, interpreters of the novel have been faced with a similar problem to its hero in approaching the lawyer who will be my prime and concluding focus here: what as readers *should* we make of Jaggers? According to Angus Wilson he is ‘the strangest, most enigmatic figure in the book, perhaps in all Dickens’ work’: ‘it is almost impossible to pin him down’. He has certainly divided generations of critics and been the subject of at least two public disagreements. Most recent of these is John Batchelor’s response to Vincent Newey’s reading of Jaggers (and Wemmick) in *The Scriptures of Charles Dickens*. Batchelor opens a review of Newey’s study with ‘a quibble’:

I don’t buy into Newey’s notion that Wemmick and Jaggers can be seen as behaving in their professional lives in an amoral and inhuman manner, nor do I think that Jaggers is a bully who rules by fear. On the contrary, I think that Jaggers and Wemmick are valued by the novelist, by the reader and in the end by Pip for their assured professional competence. The observation of legal technicalities and formalities—that inflexible code which prevents Jaggers from revealing to Pip that it is Magwitch, not Miss Havisham, who is his secret benefactor—is part and parcel of the professionalism that Dickens admired.

Batchelor’s claims are emphatic and suggestive ones which, I aim to demonstrate in this section, are broadly true. In their boldness, however, they sidestep what is so difficult and so great about the novel: that it is never easy to decide precisely how something is being ‘valued’ by Pip, Dickens or the reader. This is what has,

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paradoxically, both hampered and energised critical discussion of Jaggers. He remains, to an extent, unexplainable, or according to Angus Wilson ‘enigmatic’.

Batchelor also slightly misrepresents what is most engaging about Newey’s reading, especially as it relates not to Jaggers but Wemmick. Batchelor’s summary of Newey’s point, that they ‘can be seen as behaving in their professional lives in an amoral and inhuman manner’ (my italics), is not quite right since Newey actually stresses in his account that it is not possible in the novel to maintain a defendable distinction between the professional and the personal. Wemmick may desperately attempt to keep his ‘Walworth sentiments’ apart from his London ones, but the separation between the two spheres is always a compromised one. As Newey emphatically puts it, ‘In some respects there are connections between London and Walworth’. His ‘portable property’ (GE, 451) is one such connection making sure that the slightly gruesome taint of the legal and criminal world is transferred into his cosy, domesticated realm. More telling even, as Newey points out, is the fact that ‘it becomes apparent that the whole of Wemmick’s fixed property has been built on the proceeds of the dubious business of the Law’.

This undermining of the apparent division between the professional and private spheres seems a revelation in relation to Wemmick, famously (but not quite correctly) labelled as a prime example of ‘the concept of the Split Man’ by Q. D. Leavis. There is, in contrast, no such separation to question for Jaggers. Pip discovers when he dines with his guardian for the first time that he is, unlike Wemmick, no lover of homely comforts:

73 Leavis, Dickens the Novelist, 139.
There was a bookcase in the room; I saw, from the backs of the books, that they were about evidence, criminal law, criminal biography, trials, acts of parliament, and such things. The furniture was all very solid and good, like his watch chain. It had an official look, however, and there was nothing merely ornamental to be seen. In a corner, was a little table of papers with a shaded lamp: so that he seemed to bring the office home with him in that respect too, and to wheel it out of an evening and fall to work (GE, 211).

The accumulation of detail here makes obvious the fact that for Jaggers there is no easy dividing line between his domicile and office. This is as equally true of the man as his environment. As Ruth Danon succinctly puts it, he ‘is defined by his profession and by the way that he performs it’.\(^7\)\(^4\) His professional demeanour is rarely challenged; as Pip notes he is ‘too self-possessed to change’ it (GE, 410). We may only get the merest of glimpses of his inner being. As this suggests, however, his manner is, in an important sense, still a performance, if an especially assured one. He uses, for instance, his finger to underline a point or to ‘express’, Pip thinks, ‘that he knew all kinds of things to my disparagement’ (GE, 139). Or by skilfully deploying his ‘expressive pocket-handkerchief’ he possesses the power to ‘so terrify a client or a witness’ merely by unfolding it (GE, 240). Jaggers’s style of professional theatre, it should be underlined, makes an instructive contrast with the already-discussed theatricalised actions of professionals in earlier novels. Now there is no (or little) visible difference between the acting-out of the professional role and the private one. Laughter or bemusement—the typical response to earlier versions of professional performance—has been replaced by something much grander, noticed by Pip during a visit to a trial at a ‘crowded police-court’. He stands by ‘while [his] guardian had a woman under examination or cross-examination—I don’t know which—and was striking her, and the bench, and everybody with awe’ (GE, 202).

\(^{74}\) Danon, *Work in the English Novel*, 129.
In an important early scene we are given good reason to suppose that Jaggers's impressive and composed professionalism is to be valued by the onlookers inside the text and the readers outside of it. The setting is 'round the fire at the Three Jolly Bargemen', and Wopsle is entertaining the gathered drinkers with a particularly energetic re-enactment of a newspaper account of a 'popular murder' (GE, 133):

He gloated over every abhorrent adjective in the description, and identified himself with every witness at the Inquest. He faintly moaned, "I am done for," as the victim, and he barbarously bellowed, "I'll serve you out," as the murderer. He gave the medical testimony, in pointed imitation of our local practitioner; [...] The coroner, in Mr Wopsle's hands, became Timon of Athens; the beadle, Coriolanus (GE, 133).

On one level his pretty inept acting-out of the lurid detail of this real life tale is very funny. Even the playfully alliterative prose seems to join in on the joke. But something much more serious also undercuts Dickens's comic vision. The scene contains some very pointed satire of the small-minded, small town attitude personified, in this instance, by Wopsle and the regulars at the Bargemen. Seemingly at a safe distance from the horrible actualities of the case, they turn it into a mere entertainment, a badly-acted Newgate melodrama, in which Wopsle 'enjoyed himself thoroughly, and we all enjoyed ourselves, and were delightfully comfortable. In this cosy state of mind we came to the verdict of Wilful Murder' (GE, 133). The use of 'cosy' here is strongly disparaging of their safe but blinkered provincialism. The point is pushed home by Jaggers's stunning professional response to the judgement Wopsle passes so readily and unthinkingly, itself also a performance, but one of a very different order. By turning the Bargemen into a kind of court-room and Wopsle into a witness under cross-examination, Jaggers seeks to prove a basic principle of English law to the rather unfortunate parish clerk. He firmly asks him, 'Do you know, or do you not know, that the law of England supposes every man to be innocent, until he is proved—proved—to be guilty' (GE, 134). In the dressing down that follows Jaggers
demonstrates that, while not perfect, it is the clinical detachment of the professional system that is the best way to deal with such difficulties in the world of the novel and the society that created it, and not the easy playing-up of its sensational elements. His performance, in fact, beats out Wopsle’s more diverting one so that all present, according to Pip, ‘were all deeply persuaded that the unfortunate Wopsle had gone too far, and had better stop in his reckless career while there was yet time’ (GE, 136).

In the same chapter, however, the young Pip notices that aspects of Jaggers’s manner are, at the very least, ambiguous ones. He has, for instance, a rather forbidding ‘air of authority not to be disputed’ and ‘a certain air of bullying suspicion’ which ‘he could not get rid of’ (GE, 139). These qualities are evident enough, although perhaps justified, in his thorough humiliation of Wopsle: the effective achievement of professional goals is tempered somewhat by his ‘bludgeoning approach’. For much of the novel, Pip remains unsure what to make of his guardian’s actions and bearing. He may be ‘not designed for any profession’ (GE, 197), but it might be suggested that one of Pip’s roles in the novel, maybe even a kind of profession, seems to be to act as observer and interpreter of the behaviour of its professionals. He confronts Wemmick about Jaggers’s impenetrability, for instance, in a memorable early scene, and informs the clerk in a remark that I have already quoted that he ‘hardly knew what to make of Mr Jaggers’s manner’ (GE, 198). Wemmick thinks his employer will take such a comment ‘as a compliment, […] he don’t mean that you should know what to make of it, […] it’s not personal; it’s professional: only professional’ (GE, 198). Wemmick metaphorically fleshes out the picture of Jaggers further, adding that he is ‘Deep […] as Australia. If there was anything deeper, […] he’d be it’ (GE, 199). He continues by suggesting that it always

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75 Newey, The Scriptures of Charles Dickens, 204.
seems to him ‘as if [Jaggers] had set a man-trap and was watching it. Suddenly—click—you’re caught’ (GE, 199). Wemmick says this with professional pride; Pip is not so sure how to react, thinking to himself but not ‘remarking that man-traps were not among the amenities of life’ (GE, 199). In a later remark his uneasiness is concealed by ironic admiration: ‘I was very much impressed, and not for the first time, by my guardian’s subtlety. To confess the truth, I very heartily wished, and not for the first time, that I had some other guardian of minor abilities’ (GE, 263–64).

It is difficult not to be troubled, indeed, by the treatment of his housekeeper Molly, ‘whom’, as Q. D. Leavis puts it, ‘he exhibits cruelly as a wild animal he alone can handle’. During the dinner party Jaggers gives in Chapter 26, Pip senses the fear Molly has of her master by the nervousness of the actions she makes around the table, and notices too that Jaggers seems aware of the control he holds over her:

I observed that […] she kept her eyes attentively on my guardian, and that she would remove her hands from any dish she put before him, hesitatingly, as if she dreaded his calling her back, and wanted him to speak when she was nigh, if he had anything to say. I fancied that I could detect in his manner a consciousness of this, and a purpose of always holding her in suspense (GE, 213).

This fear certainly seems justified when we see the mechanism of the ‘man-trap’ that Wemmick so admires springing into cruel, even brutal action later in the scene. His actions are described in exactly these terms: to show off her impressively muscular wrist Jaggers ‘clapped his large hand on the housekeeper’s like a trap, as she stretched it across the table’ (GE, 214). Despite her repeated protests he forces her to show them to his guests, and cursorily dismisses her once the ordeal is over: ‘That’ll do Molly, […]; you have been admired, and can go’ (GE, 214). Yet even at this relatively early stage of Pip’s progress it is possible to perceive hints that the relationship between Jaggers and Molly is more complex than it seems, and that much

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76 Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, 310.
of what goes on in the scene can be interpreted as merely being part of a ‘show’ to convince his young guests of his impressiveness as a professional operator. Since we never hear Molly’s story in her own words, we must reconstruct it through the testimony of others or attempt to read it through fleeting signs and gestures. In their ambiguity, the glances that she makes during her exhibition suggest that she might be a willing actor in Jaggers’s professional spectacle rather than a suffering victim. Pip describes the way that ‘she took her eyes from Mr Jaggers, and turned them watchfully on every one of the rest of us in succession’ (GE, 214). There is the strong sense here that, rather than pleadingly looking at them for sympathy, Molly is instead mechanically playing a part for Jaggers. The lawyer’s own behaviour is described in typically detached terms: as well as ‘coolly tracing out [her] sinews with his forefinger’, ‘he said these words in a leisurely critical style’ (GE, 214). If his is a ‘cruelty’ it is of a particularly clinical and composed kind. Later revelations also suggest other ways of reading their connection. Wemmick hints that much about the relationship is hidden, since how he tamed her is ‘his secret’ (GE, 392). We later find out that his ‘taming’ of her was, at least initially according to Jaggers himself, a rather placid one: ‘when she was set at liberty, she was scared out of the ways of the world and went to him to be sheltered’ (GE, 413–14). The peculiar phrasing of this has an almost biblical ring; Jaggers is recast not as a bullying lawyer but an accepting shepherd. He suggests immediately afterwards that control was required later: ‘he kept down the old wild violent nature, whenever he saw an inkling of its breaking out’ (GE, 414). His domination of her may be troubling, but in the world of the novel is ultimately a necessary one. Molly’s other options would have been, in any case, especially stark ones: execution or a return to the dangerous environment from which she came.
His acquittal of Molly and arrangement to have Estella adopted by Miss Havisham are acts which force us to reconsider critical accounts that stress Jaggers's inhumanity. Newey views these interventions (and also Wemmick's 'occasional emergency application of a Walworth sentiment in a London context') as ones that 'alleviate the cruelty of the system, but [...] leave that system fundamentally unchanged'.77 It is equally possible to interpret them another way, however: Jaggers's isolated acts of what seem to be compassion are significant and admirable ones despite their ultimate smallness, simply because the realities of the criminal world—which he encounters first-hand on a daily basis—are so terrible. It might be argued that Estella's adoptive life is not much preferable as an eventual destiny, and itself represents if not exactly a kind of imprisonment then at least a restricting, emotionally arid existence. Yet the parallel path initially marked out for her could have been unimaginably worse: a world pervaded by 'an atmosphere of evil' with prospects of the grimmest sort, in which Jaggers 'habitually knew of [children] being imprisoned, whipped, transported, neglected, cast out, qualified in all ways for the hangman, and growing up to be hanged' (GE, 413). Jaggers admits that his usual attitude toward such unfortunates is a rather callous one:

[P]retty nigh all the children he saw in his daily business life, he had reason to look upon as so much spawn, to develop into the fish that were to come to his net—to be prosecuted, defended, forsworn, made orphans, be-devilled somehow (GE, 413).

He sees Estella, on the other hand, as 'one pretty little child out of the heap who could be saved' (GE, 413).

The language that Jaggers uses here is surprisingly emotive, even artificially so. What I have not drawn attention to so far is the fact that such a register is enclosed within a rigidly professional one. Jaggers insistently prefixes what he is telling Pip

about Estella’s past with ‘Put the case’ and then further distances himself from his involvement in events by narrating them in the third-person as if he were an outsider (GE, 412–14). This emphasises further the grip Jaggers’s professionalism has over him. The scene also offers up a more intriguing possibility: that his impersonal code can accommodate an amount of compassionate humanity. He argues convincingly that revealing the ‘secret’ he has kept so closely (or professionally) would benefit none of the parties involved. His handling of them with professional discretion distances him from a character like Tulkinghorn discussed above, who as a ‘silent depository’ of ‘noble secrets’ (BH, 23) abuses—or rather threatens to abuse—the confidence placed in him by his clients. The act of persuasion that he mounts, moreover, seems even to have convinced Pip, thoroughly sceptical elsewhere in the novel about his guardian’s powers, that Jaggers has done the right thing by maintaining the confidence, especially from Estella, but even from his own housekeeper. Critics have struggled to explain why Pip ‘drop[s] the subject immediately’78 after Jaggers has ‘put the case’. Anthony Winner suggests that ‘His so doing may indicate the ambiguity and confusion of his own motives, but it is also a vital acknowledgement that, in the world he has come to know, “such things” require the shelter of opacity’.79 This last point is made clearest not by a verbal detail in Pip’s retrospective narration but rather in a particularly striking gesture of collusion with the two professionals: ‘I looked at Wemmick, whose face was very grave. He gravely touched his lips with his forefinger. I did the same. Mr Jaggers did the same’ (GE, 414). Previously excluded up to this point from their professional interchanges of both look and word,80 Pip’s reaction in the scene hints at the very least that he has, as John

78 Winner, ‘Character and Knowledge’, 117.
79 Ibid., 117.
80 Even in the same chapter as Pip eventually comes to this apparent realisation he sees Wemmick looking with ‘a grimly satisfied air’ at Jaggers but not at him (GE, 389).
Batchelor puts it, come ‘in the end’ to understand Jaggers’s actions and motivations. It is tempting to speculate Dickens does too. Although ‘Dealing in facts and realities, Jaggers cannot be an appealing figure’, he, his professional actions can be humane, and at the very least he ends up as a character whom Pip, this reader and perhaps Dickens respect.

81 Winner, ‘Character and Knowledge’, 120.
CHAPTER FOUR
WOMEN’S WORK?
DICKENS AND THE MANAGEMENT OF THE HOME

‘Work’ and ‘home’ are traditionally viewed as reasonably stable oppositional terms. It has been the project of much recent feminist criticism, however, to destabilise the validity of the dichotomy, thus re-evaluating the true significance of women’s domestic work.¹ Unstitching the classic (and by now wearily familiar) presentation of the opposition in John Ruskin’s ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’ (1865), such scholarship questions the accuracy of simply labelling the home a ‘haven’ and ‘a sacred place’, or as Ruskin puts it, ‘the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but all terror, doubt and division’.² It argues instead that what Ruskin calls ‘the anxieties of outer life’ do inescapably ‘penetrate it’. As such revisionary readings of multiple fictional (and non-fictional) texts point out, the codes and practices of public lives filter in various and complex ways into private ones, and vice versa; in other words, the so-called ‘separate spheres’ should no longer be considered so ‘separate’.

Mary Poovey’s Uneven Developments, one of the pioneering books in this well-populated field, includes a chapter that complicates our understanding of the rigid separation of work and home by famously aligning the role of ‘literary man’

with that of the ‘good housekeeper’ in *David Copperfield*. For Poovey the sanctuary of home remains an illusory ideal. Instead, both writer and household manager ‘actually reproduce the very society from which they seem to offer escape’. What she labels ‘the “stain” of sexuality, the “blight” of class, the “degradation” of work are inescapable’. The influence of Poovey’s reading upon more recent scholarship is made clear in the work of Monica Cohen and Elizabeth Langland. In her book *Professional Domesticity*, Cohen, who happily admits her debt to Poovey, also stresses the inadequacy of analysing the division between work and the home in the period as a straightforward dichotomy, favouring instead an approach that ‘represents the home as a profession, as vocational work’. Her statement that ‘the professionalization of the home should not be confused with an identity between home and work’ qualifies this, however. The argument she follows is, as a result, a subtler one that discusses the ‘professionalization of the home’ as a ‘metaphor’ or ‘similitude’. Langland reads along similar, if not even more measured lines in her study *Nobody’s Angels*. Its introduction argues for ‘a more significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived’ for the Victorian middle-class wife. Rather than opposing them, she claims that ‘the house and its mistress served as a significant adjunct to a man’s commercial endeavors’. Mutually exclusive ‘separate spheres’ might be a myth, suggest Langland and Cohen, but simply yoking together the practices of work and home is not a useful strategy either. According to such a reading they run instead in parallel to each other.

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5 Ibid., 123.
7 Ibid., 9.
This is important critical work that usefully re-evaluates the fixed categories often used to conceptualise the Victorian period. In its admirable drive to legitimise women’s domestic work as a serious topic of study, however, such criticism marginalises two aspects of household labour in particular. By reading representations of ‘the home as a profession, as vocational work’, critics like Cohen accentuate the benefits in terms of status and retrospective regard for nineteenth-century domestic women, but do not, importantly, confront the effects of such ‘a professionalization of the home’ upon those who practice it. In this chapter I show that it is possible to read the impact of a near-pathological domestic efficiency upon the inner lives of Agnes in *David Copperfield* and Esther in *Bleak House* as troubling and damaging as well as being a means of maintaining or improving social standing. I suggest, as a result, that the domestic fantasy that Dickens creates for Bella in *Our Mutual Friend* can be seen as a reaction to such household difficulties, both in relation to his own work and in the context of an intriguing text written in the same year. By stressing the importance of the female domestic manager, moreover, critics who analyse professional domesticity miss an element of many of Dickens’s scenes of domestic work that might initially seem an incongruous one: that work done by men in the home is not always of the sort they do quietly in their studies. This fact further underlines the complexity of constructions of gender in Dickens’s work and adds to recent revisionary work about the connection between masculinity and domesticity, which will be explored at greater length later.

I ‘Teaching Young Ladies Domestic Economy’: *David Copperfield* and the limits of domestic education

The hopeless attempts at ‘keeping house’ made by David and Dora in *David Copperfield* (DC, 585) represent some of Dickens’s most memorable domestic scenes.
These comic sequences are strikingly full of instances of household mismanagement, though, rather than of effective housekeeping. In narratological terms, that they are so engaging is not that surprising: such difficulties, after all, are more entertaining for most readers than the kind of resolution and lack of complication typical in the representation of a smooth-running household. A conflict emerges, however, between the warm comedy of the scenes and their more serious purpose, and it is this that the following section will explore. As we shall see, the significance and sources of these domestic mistakes is a particularly topical concern for Dickens in his role as a campaigner for various causes. It also brings into focus an important parallel between his position on domestic work and its non-domestic professional counterpart.

The domestic education of women, or 'teaching young ladies domestic economy' (Letters VI, 17), was a subject at the forefront of Dickens's mind during the serial publication of the novel that he famously called his 'favourite child' (DC, 10). On 28 January 1850—less than six months before the publication of the numbers dealing with Dora and Doady's household difficulties—Dickens wrote one of his many letters to Angela Burdett Coutts. In it, he strongly criticises the elaborate plans made for a 'College of Domestic Economy' by the famous chef and domestic economist, Alexis Soyer. It is wise to approach Dickens's attack with some caution. He seems to have taken a general dislike to Soyer's extravagant personality, deeming

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9 Alexander Welsh makes a similar point with different emphases in The City of Dickens. He suggests that what is central to the plot of most Victorian novels is 'the crucial period of the hero's life, the whole of his life that matters' is his courtship, and that his marriage and domestic happiness function as a kind of death, and as narrative closure. See Welsh, The City of Dickens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 213, 213–28.

10 Copperfield came out in monthly parts between 1 May 1849 and 1 November 1850. The relevant domestic numbers were 15 and 16, which came out in July and August 1850. See 'A Note on the Text', DC, xxix.

11 The main thrust of Soyer's proposal, indeed, seems to chime with Dickens's views on the subject. He attacks the 'ornamental rather than useful [...] instruction given to the female population', and describes his plan not in abstract terms but rather as 'a more decided and practical step towards the realization of my views'. See Memoirs of Alexis Soyer, ed. F. Volant and J. R. Warren (London: W. Kent, 1859), 191–92.
that ‘everything he does, has a certain amount of good sense and good purpose in it, [but] with a considerable infusion of puffing and quackery’ (Letters VI, 17), and this perhaps obscures a more objective assessment of the specific proposals here. Dickens’s preference for the classes of John Hullah (a leading figure in musical education in the period) as ‘the model of the thing’ (Letters VI, 17) might also be influenced by the fact that he had known Hullah since 1836 when he composed the score for *The Village Coquettes*, and also that one of Hullah’s acolytes had been selected to teach music at Urania Cottage\(^\text{12}\) according to his ‘system’ of musical instruction.\(^\text{13}\) Nevertheless, several elements of Dickens’s response to Soyer’s scheme are worth commenting upon, and provide a new context for considering his fictional engagement with the theme in *Copperfield*.

What emerges most strongly in reaction to Soyer’s plans for a ‘College of Domestic Economy’ is Dickens’s own practical and pragmatic conception of how all young women should be instructed in household affairs. Dickens, as we have seen, admits that Soyer’s suggestions contain ‘a certain amount of good sense’; it is their frivolousness with which he has a problem. He enthusiastically decrees that the proposal that ‘Each class-room’ in the proposed institution (the plans for which never came to fulfilment) should ‘be furnished with musical instruments, and mistresses of music and drawing will attend to give instruction’ is a ‘ridiculous’ one (Letters VI, 17). Like the Cookery Book that David has ‘prettily bound’ for Dora (DC, 558), the implication is that the effectiveness of the scheme is blunted somewhat by window-dressing and surface finery. Dickens believes instead that prospective students of the college ‘could be *practically* shewn, in a sort of hall-kitchen made for the purpose, every *useful* household duty in a regular course of exposition’ (Letters VI, 17, my

\(^\text{12}\) The ‘home for homeless women’ that he had set up with Burdett Coutts only a few years previously in 1847 for the reform of prostitutes and other working women seeking to improve their circumstances.

\(^\text{13}\) See Letters V, 208 & n.
italics). It is particularly striking that in his conception of domestic education, Dickens does not distinguish between 'daughters of the wealthy and well-to-do' and those of humbler stock. The kind of instruction in household affairs that he admires cuts across class boundaries. He does suggest that different classes of women should be taught separately: 'Young ladies at such an hour, [...] Working men's wives and daughters at such an hour, [...] Servants at such another hour' (Letters VI, 17). The matter of their training, however, should remain fundamentally the same, and be of a highly practical nature in all cases. Dickens's faith in such a system is so strong, in fact, to lead him to state (perhaps with a slightly flippant tone) that 'I am sure I should send my own daughters to acquire it, if they were old enough' (Letters VI, 17).

Plausible parallels can be drawn, moreover, with Dickens's similarly pragmatic response to the professional education of his own sons, especially of Charley, explored in Chapter 3 of this thesis. In determining a suitable 'walk of life' (Letters VI, 808) for his eldest son, Dickens acquired positions for Charley with the aim of furnishing him with specific, practical skills. He worried, in fact, that Charley's professional training might have come too late, that what Dickens describes as his 'indescribable lassitude of character' had only been encouraged by the 'Eton system' of education to which he had been exposed (Letters VII, 245–46). This situation is, as we have also seen, dramatised (to a point and with important differences) in the inability of Richard Carstone to decide upon the right path in life in Bleak House. The contours of such a narrative are interestingly present too in the account of attempts to educate Dora in the mysteries of domestic economy.

14 W. H. Wills, 'A Good Plain Cook', Household Words 1 (4 May 1850), 140. Wills's line is noticeably more conservative than his editor's. He recommends the instruction of young women in the 'principles' of the home, but not its practical realities (Ibid., 140). I am grateful to Kris Siefken for providing me with a copy of the article.

15 The education Dickens gave Mamie and Kate was, however, exactly the kind of accomplishment-led training that he implicitly attacks here. See Philip Collins, Dickens and Education (London: Macmillan, 1963), 40–41 for more detail.
On one level, therefore, the presentation of Dora’s domestic ineptitude is informed by a simple critique of the kind of superficial female education that privileges ‘accomplishments’ over the learning of useful household skills. Mary Poovey suggests that ‘Dora’s French education has given her grace but no practical knowledge or skill’. This is true to a point, and usefully aligns Dora with the young men discussed above. It is not clear, though, exactly what Poovey means here by ‘grace’. Or at least if the novel shows Dora behaving in a graceful manner, then it is in a rather watered-down sense: that of softness and feminine charm. Dickens even seems to poke fun at the faint ridiculousness of Dora’s artistic pursuits: her musical instrument is described in disparagingly diminutive terms a ‘glorified guitar’, and she always sings ‘those same dear old French songs about the impossibility of ever on any account leaving off dancing’ (DC, 440, 502–3). What is sweetly amusing at first for David soon becomes irritating. In a later scene, moreover, the actual objects related to her singing, painting and playing obstruct the smooth running of a dinner party they arrange with Traddles, so that he ‘was so hemmed in by [Jip’s] pagoda, the guitar-case, and Dora’s flower painting, [...] that I had serious doubts of the possibility of his using his knife and fork’ (DC, 591). The presence of these items, then, demonstrates Dora’s frivolous education literally getting in the way of the smooth running of the household. Given the alternative of the kind of instruction in domestic matters outlined above, Dickens seems to suggest by implication, she just might have become a capable household manager.

By the time she becomes David’s intended wife, however, her habits of mind have already been ‘formed’. All of his efforts at domestic instruction—the ‘Cookery Book’, Betsey Trotwood’s ‘old housekeeping book’, and the pencils (DC, 558)—

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come too late. Another link emerges, then, between Dora’s stunted development and that of Charley Dickens, and especially of Richard Carstone in *Bleak House*. The latter, as we will remember from Esther’s narrative, ‘had been eight years at a public school, and had learnt, I understand, to make Latin Verses of several sorts, in the most admirable manner’ (BH, 152). This particular kind of education has not improved what our narrator calls his ‘habits of application and concentration’ (BH, 208), and may in fact have been instrumental in forming it. As a result, Richard is unable to settle or decide upon a career. In his defence, he does actually try at various professions; Dora does not even open her manual, preferring to indulge in a ‘make-belief of housekeeping’ and to play at ‘keeping a baby-house for a joke’ (DC, 598).

Yet even this shows the influence of her education in accomplishments. This is developed further in the way that she eventually interacts with the textual household management tools that David gives her (they initially make her ‘head ache’, DC, 558).

Everything is given a pretty surface sheen:

> Accordingly, she polished the tablets, pointed the pencil, bought an immense account-book, carefully stitched up with a needle and thread all the leaves of the Cookery Book which Jip had torn, and made quite a desperate little attempt “to be good,” as she called it (DC, 595).

The wider significance of such household manuals is a topic to which this chapter will return. For now, it will do to observe the way that Dora approaches these practical implements of the home just as she would one of her paintings or flower arrangements. As a result, the leaves of the Cookery Book are prettily stitched up, and therefore, we assume, closed and unavailable for consultation.

A critical reading of Dora can only be stretched to a point, however. If Dickens’s aim is to satirise faulty female education, then this is countered somewhat by the evident sympathy felt for her by her author. In one of the entries in his number plan for the chapters that detail the Copperfields’ domestic distress, Dickens writes
Two critics in particular have usefully forwarded thinking about Dora, and rightly seen that there is much more to her than the stereotype of a helpless child wife. Michael Slater claims that Dora is a ‘complex and developing character’, and one of Dickens’s most intriguing women. Margaret Flanders Darby takes Slater’s perceptions further by provocatively stating that

> virtually no one has seen Dora for what she is throughout *David Copperfield*: clearheaded; wise and realistic; stunningly honest about herself, her husband, and her marriage; and, above all, always true to a self that David will not, finally, allow.\(^{18}\)

In the portrayal of her domestic incompetence, the critique of frivolous female education is accompanied, then, by what Darby calls a ‘complex sensitivity to the plight of child-wives in [Dickens’s] novel and in his society’.\(^{19}\) Part of this ‘sensitivity’ is filtered through David’s retrospective account of these years of his life, coloured as it is by both fondness and regret. The latter is especially clear in a direct plea he makes to the reader: ‘I was a boyish husband as to years. [...] If I did any wrong, as I may have done much, I did it in mistaken love, and in my want of wisdom’ (DC, 597). David just about recognises his mistakes in trying to form Dora for a mould in which she would not fit. But as its cautious, conditional phrasing confirms, he does not really confront them, or engage with them. This, as I shall argue later, is a lack of self-awareness that persists in the presentation of the action of a disciplined heart: his union with Agnes.

> It usually goes unnoticed that the novel, in fact, is careful to stress the collective failings of the Copperfield household, and not just of Dora as a housewife. It is not just Dora’s ‘pagoda, the guitar-case, and [...] flower painting’ that get in the

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19 Ibid., 155.
way during the dinner with Traddles, but also David’s writing desk (DC, 591). From the start, David’s own account assumes partial responsibility for the continuing debacles, admitting that ‘I doubt whether two young birds could have known less about keeping house, than I and my pretty Dora did’ (DC, 585). Thereafter, it is the first person plural that is repeatedly favoured: ‘We felt our inexperience and were unable to help ourselves’; ‘We must be serious sometimes’; ‘We both have a great deal to learn’ (DC, 586–87). Domestic guides often stressed the necessity of what is entirely missing in the efforts made in the novel by Dora and Doady: the full co-operation of husband and wife in the actual detail of the financial management of the home. While this did not necessarily mean that either partner should undertake any particularly demeaning domestic tasks, it did usually require, as John Henry Walsh puts it that ‘each partner should be made acquainted with the necessary outlay required in those branches undertaken by the other’.

Dickens himself, moreover, considered the domestic role of the husband an important one. As the following extract from Forster’s biography emphasises, his practical concern with the home perhaps exceeded the expectations of an advice writer like Walsh:

If it is the property of a domestic nature to be personally interested in every detail, the smallest as the greatest, of the four walls in which one lives, then no man had it so essentially as Dickens. […] Even the kind of interest in a house which is commonly confined to women, he was full of.

Both for Dickens and writers of instructional literature of the day, then, the male role in the running of the household is a much more central one than might be assumed by the twenty-first century reader. The importance of the relationship between

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21 Quoted in Slater, *Dickens and Women*, 129. Slater also quotes a letter in which Dickens writes of the ‘solemn weekly councils’ he held with Catherine about the management of their home, during which he would menacingly ‘break a chair or so’ to emphasise a point (115). Dickens’s healthy interest in the running of the home did sometimes, it seems, tip into something much more intimidating.
domesticity and masculinity for Dickens is one that we will revisit in the course of the chapter.

But what should we make, more specifically, of David's subsequent relationship to the home and its management? We have already seen that the failure of keeping house with Dora is partly his responsibility, and that this is a mistake to which he admits. Given the evidence above, furthermore, it is difficult to view this domestic inexperience in anything but critical terms. In the admittedly brief portrait of his marriage to Agnes at the novel's close it is never made entirely clear how much David has learned as a result of the domestic 'trials' that he must endure with Dora. He informs us that his 'domestic joy was perfect' and that he 'had advanced in fame and fortune' (DC, 795). It is not possible, however, to clearly ascertain who actively creates this 'domestic joy'. Agnes acts, we assume, both as consummate housekeeper and helpmeet and adviser to David, especially judging by her sympathetic and 'earnest' response to a reading of David's own work before they are married (DC, 787). Ultimately, however, the division of household labour remains mysterious.

A nagging doubt remains that, if even subconsciously, David marries Agnes just because she is a good housekeeper.\(^{22}\) That, disappointingly, 'suitability of mind and purpose' is measured within a narrow frame: it means simply that she must take up her place in the domestic sphere, and David his (if from home) in the public. This is certainly the impression we get from David's memorable return to the Wickfield household towards the end of the novel:

\[
\text{[T]he staid old house was, as to its cleanliness and order, still just as it had been when I first saw it. [...]} \text{ The books that Agnes and I had read}
\]

\(^{22}\) She is obviously more than this, since she works laboriously (if, at least according to her, effortlessly) as a schoolmistress (DC, 771). It seems unlikely that this is what draws David to her, however. On his return to the Wickfields' home, he is greeted first, importantly, by the impeccable results of her domestic management quoted later in this paragraph. It is this that has both spiritual and psychological resonance for David. Her school teaching is simply another example of her inherent goodness and seriousness of intent.
together, were on the shelves; and the desk where I had laboured at my
lessons, many a night, stood yet at the same old corner of the table. All the
little changes that had crept in while the Heeps were there, were changed
again. Everything was as it used to be, in the happy time (DC, 770).

There is an almost magical air to the description of this retransformation. Agnes is
physically absent, but her spirit is everywhere. He notices the ‘cleanliness and order’
of the place, and this causes him to immediately recall the first time he saw the house
and met Agnes. In this earlier context, she appears as a ready-made housewife, and
her ‘tranquillity’ of character is connected with the peaceful atmosphere of the house.
She is described in greater detail in the following terms: ‘She had a little basket-trifle
hanging at her side, with keys in it; and looked as staid and discreet a housekeeper as
the old house could have’ (DC, 213). Despite the fact that Agnes is only playing at
being a little housekeeper here, it is an act that is so convincing that she looks ‘staid
and discreet’. The contrast with Dora could hardly be more striking: her adult
attempts at housekeeping are more playful than Agnes’s girlish ones. Vincent Newey
notes this ‘constancy’ in her portrayal, and makes a similar comparative reading of
this distinction:

Though David comes to view [Agnes] in a changed light, as spouse rather
than sister or friend, she already as a girl inhabits the position into which
she must thus grow—not like Dora a “child wife”, arrested in
adolescence, but a woman before her time, a wifely child.23

This is an eloquent point, but Newey tends to play down (if he does not ignore) its
more troubling aspects by suggesting that ‘we cannot help but have mixed feelings’
about the way in which Agnes is marked out for a certain role from her girlhood, and
to an extent internalises that role.24 Perhaps he is right to do so: as a novel David
Copperfield only very covertly suggests that the construction of such a role might be

23 Newey, The Scriptures of Charles Dickens: Novels of Ideology. Novels of the Self (Aldershot:
Ashgate, 2004), 158.
24 Ibid., 158–59.
As Newey makes clear, however, the novel is not entirely silent on what psychological effect this might have upon Agnes. As he suggestively puts it, ‘Agnes herself exceeds the mould in which she is wrapped. She lets out clues to another story, another mode of being and of being understood’. This is true enough, but is made to look very tentative when considered in relation to the self-denial and psychological damage caused by similar roles enforced upon Bleak House’s Esther Summerson, upon whom I focus next. The following example from the early stages of David Copperfield illustrates this point well. There is a hint of unease in David’s response to his inquiry about Agnes’s schooling:

“You have never been to school,” I said, “have you?”
“Oh yes! Every day!”
“Ah, but you mean here, at your own home?”
“Papa couldn’t spare me to go anywhere else,” she answered, smiling and shaking her head. “His housekeeper must be in his house, you know.”
“He is very fond of you, I am sure,” I said (DC, 218–19).

Still, it is a fairly muted kind of awkwardness, and David’s response ultimately commends Agnes’s domestic education, implying that this is a healthy arrangement. In Dickens’s next novel Esther’s first-person narration can be similarly evasive; it is possible nevertheless to trace a disturbingly powerful response to the pressures that create and are created by domestic duties.

II ‘Duty, Duty’: Esther Summerson and the psychology of household management

Most true is it, as a wise man teaches us, that “Doubt of any sort cannot be removed except by Action.” On which ground too let him who gropes painfully in darkness, and prays vehemently that the dawn may ripen into day, lay this other precept well to heart, which to me was of invaluable service: “Do the Duty which lies nearest thee,” which thou knowest to be a Duty! Thy second duty will already have become clearer.26

25 Newey, The Scriptures of Charles Dickens, 161. For consideration of Agnes’s ‘interiorisation’ of a substitute wife role, see 173n.
Carlyle's well-known lines from 'The Everlasting Yea' in *Sartor Resartus* tell of a personal struggle to deal with a crisis of faith through action. They are also, in an important sense, epoch-defining ones, since in the period duty was seen as a value that had to be urgently maintained during a time of such emotional and spiritual uncertainty. In *The Victorian Frame of Mind* Walter Houghton recounts a famous occasion when George Eliot mentioned the three words which had so long been "inspiring trumpet calls of men,—the words *God, Immortality, Duty*—" she "pronounced with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable was the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third".  

Tracing the general implications of Eliot's comments, Houghton claims that: 'It is partly because the first two words have lost their meaning that the third is given such passionate affirmation, [...] in contemporary society'.

It is certainly possible to see 'such passionate affirmation' of duty in Dickens's thinking. In a letter dated 1 February 1850 to Emmely Gotschalk, a young Danish woman evidently troubled by the 'mysteries' of existence, Dickens enthusiastically urges that the 'remedy' for her perilous 'state of mind' is 'easy, and we all have it at hand—action, usefulness—and the determination to be of service, even in little things, to those about you, and to be doing something' (Pilgrim VI, 25). When he quotes this letter in *The City of Dickens*, Alexander Welsh is certainly right to claim that Dickens 'preaches' this instruction. His advice in a subsequent paragraph seems almost a conscious reworking of Carlyle's words from *Sartor Resartus* with which I began this section:

> The mystery is not here, but far beyond the sky. The preparation for it, is in doing duty. Our saviour did not sit down in this world and muse, but labored and did good. In your small domestic sphere, you may do as much good as an Emperor can do in his (Letters VI, 26).

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28 Ibid., 239.
In the novels too selflessly doing good for others is seen as a positive trait. In *Little Dorrit*, for instance, Amy Dorrit functions as a virtuous, living embodiment of the principle of duty. As Mr Meagles puts it in encouraging the now-reformed Tattycoram:

> Her young life has been one of active resignation, goodness, and noble service. Shall I tell you what I consider those eyes of hers that were here just now, to have looked at, to get that expression? [...] Duty, Tattycoram. Begin it early, and do it well (LD, 774).

Esther Summerson has many of the same features. Robert Newsom suggests a connection between ‘Carlyle’s practical ethics—the idea of duty derived from Goethe as attending to the self-evidently good’ and Esther who in *Bleak House* ‘adopts just such an ethics when she proposes to let the immediate domestic “circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself”’. Yet, as I aim to show in what follows with specific reference to Esther, there is another side to Dickens’s engagement with duty in novels like *Bleak House*. Newsom is not wrong exactly to notice the qualities of Esther that make her a kind of domesticated version of a Carlylean hero, nor is it quite correct to claim that duty is not valued in this novel or in other ones. But with his creation of Esther Dickens is clearly aware of the deeper psychological motivations and costs of her devotion to domestic duty. A statement in an article written on the subject some years later for *All the Year Round* encapsulates nicely the wider implications of Dickens’s portrait of Esther: ‘Duty is a grand thing to do, and the duty-doer is an indispensable person in his generation; and yet more than mere duty is needed for the perfectioning of our lives’. Duty brings Esther domestic success but not happiness.

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31 ‘I Have Done My Duty’, *All the Year Round* 12 (14 January 1865), 543.
Critics interested in the portrayal of Esther's domestic work have tended to read her simply as an effective household manager, and to ignore both what brings about such mastery and the implications this might have upon her state of mind. Her successful control of the domestic sphere, in fact, has been a consistent focus for the growing number of critics eager to collapse the distinction between the professions and the home. Although she does not discuss Esther in depth, Monica Cohen decides that 'A true amateur professional, emerges in the figure of Esther Summerson, *Bleak House*’s diminutive housekeeper. Never in debt, Esther pursues her unpaid work devotedly and skilfully'. Martin Danahay, reading along similar lines, argues that 'her labor as housekeeper [...] has points of contact with the work of male characters such as Tulkinghorne the lawyer, Woodcourt the doctor and Bucket the police inspector'. Elizabeth Langland, too, ‘discover[s] links between the housekeeper and detective police’. Danahay and Langland, though, both stress the limits of such a reading, and argue instead that the precise nature of Esther’s domestic management is often obscured and not always categorised as work. Danahay even goes so far to claim, in analysing a passage from Chapter 8 of the novel, that in this particular instance, ‘her activities [...] are not described as labor, but rather as a hectic but enjoyable romp. Work is redefined as pleasure’. It is without doubt that Esther carries out her domestic duties efficiently, and even with what Skimpole calls ‘a fine administrative capacity’ (*BH*, 676). But to argue, as Danahay does, that she actively enjoys her household work misses a good deal of the psychological complexity of

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35 Danahay suggests that Dickens portrays Esther’s household labour ‘in a way that does not acknowledge its status as work’ (Danahay, 7), while Langland claims that ‘Although the novel points to Esther’s achievements, it disguises the nature of her work’ (Langland, 96).
Esther’s portrayal. Such critical assessments, instead, are based upon appearances, and what Esther actually does. They do not read behind or between the lines to see what might be motivating Esther to be continually ‘busy’, or trace what kind of pressures underlie her successful management of Bleak House. Bruce Robbins is one of the few critics to engage more deeply with Esther, arguing (within a slightly different context) that ‘in Esther’s case’, Dickens ‘devote[s] a great deal of attention to the psychological damage done by an over-acute sense of responsibility’.37 This is a suggestive claim, and one that proposes the evaluation of Esther as the serious character that she is rather than just a gender stereotype. How and in what ways, then, does this over-developed quality express itself in the novel?

The root of Esther’s desire to ‘strive [...] to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted’ (BH, 31) is, to begin with, a troubling one. It resides ultimately in her illegitimacy, and is more specifically a response to her godmother’s stricture that ‘Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it’ (BH, 30). Esther internalises this, and decides ‘to repair the fault I had been born with’ (BH, 31); it eventually becomes a fixed and finally damaging frame of mind. It is a habit that goes so deep, indeed, that Esther often channels her subsequent adult emotional disturbances into her domestic work, even creating simple household tasks to distract her from her own distress. This, further, is effectively demonstrated in her retelling of two important incidents early in the novel.

The first follows Esther’s embarrassed declining of Guppy’s initial offer of marriage. After this has occurred, the novel’s heroine describes a flurry of resumed domestic activity:

I sat there for another hour or more, finishing my books and payments, and getting through plenty of business. Then, I arranged my desk, and put everything away, and was so composed and cheerful that I thought I had quite dismissed this unexpected incident. But, when I went upstairs to my own room, I surprised myself by beginning to laugh about it, and then surprised myself still more by beginning to cry about it (BH, 154).

That Esther associates this ordered round of domestic management tasks with a feeling of satisfaction is clear enough from what she tells us here: that she ‘was so composed and cheerful’ doing such work. It is also, importantly, reflected in the extract’s syntax, which is defined by a kind of satisfying successiveness, and of a series of tasks well done. The preponderance of consecutive ‘and’ clauses, though, hints at something darker lurking behind this satisfaction. In his assured account of the complex working out of memory in the syntactical structure of nineteenth-century autobiography, Philip Davis points out that

In his ‘Essay on the Principles of Method’, Coleridge remarks that in the prosaic circumstantial accounts of ordinary people the shift from one thought to another is measured only by the temporal connective ‘and’, marking the next move in the mechanical succession of chronologically bound thought.38

It might seem fitting that Esther adopts this everyday and relatively unsophisticated form of clausal structure, since the very first lines of her narrative modestly proclaim that she does not consider herself ‘clever’, and thus has ‘difficulty’ in writing her ‘portion of these pages’ (BH, 27). This, though, like much about Esther, seems deceptive. A more sceptical reading of Esther’s own autobiography emerges with some more help from Coleridge’s thinking on consecutive clauses. As Davis summarises, in such constructions, ‘There is no tacit thinking, no implicit poetic potential going on, to take the person from one point to the next’.39 This remark almost perfectly captures the way that this conjunction functions in Esther’s prose

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39 Ibid., 82.
here and, as we shall see, in many other instances. It represents for her the avoidance of dwelling upon or reconsidering something that is troubling or difficult that might be represented by a more complex or subordinate clause. Favoured instead is the successive recording of activity undertaken to forget a painful experience. Tellingly, this passage pivots on the subordinating conjunction ‘but’, and without the distraction of the minutiae of the household Esther’s submerged feelings flood out. That she herself is ‘surprised’ by such a feeling only emphasises further how deeply buried her trauma is—just like, in fact, her ‘dear old doll, long buried in the garden’ (BH, 154).

In our second example, the surface of the text is not even ruptured by such a moment of self-revelation. In the passage in question, however, her obsessive attention to household business is even more marked than in the excerpt discussed earlier:

I was very busy indeed, all day, and wrote directions home to the servants, and wrote notes for my guardian, and dusted his books and papers, and jingled my housekeeping keys a good deal, one way and another. I was still busy between the lights, singing and working by the window, when who should come in but Caddy, whom I had no expectation of seeing! (BH, 278-79).

Caddy’s entry disturbs the housework Esther has been so energetically carrying out to take her mind off of the recent departure of Allan Woodcourt. Syntactically, this extract shares many similarities with the one explored in the previous paragraph, most notably the insistent use of successive rather than subordinating clauses. If anything, it is even more energetic, both in its excited, even perky tone, and in terms of the amount of activity done that it conveys. If we look more closely, however, the enthusiasm portrayed begins to appear much less convincing. These household tasks are relatively insignificant ones, and seem to be the actions of a housekeeper trying to fill time. Esther has almost to invent unimportant, mindless chores, has to be ‘busy’ in order to distract herself from what is really troubling her. Besides this, her only
significant act is a symbolic one—the jingling of her housekeeping keys. They ultimately strike a flat note, however. Like her repetitive chiming internal dialogues ('Once more, duty, duty, Esther'; 'busy, busy, busy', BH, 609, 693), this is an action that seems a conscious one of self-persuasion. Esther is not happy, but must convince herself that this is the case by chirpily telling herself so, especially when she is not obsessively taking control of the management of the house.

Esther's self-deception is maintained right to the last. The ending of *Bleak House* (technically the end of Esther's narrative since the other concludes in Chapter 66) remains startlingly open to interpretation. Most of what she tells us at the start of her final chapter goes along with expectation. She is happily married to Allan, and has secured her position as dutiful wife and manager of the new Bleak House in Yorkshire. In the very last paragraph of the novel, however, any sense that this might be a typical Dickensian happy ending is brought into question. Its startling open-endedness, instead, brings Esther's insecurities sharply back into focus. It begins when she tells Allan that she has been thinking about her 'old looks—such as they were'. The brilliant effectiveness of the prose in the exchange makes it worth quoting at length:

"My dear Dame Durden," said Allan, drawing my arm through his, "do you ever look in the glass?"
"You know I do; you see me do it."
"And don't you know that you are prettier than you ever were?"
I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling [Ada] is very beautiful, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing— (BH, 989)

The shared syntactic stresses in Esther's accounts of home management are revealed once more. In this final instance, the common grammatical features only seem the more striking, even poignantly so. The consecutive successive clauses show a mind

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trying to convince itself of its happiness and position in the world. As that closing
dangling qualifying phrase so deftly points out, however, this is an act of persuasion
that repeatedly does not work. It is surely significant too that this rare use of a
subordinating phrase by Esther leads to a dead end, to a blank. She is, it seems, unable
to turn back and confront what has been haunting her. She may have secured a stable
social position as 'the doctor's wife' (BH, 988) but the residual feelings of
worthlessness remain. A very different, more hopeful domestic narrative, perhaps
written in response to the underlying pessimism of Esther's story, will be explored
next: that of Bella Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend*.

**III The Complete British Family Housewife**

As well as being a fixture on the bookshelves of many middle-class homes, the
household manual has been interpreted as a socially significant artefact. The social
historian Leonore Davidoff, for instance, argues that 'The spate of housekeeping
books of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century shows that this was a period
of experimentation with various forms of rationalizing household affairs'. Given
their cultural importance as a form, it is surprising that relatively little detailed
attention has been paid to their role and function in nineteenth-century fiction
generally, and Dickens's novels specifically. Elizabeth Langland's *Nobody's Angels*
is a notable exception, although her attention is more specifically upon the upper-
middle-class etiquette manual. What, as far as I am aware, no one has covered is
what I shall call the fictional life of these real texts. By this I mean the depiction and

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40 According to Elizabeth Langland, 'One of the most famous, [...] Isabella Beeton's *Book of
Household Management*, [...] sold 60,000 copies in its first year.' See Langland, 'Women's Writing
and the Domestic Sphere', in Joanne Shattock, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain 1800–1900*
41 Leonore Davidoff, 'The Rationalization of Housework', in *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives
uses of fictional domestic manuals in Dickens’s fiction. Bella Wilfer’s comic struggle to master her copy of the Complete British Family Housewife in Our Mutual Friend will be the prime focus here. In glossing this fictional domestic book, editors of various paperback editions of the novel tend to make a cursory nod to Isabella Beeton’s Book of Household Management (1861), or attempt a reference to the broad context of household manuals.43 No one, however, has speculated upon a specific source—or the wider significance of that source—for Bella’s fictional manual. It is to this search I now turn.

Given the number and variety of household books published in the period, this is an understandably difficult task.44 Many often very different approaches vied for the attention of the reading public, so it is only possible to give a snapshot of such diverse material here as a context for the following discussion. Alexis Soyer’s The Modern Housewife, or Menagere (1849), for instance, might be described as a gentlemanly, discursive take on the genre. It predominantly employs the dialogue form to present relaxed conversations on such topics as what constitutes ‘The Model Housekeeper’ and instructive essays on such matters as how to make good toast.45 According to a contemporary review in The Scotsman, its recipes are, despite the continental extraction of their author, ‘written with great clearness and correctness’.46 Other titles such as Thomas Webster’s Encyclopaedia of Domestic Economy (1844)

43 Adrian Poole, for instance, confidently claims that ‘The novel’s first readers will have thought of Mrs Beeton’s recently published The Book of Household Management (1861), which sold 60,000 copies in its first year’, Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, ed. Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 1997), 835n.
44 Dickens certainly possessed some knowledge of the kind of material under discussion. Catherine Dickens pseudonymously published a slim volume of receipts entitled What Shall We Have For Dinner? in 1851, and it has been suggested that Dickens himself might even have contributed its lively Introduction. See Slater, Dickens and Women, 132–33. There is also evidence that Eliza Acton sent him a copy of her Modern Cookery in all its Branches (1845). See Kathleen Tillotson, ‘Eliza Acton and Martin Chuzzlewit’, Dickensian 75 (1979), 143.
and John Henry Walsh’s *Manual of Domestic Economy* (1856) take, on the other hand, what might be called a more industrial or systematic approach. There is a clear divide in how these authors view their own books: Webster sees his as simply a ‘compilation’ of informative matter,\(^47\) while Walsh rather self-importantly states that ‘This Manual is not [...] a mere compilation’.\(^48\) Both texts, nevertheless, share fundamental similarities, and present a voluminous, detailed and often dryly technical guide to the home.

Obtuseness and abstraction are important features of Bella’s *Complete British Family Housewife* in *Our Mutual Friend*. This is made fully evident even from Dickens’s playful choice of title for this made-up instructional book, with its awkward and redundant phrasing. This spirit also informs the manual’s prose style: ‘The Complete British Housewife, however sound a Briton at heart, was by no means an expert Briton at expressing herself with clearness in the British tongue’ (OMF, 666). There is a ‘coolness’ about its manner, too, that Bella finds ‘exasperating’ (OMF, 666). We will return in due course to ponder the significance and wider implications of Bella’s struggle to comprehend this ‘sage volume’ (OMF, 666). The intention now is to pause and speculate what the target of Dickens’s humour might be with this. Its title is certainly much more specific than the one given to Dora’s manual in *David Copperfield*. Do, then, both the title and the style of Dickens’s fictional compendium make it possible to match the *Housewife* up with the tomes by Webster and Walsh mentioned above? If so, what is the significance of making such a connection?

A clear link between them seems unlikely. A more convincing, if perhaps more obvious, case can be made for Mrs Beeton’s *Book of Household Management*. But then in some senses Beeton’s book is a kind of summary of what went before—in


other words, a distillation of exactly the kind of material I have been discussing. As Nicola Humble puts it in her Introduction to the recent abridged Oxford edition, ‘Isabella Beeton borrowed largely and unashamedly from the publications of Acton and Soyer, with random and scanty acknowledgement. In fact, there is very little that is original in Household Management’.49 Other clues also point to Mrs Beeton. Humble’s assessment of the style of the text is that it ‘is matter-of-fact, and determinedly impersonal’,50 which neatly echoes the ‘coolness’ that Bella ‘found exasperating’ in the Complete Housewife. Beeton’s tendency to truncate and summarise the work of others can also make following her recipes a difficult task. As Humble again explains, ‘Beeton […] habitually omits explanation in the recipes themselves, with sometimes frustrating results’.51 There is a hint of this in the lack of ‘clearness’ in the instructions of that ‘sage volume’ in Our Mutual Friend.

An important element of the presentation of Bella’s ‘severe study’ of the Complete British Housewife transcends attempts such as the one above to pin down a specific point of reference. It is primarily depicted not as a realistic scene of housework but as a flight of domestic fancy. Her copy of the Complete British Housewife is, for instance, actually personified as a British housewife—one, admittedly, who is ‘by no means an expert Briton at expressing herself with clearness in the British tongue’, and is maligned by Bella as a ‘ridiculous old fool’ who ‘must have been drinking’ (OMF, 666). The ‘marginal notes’ that Bella makes in pursuing her ‘profound research’ sound, fittingly enough, more like chastisements of a failing

49 Nicola Humble, Introduction to Isabella Beeton, Book of Household Management (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xv. According to another critic, Beeton ‘never laid any claim to originality. […] Household Management was not intended to be more than a collection of other people’s ideas, […] she even rejected the title of “author”, calling herself merely “editress”’. See Sarah Freeman, Isabella and Sam: The Story of Mrs Beeton (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977), 143.

50 Humble, Introduction to Household Management, xiv.

51 Ibid., xiv. Freeman argues in contrast that this is a merit rather than a deficiency: ‘the epigrammatic phrases for which Household Management is famous […] were arrived at only after much polishing and paring down of words’. See Isabella and Sam, 134.
older relative than thoughts scribbled at the edges of the page. The comic tone is maintained in scenes of fevered domestic activity as well as study:

Such weighing and mixing and chopping and grating, such dusting and washing and polishing, such snipping and weeding and trowelling and other small gardening, such making and mending and folding and airing, such diverse arrangements, and above all such severe study! (OMF, 666).

Monica Cohen offers an intriguing and sophisticated close reading of this very scene in *Professional Domesticity*. In pushing towards her aim of relating domestic labour to professional work, however, Cohen takes the sequence, I think, far too seriously:

Exhausting in its exhaustive catalogue of household management, the scene’s technical construction reveals the operation of an ethos, a spirit according to which the performance of household tasks means something more than just sweeping the floor or cleaning the dishes [...] while the cropped cadences and anaphoric phrasing set a quickened, anticipatory tempo, the gerunds, in their omission of direct and indirect objects, go on to convey a sense of energized movement divorced from any idea of progress, as if to suggest that homework is meaningful without being teleologically directed.  

The depiction of Bella’s housework quoted above can certainly be interpreted in a much less transcendent, abstract way than Cohen does here. Rather than being analysable as ‘a single spiritual concept’ Bella’s chores subdivide into compartmentalised tasks associated with a particular, concrete aspect of the home. Direct and indirect objects might be omitted, but they are certainly implied by the grouping together of gerunds representing related actions. This fact makes Bella’s housekeeping a serious affair in another way by implying that it is methodical and well-ordered. At the same time, of course, it diminishes it and makes it funny. Elizabeth Langland allows such contradictions to inform her reading of Bella’s scenes of domestic work, noticing that: ‘A textual tension generated by representing household management as at once trivial and serious structures the narrative at this

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52 Cohen, *Professional Domesticity*, 89.
53 Ibid., 90.
point’. This is perceptive, as we shall see, about the complications of Bella’s domestic coming-of-age.

Her engagement with the domestic manual is admittedly a spirited one. It makes an interesting contrast to how Dora deals with hers in *David Copperfield*. Failing to even open it, she stitches it up and allows her lap dog Jip to use it as a play-surface. It is, tellingly, reduced to the status of an object. *The Complete British Housewife*, on the other hand, is brought strikingly enough to life to almost seem like one of the novel’s characters. Critics maintain that the distinction between Dora and Bella’s use of their domestic books is a significant one. They argue that Bella struggles with her household manual, but unlike Dora at least does eventually do so successfully. Vincent Newey suggests that ‘daunting though it is, Bella makes a much surer conquest than David’s incompetent Dora had made of her book of instruction’. Kate Flint makes a similar point, that Bella ‘applies herself diligently to the *Complete British Family Housewife*, the text which is to help bring out her innate womanly powers’.

Both of these judgements, however, miss an important textual detail. It is difficult to ascertain with certainty how much of an influence this ‘sage volume’ actually has on the fact that she is ‘fast developing a perfect genius for home’ (OMF, 665). By Chapter 11 of Book 4 it has mysteriously disappeared: ‘Whether the Complete British Family Housewife had imparted sage counsel anent them, did not appear, but probably not, as that cloudy oracle was nowhere visible’ (OMF, 724). Her real instructor in matters of the hearth has been, it seems, a very different one:

For certain, however, Mrs John Rokesmith stitched at them [a basket of neat little articles of clothing] with so dexterous a hand, that she must have taken lessons of somebody. Love is in all things a most wonderful

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teacher, and perhaps love (from a pictorial point of view, with nothing on but a thimble), had been teaching this branch of needlework to Mrs John Rokesmith (OMF, 724).

The manner of Bella’s education that is presented here might seem syrupy or sentimental to some. It is, however, entirely of a piece with the wider themes of the novel, and also shows a shift in Dickens’s conception of what form domestic education should take. Rather than showing instruction in household duties to be concerned with the acquisition of useful and practical techniques, this novelistic example shows it to be a mysterious process; one, nevertheless, about which Dickens is entirely serious. The wonderfully weird image of Love as a naked, thimble-wearing figure—so strange, in fact, that it almost seems to push into ironic self-parody—personifies the emotion in solid, even fleshy terms. In contrast, the Complete Family Housewife, vividly brought to life as a ‘ridiculous old fool’ above, is now strikingly disembodied. The awkward abstractions of its verbal style, what in other words make it ‘cloudy’, are made literal when the object vanishes. Love, in contrast, is made to seem physically actualised. It follows that Dickens subsumes Bella’s domestic education within her moral one.

It is not love alone, however, that drives the plot of Our Mutual Friend. It is a love instead that is happily accompanied by financial security. This point is made all the more striking when Bella’s domestic progress is considered alongside a relevant contemporary text that was published in the year that the serialisation of Our Mutual Friend began. Eliza Warren’s How I Managed My House on £200 A Year (1864) belongs to the household narrative genre. Dena Attar sketches the features of it for us here:

Domestic economy narratives […] aimed to provide household hints on budgeting, cooking and childcare within the more or less realistic framework of a story with which readers could identify. The stock characters were the young, inexperienced and incompetent wife, the
husband whose patience often snapped [...] and the older, wiser woman—friend, neighbour or relative—whose advice saves the day.\textsuperscript{57}

Locating Warren's book within this framework, Attar suggests that this 'experienced professional journalist’s' work is simultaneously 'crudely melodramatic and sentimental' yet also capable of achieving 'considerable subtlety and restraint'.\textsuperscript{58} This is an astute judgement of an intriguing text. If anything, \textit{How I Managed My House} surprisingly tends to the latter claim rather than the former. It should be stated from the start that the intention here is not to claim that Dickens knew Warren's work, or that he was responding or referring to it. Instead, it is to come at Dickens's text from a new angle, and to place it within a new context.

In comparison with Bella's effortless advancement to domestic assurance, Warren's protagonist Milly's progress is a struggle, and often a gloomy one. Part of the unexpected seriousness in Warren's text may be due to it being narrated retrospectively in the first person, from the vantage point of the 'loneliness of [...] old age'.\textsuperscript{59} It is not too much of a stretch, indeed, to label the book a kind of domestic Bildungsroman. Milly, with hindsight, is ruefully disparaging about her younger incarnation as domestic ingénue. She sees learning to manage the home as a process of development and growth, and earnestly records being 'determined to learn everything' about it.\textsuperscript{60} Her tale of domestic education also sometimes takes on a specifically religious colouring. She speaks rather peculiarly of her period of domestic innocence as the time 'before my days of reformation'.\textsuperscript{61} After the event, she (perhaps melodramatically) considers her 'besetting sin' to be an 'indolence of body', and

\textsuperscript{57} Dena Attar, Introduction to \textit{A Bibliography of Household Books Published in Britain 1800–1914} (London: Prospect Books, 1987), 20.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{59} Eliza Warren, \textit{How I Managed My House on £200 A Year} (London: Houlston and Wright, 1864), 31.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{61} Warren, \textit{How I Managed}, 31.
tendency to 'put off till another time, if I could, a present duty'.

A strange kind of religion of the home and of domestic duty, then, is evident throughout Milly's narrative. This culminates with an account of the death of her first child, which is handled with quietness rather than melodramatic excess. The quasi-spiritual theme seeps into Milly's expression of 'silent reproach' that if she 'had not gone in debt this had never been'.

What is most unexpected about this popular household narrative—or not, given what I have been highlighting—is its ending. It is here, also, that the comparison with Bella's own domestic ascent becomes most striking. Milly's reward for becoming 'famous as a household manager' is a paltry one. Rather than achieving security and comfort as an ageing middle-class wife, she is forced by financial instability brought about by her husband's death to seek out a position as a family's housekeeper, a period she suggestively calls her 'after life'.

The movement of Warren's plot, therefore, reverses the conventional novelistic trajectory, which usually tracks instead the heroine's rise from housekeeper to housewife. This is not only measured in material terms: as the closing cadences of her narrative show, Milly's emotional life is precarious too:

I am living with the youngest of the family of the Arkwrights; [...] Miss Arkwright left me £100 a year—all her income; and Dora, her youngest pet, declares that nothing shall induce her to leave her own "Minnie". She insists upon it that, as Ruth followed Naomi of old, so will she never leave, never forsake me.

She is but twenty—we shall see.

As this makes clear, the problem is not a financial one. Milly's old age does promise relative security on that front. But, as the book's final line movingly and uncertainly

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62 Warren, How I Managed, 34.
63 Ibid., 17.
64 Warren, How I Managed, 30.
65 Ibid., 89.
66 Warren, How I Managed, 91.
hints (more like Esther’s ending in Bleak House than Bella’s in this one), it may be
(or Milly thinks it may be) a dotage that is spent alone and unloved. Given that this is
also an overtly instructional book, Warren’s strategy is a confusing one, both for
modern day critic and (although we can only speculate) the contemporary reader. If
Milly’s depressing future is all that awaits the diligent young wife, they might have
asked, then why learn even the rudiments of keeping a house?

It is entirely possible, of course, that contemporary readers would have found
the formulaic discussion of domestic hints useful and the unexpectedly good dramatic
sections moving or enriching in some way, and not worried about the disparity
between the two. Bella’s fate in Our Mutual Friend, nevertheless, provides much
more effective encouragement for young female readers about to enter into married
life who will have to deal with the management of a home. The novel may
understandably lack detailed practical advice in domestic matters. But Bella receives a
reward for mysteriously learning the ways of the household that is, if not as
believable, much more enticing to the reader than the one discussed above. Having
run their little cottage on Blackheath in ‘economical and orderly’ fashion for the
relatively modest sum of £150 a year (OMF, 663), Bella is transplanted with her
husband and child to a large and expensively equipped home. Luxuriously but
elegantly decorated, its staircase has been ‘tastefully ornamented with most beautiful
flowers’, and it even contains ‘a charming aviary’ within its doors (OMF, 748). Love
combines with financial security to create what might be called a domestic fantasy, or
a kind of wish-fulfilment narrative of the home. Seeing the ending of Our Mutual
Friend next to How I Managed My House only accentuates these elements. Despite
Dickens’s playful puncturing of the form generally, in terms of the message it
conveys it is his last-completed novel rather than Warren’s text which becomes a distinctively effective domestic narrative.

IV ‘A Little Division of (Household) Labour’: Realigning domestic gender roles

Recent work in the history of gender has set out to qualify the relationship between ‘masculinity’ and ‘domesticity’. Rather than simply functioning as oppositional terms, critics suggest, these are categories that should be considered together, or at least in close relation to each other. In his study *A Man’s Place*, John Tosh sets out such a revisionary agenda by arguing that

The domestic sphere […] is integral to masculinity. To establish a home, to protect it, to provide for it, to control it, and to train its young aspirants to manhood, have usually been essential to a man’s good standing with his peers. *Domesticity* represents something else. It denotes not just a pattern of residence, or a web of obligations, but a profound attachment: a state of mind as well as a physical orientation.67

Here, Tosh redraws the connection between men and the home, but in primarily conceptual terms. Nineteenth-century husbands were, according to this analysis, committed to the home as an idea rather than a reality. At the material level, Tosh reconfirms common preconceptions about the work of the home by claiming that a division of household labour was maintained. He cites evidence that suggests the prevailing perception was that women should carry out (or supervise the carrying out of) the bulk of domestic duties, while the ‘minority view [was] that domestic burdens should be shared’.68 True as this may be of the historical situation, it does not adequately capture the gender bias in the following domestic scenes.

Dickens’s enthusiastic interest in the running and management of his own household may begin to explain the positive value he attaches to male involvement in domestic work. As that already quoted extract by Forster tells us, Dickens was not just

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68 Ibid., 56.
concerned with domesticity in the abstract, but was ‘personally interested in every detail’. This should more properly be the administration of every detail. Such a fine distinction is significant here since the soon to be discussed domestic scenes are generally much humbler than the ones at least of Dickens’s adult life. That is, they present the carrying out of the actual household task itself rather than its management or supervision. These are also scenes that take place in a communal atmosphere rather than the intensely private one of a typical small family that Tosh has in mind when making his claims. Nevertheless, they do show male characters unexpectedly and effectively doing domestic work.

Wilkins Micawber seems the unlikeliest of household managers. His flamboyant character is, to begin with, at odds with the way that the ‘good housekeeper’ is supposed to work, according to Mary Poovey: ‘invisibly’ and ‘quietly’. He proves to be particularly adept at the role, however, when pressed into it at a ‘domestic little party’ David hosts for the Micawbers and Traddles in Chapter 28 of *David Copperfield*. The hired help that consists of the rebellious Mrs Crupp and a snivelling ‘young gal’ (DC, 382) proves comically ineffective. David’s humble ‘banquet’ (DC, 383) threatens as a result to fail. Or at least it does until Micawber becomes its unexpected saviour with the ‘bright suggestion’ that ‘with a little division of labour, we could accomplish a good one if the young person in attendance could produce a gridiron’ (DC, 384–85). The use of the expression ‘a little division of labour’ attunes us to the fact that this will be hard work. As we shall see, though, it turns out to be a very pleasurable kind of hard work, without the hint of either alienated or mechanised labour that is suggested by such a phrase. The following extract captures the mood of the scene:

What with the novelty of this cookery, the excellence of it, the bustle of it, the frequent starting up to look after it, the frequent sitting down to
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What with the novelty of this cookery, the excellence of it, the bustle of it,
the frequent starting up to look after it, the frequent sitting down to
dispose of it as the crisp slices came off the gridiron hot and hot, the being so busy, so flushed with the fire, so amused, and in the midst of such a tempting noise and savour, we reduced the leg of mutton to the bone (DC, 385).

The emphasis here is on activity, specifically happy and purposeful activity. It is clear that the scene is one of enjoyment because the action of it is imbued with a particularly collective spirit. Micawber, nevertheless, stage-manages the whole evening. It is even stated that he has a flair for such things. As David informs us: he ‘could do anything of that sort to perfection’ (DC, 385). His skills in the area compare noticeably, it should be added, with his lack of success in other fields.

An ungenerous reader might categorise what Micawber does in the above example as merely entertaining the group rather than a form of work. It is, though, an important branch of household management that deserves attention. The success of the improvised ‘banquet’ just discussed, moreover, certainly remains in the mind once we reach the disastrous dinner David and Dora put on for Traddles. The latter might be more materially sumptuous, but Dickens clearly favours the warmth and spirit of ‘making do’ (which is notably effective too) typical in the earlier scene. That this is the case is made even clearer by the arrival of Littimer late in the scene. He brings with him an air of professional assurance, but entirely deflates the evening’s happy mood. As David sadly intones, because of Littimer, ‘our appreciation of it was gone, and we merely made a show of eating it’ (DC, 386). Littimer’s formality of manner is the problem here. Although this may appear somewhat contradictory, Dickens values instead the relaxed and much more informal kind of effective and professional domestic management as it is presented in the ‘banquet’ scene. Another obvious contrasting sort would be, for instance, the kind of rigid domestic professionalisation represented by household manuals. The true spirit of ‘amateur professionalism’ that Monica Cohen supposes to reside with Esther is also present here.
This is certainly true too of *Dombey and Son*’s Captain Cuttle, who turns out to be equally talented as a male manager of the home. The point is made clearest towards the end of the novel, when nursing Florence back to health he sets to making her dinner. He carries out this simple domestic task with almost professional (in the sense that he is particularly proficient in the culinary arts) ease. The description of his actions makes this perfectly clear: he prepares the meal ‘with great care’, ‘a strong interest’ and ‘extraordinary skill’ (DS, 773). Once it is ready, furthermore, we are told that he ‘dished and served it up, with no less dexterity than he cooked it’ (DS, 773). The account of the whole process shows great balance (especially given that Cuttle has a hook in place of one of his hands), and this is echoed both syntactically in the equivalent weighting of phrases in Dickens’s prose and in some of the images used. Cuttle makes ‘an impartial round of basting and stirring’ (DS, 773), for instance, and even arranges the meal ‘symmetrically on a plate’ (DS, 773).

Cuttle, then, is particularly proficient and capable within this domestic scene. It is stressed, however, that he does not carry out all of the evening’s domestic duties alone: it is conducted instead as a team effort. Diogenes, for example, instinctively helps out with the clearing away of the meal’s leftovers. We are ironically informed that he ‘quickly dispatched the banquet’, presumably into his stomach (DS, 775). More important is the contribution made by Florence to the domestic work of the scene. We share, perhaps, in ‘The Captain’s delight and wonder at the quiet housewifery of Florence in assisting to clear the table, arrange the parlour, and sweep up the hearth’ (DS, 775). We might ‘wonder’ since it is never made clear how a solitary middle-class girl like Florence would have found out about or practiced such practical duties. Indeed it is suggested that her education is one based upon the learning of impractical accomplishments, since ‘Her books, her music, and her daily
teachers, were her only real companions’ (DS, 395). We have to assume, then, that Florence’s domestic abilities are ‘natural’ ones that extend out of her general goodness and decency of character.

As was stressed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, these are qualities that Cuttle possesses too. This strange couple are united by their unworldliness, and that perhaps is what makes their domestic work so simultaneously effective and happy. They function best in what becomes for both of them a kind of haven. The intention here, however, is not to argue that the simple domesticity they enjoy reinscribes Ruskinian notions of the separate spheres. For Cuttle, rather, it can be argued that household work emerges as a kind of vocation, or at least as what he is best at. He is a ‘natural’ too, and is another example of a relaxed, informally professional male manager of the home. His control of matters domestic, moreover, stands in emphatic contrast to his disastrously comic attempts at shopkeeping earlier in the novel that have already been discussed. Cuttle’s demonstrable skill in aspects of housekeeping may also be partly accounted for by the strength of Dickens’s imaginative extension of the character’s seafaring persona. Conforming to naval stereotype, Cuttle is described as ‘an orderly man’ who ‘was accustomed to make things ship-shape’ (DS, 764).69 His nautical bearing, though, seems one that is curiously and almost entirely reinvented within a domestic context. His accommodation may become ship or cabin-like, but it is an especially homely and stable kind of ship. Adventure and ‘romance’ (DS, 776), are consequently excluded, and his fascination with them, as a result, remains emphatically in the abstract.

Many of the peculiarities of this particularly domestic seaman resurface again much later in Dickens’s career in the figure of Tartar, a retired naval man who appears

69 The OED stresses that ‘ship-shape’ is originally a nautical term, but that it has frequently come into general usage since the nineteenth-century. Dickens effectively exploits the gap between literal and metaphorical meanings here. See OED, 2nd edn, s.v. “ship-shape, a.”
in his last and uncompleted novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Making his first appearance in the book as Neville Landless’s upstairs neighbour, he explains how his years spent on ships have conditioned his choice of land dwelling:

> I chose this place, because, having served last in a little Corvette, I knew I should feel more at home where I had a constant opportunity of knocking my head against the ceiling. Besides: it would never do for a man who had been aboard ship from his boyhood to turn luxurious all at once. Besides, again: having been accustomed to a very short allowance of land all my life, I thought I’d feel my way to the command of a landed estate, by beginning in boxes (ED, 200).

Having been used both to cramped living conditions at sea, and to naval discipline, Tartar has become particularly neat and tidy. It is emphatically put that ‘Mr Tartar’s chambers were the neatest, the cleanest, and the best ordered chambers ever seen under the sun, moon, and stars’ (ED, 236). In his introduction to a recent paperback edition of the novel, David Paroissien suggests that Tartar ‘has skills in household management equal to those of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*’ (ED, xxxi). This despite the fact that, as Paroissien has it, he is a ‘robust and “manly” man who has knocked about the world for twelve or fifteen years in the tough conditions to which England’s fighting men at sea were subject’ (ED, xxxi). What appears to be a contradiction is perhaps partly resolved by the association between the cultural type of the nautical man and neatness. It is a contradiction, nevertheless, that leads Paroissien to group Tartar with other distinctive characters who display positive energy: Crisparkle, Rosa Bud and Helena Landless. All show the ‘capacity […] for crossing boundaries and defying readerly expectations’ (ED, xxxi). Tartar should also be considered alongside the male household managers we have just been discussing. He is, perhaps, the example of this type par excellence.

There are, however, several important features of the portrayal of Tartar’s domestic management that distinguish it from the others explored in this section. To
begin with, we see the results of his cleaning urge, but no account of the process itself. The following excerpt is typical of the long descriptive passage with which Chapter 22 opens:

The floors were scrubbed to that extent, that you might have supposed the London blacks emancipated for ever, and gone out of the land for good. Every inch of brass-work in Mr Tartar's possession was polished and burnished, till it shone like a brazen mirror. No speck, nor spot, nor spatter soiled the purity of any of Mr Tartar's household gods, large, small, or middle-sized (ED, 236).

The hard graft of the polishing itself remains mysteriously out of the picture. The domestic scene recalls, as a result, the well-ordered but labour-free house in Canterbury to which David returns at the end of David Copperfield. Tartar, then, is properly the equal of Agnes rather than Esther. The latter, after all, documents the varied work tasks that she undertakes. Tartar also defines himself as an 'idle man' (ED, 200); this hardly captures the personality of a woman who needs to keep 'busy, busy'.

The nature of the only piece of household work that we see Tartar actually do confirms such assumptions, and provides us with a suggestive note on which to end. His curious creation of a meal for Rosa and Helena is described thus:

The refection that Mr Tartar produced in the admiral's cabin by merely touching the spring knob of a locker and the handle of a drawer, was a dazzling enchanted repast. Wonderful macaroons, glittering liqueurs, magically preserved tropical spices, and jellies of celestial tropical fruits, displayed themselves profusely at an instant's notice (ED, 241).

The 'dazzling' repast is a strangely exotic one with echoes of the 'heap / Of candied apples, quince, and plum, and gourd; / With jellies soother than the creamy curd' that is served up in Stanza 30 of Keats's The Eve of St Agnes. Unlike that example, Tartar's impromptu meal does not seem dangerous or designed as an act of seduction.

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But it does chime with the domesticated atmosphere of romance, and even of fairy-tale that pervades the presentation of Tartar's chambers, elsewhere suggestively labelled 'bean-stalk country' (ED, 241). As several recent critics have pointed out, such an atmosphere of exoticism and of the Orient is frequently present in the novel too, usually in the form of imported objects. Grace Moore, for example, argues that 'The small town of Cloisterham is awash with delicacies from the East, and Dickens seems to be deliberately and parodically overwhelming his characters in Eastern goods and imagery'.\(^71\) Perhaps more relevant here, however, is the precise manner in which Tartar prepares this feast. His actions—making some dainty delicacies appear by 'merely touching the spring knob of a locker and the handle of a drawer'—are made to seem magically effortless, so that he becomes more of a conjurer than a household manager. With its aura of mystery and illusion this calls to mind the scene in which David returns to the Wickfields' magically tidy residence at the end of *David Copperfield*. Another suggestive ending, Bella's domestic transformation, is recalled too. The difference here is that Dickens showcases the talents not of an angel of the house but, more unexpectedly, of a domestic god.

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\(^71\) Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of Class, Race and Colonialism in the Works of Charles Dickens* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 183. Miriam O’ Kane Mara argues that the novel criticises colonialism through such commodification, and that ‘colonial infection begins, not in the colonies, but with the British themselves and their attempts to ingest other cultures’. See her ‘Sucking the Empire Dry: Colonial Critique in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*’, *Dickens Studies Annual* 32 (2002), 233–46, 234.
CHAPTER FIVE

‘A ONE ENTIRE AND PERFECT CHRYSOLITE OF IDLENESS':
ACTION AND REPOSE IN DICKENSIAN BIOGRAPHY

‘Never lived a more restless man’¹

So claims George Gissing in an essay on ‘The Homes and Haunts of Dickens’. As biographical statements go, it is a pretty confident, even categorical one. Gissing is most likely taking his cue from The Life of Dickens, in which John Forster emphasises restlessness as one of the defining characteristics of his subject. An extract from one of Dickens’s letters to Forster in the autumn of 1857 is representative of the kind of strength with which the feeling is expressed:

Too late to say, put the curb on, and don’t rush at hills—the wrong man to say it to. I have now no relief but in action. I am become incapable of rest. I am quite confident that I should rust, break, and die, if I spared myself. Much better to die, doing (Forster, 638).

Dickens presents himself here as if a machine pulsing with energy. A mood of desperate dynamism seeps even into the rhythms of the letter’s staccato syntax. It is certainly a powerfully expressed image, and one of many such letters dealing with the topic that Forster quotes in the space of a few pages of the Life.² Forster, moreover, was not the only recipient of letters on the subject. From the 1840s on, Dickens wrote repeatedly to a varied range of correspondents about this peculiar character trait. It is

² See Forster, 635–39.

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hardly surprising, then, that his restlessness has become an important, if not the most important, strand of Dickensian biography. As Jean Ferguson Carr points out ‘[restlessness] became one of Forster’s organizing themes, and has since been used by Edgar Johnson as well’.³ It has persisted as a way of conceptualising Dickens’s life story: restlessness also features heavily in Peter Ackroyd’s 1990 biography Dickens.⁴

In this chapter dealing with biographical materials I contend that there is good reason to question this orthodox view. As I show in my first section, Dickens’s letters on the theme of his restlessness are, taken together, much more complex and varied in tone than biographers and critics have generally allowed. This prepares the ground for the second part of my argument in which I question a prevailing position that relates to the previous one: that Dickens was so restlessly energetic he, as Forster puts it in the Life, ‘did even his nothings in a strenuous way’ (Forster, 495).⁵ Forster’s interpretations are influential ones that have been picked up by more recent critics like Alexander Welsh, who suggests that ‘Dickens was hardly one to be idle in any circumstances’.⁶ It is my intention in what follows to claim that he could be by exploring the significance of his idle moments on holiday, about which one critic has remarked with passing surprise that he possessed the ability to ‘be as human as we are’.⁷ In The Tourist Gaze, John Urry stresses the importance of holidays from a sociological viewpoint: ‘to consider how social groups construct their tourist gaze is a

³ Jean Ferguson Carr, ‘Dickens and Autobiography: A Wild Beast and His Keeper’, English Literary History 52 (1985), 464. As noted above, Forster devotes a large section of the second chapter of Book 8 to detailed discussion of the subject. The sixth part of Edgar Johnson’s Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, 2 vols (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953) is entitled ‘Crescendo of Restlessness’ and much attention is paid to this aspect of Dickens’s character throughout.

⁴ Ackroyd does not use the theme as a structuring device. It is a subject, nevertheless, that is much discussed in Dickens (London: Vintage, 1999). See, for example, pages 479, 543, 747, 758, 781 and 797.

⁵ Forster is also keen to stress this facet of Dickens elsewhere in his biography. He claims, for instance, that ‘There seemed to be no need for rest to that wonderful vitality’ (Forster, 469) and that ‘his “doing nothing” was seldom more than a figure of speech’ (Forster, 687).


good way of getting at just what is happening in the “normal society”\textsuperscript{8}. By reassessing Dickens’s experience of ‘doing nothing’ (Forster, 687) I aim to separate him further from a narrowly-defined understanding of the gospel of work. As the subsequent biographical readings show, he does not distrust, as Carlyle does, all forms of idleness; this will be shown to have some bearing upon his fiction in my next and final chapter. I also hope to draw out the general difficulties of grasping ‘the whole truth’ about a biographical subject. Edgar Johnson proposes that:

The real job of imagination in biography is not so much in inventing as in perceiving relationships between different areas of fact and relationships between different degrees of significance in fact. All the work of imagination is one of proportioning and selection and presentation. [...] That’s the reason there can be half a dozen different biographies of the same man, all somewhat differing from each other in interpretation and yet all recognizable as aspects of the truth.\textsuperscript{9}

Within a much narrower frame, this chapter offers a new interpretation of the facts that we have about Dickens’s life, uncovering not ‘the whole truth’, nor even ‘a truth’ about him, but multiple versions of it.

I begin such a reinterpretation with a letter Dickens wrote on 6 June 1867 to W.H. Wills, his trusted sub-editor on his periodicals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. It responds in some detail to a letter written by Wills concerning his ‘misgivings’ about a potential American reading tour. Dickens justifies the trip partly on financial grounds. As he rather curtly puts it: ‘my wife’s income to pay—a very expensive position to hold—and my boys with a curse of limpness on them’ (Letters XI, 377). Importantly, he suggests that his old spirit of restlessness is also a central motivating factor for the trip. His account of the personal characteristic is, however, a far from typical one. He admits:

I shall never rest much while my faculties last, and (if I know myself) have a certain something in me that would still be active in rusting and corroding me, if I flattered myself that it was in repose. On the other hand, I think that my habit of easy self-abstraction and withdrawal into fancies, has always refreshed me in short intervals wonderfully. I always seem to myself to have rested far more than I have worked; and I do really believe that I have some exceptional faculty of accumulating young feelings in short pauses, which obliterates a quantity of wear and tear (Letters XI, 377).

Peter Ackroyd interprets the last two sentences of the letter as desperate attempts by an ill man to convince Wills (and perhaps himself) that an arduous schedule of public readings will actually benefit his health rather than destroying it, and this is an important context that should be taken into account. The letter does not initially flatly contradict prevailing opinion on Dickens's restless attitude either; its first sentence, in fact, confirms our assumptions about the inimitable, if in peculiarly memorable form. Ackroyd is right to claim that there is something 'astonishing' about this image of Dickens mechanically rusting into obsolescence merely if he were to stop and rest. There is also something 'astonishing' about the most unexpected and suggestive statement that Dickens utters here (which Ackroyd significantly does not quote) that, as he puts it, 'I always seem to myself to have rested far more than I have worked'. It is an observation, moreover, that is corroborated by many examples from the letters and travel writing that precede it. I deal first, though, with Dickens's statements about his restlessness in varied correspondence and in 'The Lazy Tour'.

I 'Setting up a Balloon': Reinterpreting Dickens's Restlessness

Despite its prominence in Dickens biographies, surprisingly little close or sceptical scrutiny has been paid to the presentation of his restlessness. Jean Ferguson Carr

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10 Ackroyd, Dickens, 1059.
11 There has, however, been some disagreement about the dating of the characteristic. Ackroyd suggests that 'Dickens's general restlessness became a marked feature of his life' during his first stay in Italy in 1844–45 (Dickens, 543). Forster, of course, dates it about ten years later in his chapter entitled 'What Happened At This Time: 1857–58'. In an editorial note in his edition of Forster's text, J.
touches upon the issue in an article dealing with the broader topic of Dickens and biography. She usefully begins to examine the extent to which Dickens uses the trait to explain his actions and also argues that in a particular letter Dickens ‘urges Forster not to underrate or simplify it’.\textsuperscript{12} Despite the suggestiveness of this last claim, she does not explore the issue any further. It is my intention here to begin a more critical reading of Dickens’s restlessness.

Much of the primary material for such a reassessment comes from Dickens’s collected correspondence. This is still perhaps undervalued, and certainly underused by critics. Angus Easson is certainly right to call Dickens’s letters ‘important not only as biographical materials or a commentary upon his age, but as part of the Dickens canon’.\textsuperscript{13} I aim to treat them as such—as literary texts worthy of close attention in their own right—both in the following section and in the chapter as a whole. This will involve trying to tease out some of their complexities, and peering behind surfaces. The view expressed by Georgina Hogarth and Mamie Dickens in the introduction to their early edition of collected letters, that no man ‘ever expressed himself more in his letters’ and that these represented ‘a portrait of himself by himself’\textsuperscript{14} will thus be treated with scepticism. His correspondence, as a result, will become not a transparent window onto his essential inner being, but rather a series of mirrors reflecting its various and complex aspects.

The tone and manner of Dickens’s restlessness letters, especially those to Forster, is open to interpretation in light of the comments by Georgina and Mamie. They may appear revelatory, and to be an authentic expression of self in epistolary

\textsuperscript{12} Carr, ‘Dickens and Autobiography’, 464.
\textsuperscript{14} Quoted in ibid., 337.
form. They also, however, contain many performative aspects, and show Dickens to be at his most expressive, and are written in such an emphatic style that, if not precisely theatrical, is certainly rhetorically overstated. Forster quotes many of these letters together in the space of a few pages in Chapter 2 of Book 8 in his Life. Such a concentration makes this tendency in them all the more striking. They sound best spoken aloud, rather than read quietly, since interjections, exclamations and exaggerations recur frequently. A good example can be found in an already quoted letter, written, according to Forster, ‘in the early autumn of 1857’. Dickens emphatically informs his friend ‘What I am in that way, nature made me first, and my way of life has of late, alas! confirmed’ (Forster, 638). His expressivity in a letter from the same year is matched by a melodramatically concrete image of self-destruction: ‘If I couldn’t walk fast and far, I should just explode and perish’ (Forster, 638). A similar tone is evident in a letter to Forster of April 1857. Having just visited the newly-retired William Macready, Dickens reacts in horror to how the rest has affected his friend, and hopes the same will not happen to him. Instead, he writes that: ‘I have always felt of myself that I must, please God, die in harness’ (Forster, 639). In this letter, moreover, there is even evidence that Dickens was aware of the energy and performance of his letters on the subject to Forster, since he describes it as having ‘the appearance of a small sermon’ (Forster, 639).

This overwrought setting is not, however, a default one. Not all of Dickens’s letters on the subject are mini sermons. That they were so effectively grouped together, and are so engaging, perhaps explains why the letters just discussed have

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15 J. B. Van Amerongen offers an alternative reading of the connection between Dickens’s restlessness and his theatricality. He suggests that his ‘sorry shifting and wandering […] [should] be attributed to the pangs of an unsatisfied hunger. […] We are fully justified in ascribing at least part of this sense of unhappiness to his being, what Woolcott calls, a “side-tracked” or “thwarted actor”’. See The Actor in Dickens: A Study of the Histrionic and Dramatic Elements in the Novelist’s Life and Work (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1926), 55–56.
come to represent our conception of Dickens’s restlessness. Yet the tone of other letters is much more varied than Forster’s selection intimates. This fact only further emphasises the theatricality of Dickens’s letter writing. In a different context, Jean Ferguson Carr describes Dickens as ‘a chameleon actor who could assume new roles as frequently as he could change his signature from Boz to Bobadil to Joe to Sparkler’. Ferguson Carr only makes this link as colourful exemplification of her point. But it does usefully capture an important performative dimension to Dickens’s letters that goes beyond just his signature. Paying close attention to several letters written to correspondents other than Forster in the 1850s suggests that he presents different versions of his restlessness to each of them. It might be countered that this is a natural enough feature of any collection of correspondence. Most letter writers, after all, alter voice or tone depending upon the biases of the person to whom they are writing. Such variation of tone is, nevertheless, still significant since it stresses the fluidity of Dickens’s sense of restlessness. Forster’s serious, authorised account is not the only one that we have.

Thus what seems at first a serious letter to Angela Burdett Coutts, dated 25 October 1853, unfurls into something much lighter. Making what is his second Italian tour, this time accompanied by Wilkie Collins and Augustus Egg, he informs her:

I am so restless to be doing—and always shall be, I think, so long as I have any portion in Time—that if I were to stay more than one week in any one City here, I believe I should be half desperate to begin some new story!!! (Letters VII, 171).

16 Ferguson Carr, ‘Dickens and Autobiography’, 447. In another essay, Carr further emphasises the theatrical dimension of Dickens’s self-projection: ‘Dickens often resorted to this theatrical frame to present emotionally-fraught material, containing the episodes within the production of a “drama”. [...] Dickens used this narrative frame when he described his experience at the Blacking Warehouse, in which he suggests that no word has been uttered, that his own parents were “striken dumb” on the matter until he momentarily “raised the curtain” on the scene’. See Jean Ferguson Carr, ‘Dickens’s Theatre of Self-Knowledge’, in Carol Hanbery MacKay, ed., Dramatic Dickens (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 27–44, 31.
The triple exclamation mark here is particularly surprising in this context; it highlights Dickens's keen sense of the ridiculous even in times of difficulty, stress or strain. It also emphasises that he was able to see the more humorous side of his restless compulsion 'to be doing'. This quality is revealed again in a letter to Wilkie Collins, dated 11 May 1855. Dickens's account begins in predictable enough fashion:

The restless condition in which I wander up and down my room with the first page of my new book before me, defies all description. I feel as if nothing would do me the least good, but setting up a Balloon. It might be inflated in the Garden in front—but I am afraid of it scarcely clearing those little houses (Letters VII, 616).

By its close, however, there is evidence that Dickens's own perception of his restlessness is inflected by a surprisingly absurd sense of whimsicality. James A. Davies argues that the tone of Dickens's letters to Collins, in their 'desperate jollity and raffish facetiousness', is essentially forced and in 'constant awareness of Forster's bulky existence'. Davies's judgement is informed by the sense that it was Dickens's correspondence with Forster that shows us his authentic epistolary voice. This, though, seems a difficult position to maintain, especially considering Dickens's abilities as a 'chameleon actor'. Dickens's letters to Collins may sometimes appear to be written in a mood of 'desperate jollity'. But then all of his moods can be interpreted as some kind of act, from the artificially comic, to serio-comic and back again to a highly wrought sort of tragic drama.

A similar kind of spirited role-playing is even more evident in 'The Lazy Tour' than it is in the letters discussed above. Deborah A. Thomas describes this curious piece of travel writing as 'a kind of creative game that he and his fellow novelist might play with one another and the reader'. Not all interpretations of it

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emphasise its playfulness to such a degree. Catherine Peters, for instance, admits that it is an ‘amusing series’ produced from ‘scanty material’. She also, however, sees it as a kind of transparent recording of reality, and an accurate presentation of the natures of its two protagonists: ‘It is, under the not very opaque cloak of anonymity, candid about both the Idle Apprentices.’ I want to reconfigure the relationship between the text and its creators and argue instead that it is a more complicated one. To align both writers straightforwardly with Francis Goodchild and Thomas Idle, respectively the personae they adopt in ‘The Lazy Tour’, goes against the very mischievousness of the piece’s manner, and also reinforces the accepted view of Dickens as a laborious idler and Collins as a natural one.

Such an approach, moreover, reconfirms what some critics have perceived as a lazy streak in Collins. Worrying particularly about the negative influence such a quality might have had upon Dickens, Edgar Johnson, for instance, labels Collins ‘indolent and sybaritic’. Ellen Moers characterises him in similar terms as being ‘lazy, sceptical, epicurean, languid’. Given that Collins wrote more than twenty novels and also produced plays, travel writing, short stories, essays and a biography of his father, the artist William Collins, these seem peculiar claims. Perhaps Johnson and Moers are thinking of Collins’s image, or are grasping at a sense of his essential

20 Ibid., 180. For a reading that challenges this playful view of the text, see Lillian Nayder, Unequal Partners: Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Victorian Authorship (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 107. Here Nayder argues that ‘this holiday spirit serves a serious social end. Representing his characters as the members of an all-inclusive idle class, a nation gone on holiday, Dickens solves the problem of resentment in the rank and file’. While certainly a provocative interpretation, this is one that seems hard to maintain. In a review of Nayder’s book, Anthea Trodd makes a similar kind of measured reservation, suggesting that ‘[Nayder’s] arguments, for example, for the thematic centrality of disaffected labour in The Lazy Tour […] are ingenious and detailed, but extremely tenuous’. See Victorian Studies, 45 (2003), 351.
21 The names are taken from William Hogarth’s series of popular engravings Industry and Idleness (1747). For accounts of Dickens’s response to Hogarth’s work, see Forster, 490–92 and Andrew Sanders, Dickens and the Spirit of the Age (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 172–74.
23 Moers, The Dandy, 239.
nature. He certainly cultivated a kind of languorous air and kept unconventional hours, as is made playfully apparent by a letter to Charles Ward, written when he was staying with Dickens in the autumn of 1852: ‘In bed at half past ten—up at seven—ten mile walk every day—What do you think of that for W.W.C., of late-hours-and-no-exercise notoriety?’ As this letter also implies, however, he was capable of working hard despite that ‘notoriety’. Catherine Peters further highlights the evident effort that Collins put into his literary endeavours, thus giving us a very different picture of the relationship by suggesting that this was what attracted Dickens to him in the first place:

He had many of the habits common to the young Bohemians who clustered around Dickens, but there was one difference which Dickens quickly appreciated: Wilkie was already a professional. [...] [He] was a prolific and reliable journalist, prepared, like Dickens, to take infinite pains over the slightest article.

Another piece of primary evidence confirms Collins’s industriousness. In a letter of 1853 he informs his brother Charles that ‘Since our little trip we have not left Boulogne. Dickens has been, and is still, hard at work; and I am hardly less industrious in my smaller way’.

It is this side of Collins that is evident in his semi-autobiographical article ‘A Journey in Search of Nothing’, published only the month before ‘The Lazy Tour’ started its run in *Household Words*. The connection between both pieces has been noted by one of Collins’s biographers. It has also received some critical attention. Lillian Nayder argues that the presence of labour is everywhere in it: ‘Each town to

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26 Ibid., 94.
27 Nuel Pharr Davis hypothesises that Collins’s article provided the impetus for their excursion to Cumberland. Dickens, in miserable mood, ‘happened on the proofs of Wilkie’s article about his spring vacation’, causing him to ask ‘Wilkie to work out a similar junket for him’. See Davis, *The Life of Wilkie Collins* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 204.
which he travels, no matter how remote or leisurely it appears, reminds him of the
"necessities of work". Her point is not that the workers are portrayed as honest
workingmen, but rather that there is a 'debunking' of 'pastoral idealizations' of rural
work in the article. Nayder's interpretation focuses almost entirely upon the external
environment that it portrays. Her reading also plays down any basis in actual events,
describing it instead as a 'story' in which 'Collins's narrator is a professional
author'. Yet there is also strong evidence to the contrary that suggests it is
autobiographical, if in playfully comic mode. According to Catherine Peters, Collins
based the 'humorous account' that we have upon a 'rest cure' that he went on with his
'wife', really his mistress Caroline Graves. The 'circumstantial detail' of the piece
is, as Peters points out, 'convincing'. The restlessness of its main character, desperate
to get back to his desk, also confirms from an unexpected angle Peters's earlier
contention that Collins worked much harder as a professional writer than a narrowly
preconceived image of him as a Bohemian and idler might allow.

His persona does, in fact, seem to possess some of Dickens's well-known
qualities, and is portrayed as being almost more 'restless' and unable to 'keep quiet,
and do Nothing' than Dickens himself. Much of his 'restlessness' can be attributed
not to the lack of peace in this country retreat, but rather to his own state of mind. As
the following extract demonstrates, it tends to be self-generating, and to over-
emphasise the actual volume of working noise: 'No manufacture is carried on in this
peaceful place, no new houses are being built; and yet there is such a hammering that,

28 Nayder, Unequal Partners, 109.
29 Ibid., 110.
30 Nayder, Unequal Partners, 110.
31 For further detail see Peters, King Of Inventors, 195: 'One of Wilkie's 1857 contributions to
Household Words, 'A Journey in Search of Nothing', gave a humorous account of the author's attempt
at a rest-cure in the country, on doctor's orders, with his wife. Wilkie used many personae for his
Household Words pieces, of all ages, both sexes, and varied marital status; but in this article the
circumstantial detail sounds convincing'.
if I shut my eyes, I can almost fancy myself in the neighbourhood of a dock-yard'.\textsuperscript{33} The couple eventually leave what proves not to be a ‘pretty retired village’\textsuperscript{34} for ‘a large watering-place’ on the coast.\textsuperscript{35} Yet, once there, an inability to be idle persists. Collins muses that he is ‘Perhaps […] naturally of a restless, feverish constitution’. Doing nothing is categorised, as a result, as ‘harder’ work than hard work itself.\textsuperscript{36} His difficulty in being idle is evident once again later in the day when he falls to watching an ‘aged repairer of ships’. Categorising him as ‘a great professor of the art of doing nothing’, he sets out to observe his ability to occupy his time with a minute task and therefore to ‘learn how to idle systematically’.\textsuperscript{37} This, too, is a comic failure, so that he admits he is ‘a tyro Do Nothing’.\textsuperscript{38} His frustration with doing nothing reaches such a pitch that he must return to his writing desk. At the end of their first day at the ‘watering-place’ on the coast we learn that he has ‘stolen away at the dead of the night in flat defiance of [his] doctor’s directions, to relieve the unspeakable weariness by writing these lines’.\textsuperscript{39} With great archness, then, this short article itself actually represents Collins’s insufficiencies as an idler ‘vainly trying to vegetate’.\textsuperscript{40}

A very different version of Collins emerges as Thomas Idle in ‘The Lazy Tour’, thus underlining the difficulty of assuming either work is entirely ‘candid’ about this idle apprentice. Unlike the unnamed writer in ‘A Journey in Search of Nothing’, he is particularly suited to a lazy life. When we first meet him it is playfully suggested that idleness is part of his genetic make-up. He is

an idler of the unmixed Irish or Neapolitan type; a passive idler, a born-and-bred idler, a consistent idler, who practised what he would have

\textsuperscript{33} [Collins], ‘A Journey’, 218.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 217.
\textsuperscript{35} [Collins], ‘A Journey’, 220.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 220.
\textsuperscript{37} [Collins], ‘A Journey’, 221.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 221.
\textsuperscript{39} [Collins], ‘A Journey’, 223.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 223.
preached if he had not been too idle to preach; a one entire and perfect chrysolite of idleness.\footnote{[Charles Dickens], ‘The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’, \textit{Household Words} 16 (3 October 1857), 313. In the third volume of \textit{The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens’ Journalism} Michael Slater excludes material from this collaborative piece written by Collins. Since these sections are of interest to me here, I cite from the original periodical publication of ‘The Lazy Tour’ in \textit{Household Words}. For information on the attribution of the collaboration see Nayder, \textit{Unequal Partners}, 106n.} \\

This last image of a ‘chrysolite’ here hints that this is an idleness that is both very concentrated and very old—as old as a piece of hardened gem stone, in fact. As a result, Idle’s preference is for lounging rather than rushing at hills. He achieves this idle state effortlessly. Indeed, rather less solidly, it almost flows through him: ‘Prone on the sofa, Thomas made no attempt to get through the hours, but passively allowed the hours to get through him’.\footnote{[Wilkie Collins], ‘The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’, \textit{Household Words} 16 (17 October 1857), 363.} This languorous pose is, moreover, comically grounded in Idle’s boyhood experiences. In one of the tale’s sections, he catalogues his unhappy encounters with industry. In summary, he informs us that ‘all the great disasters which had tried his patience and equanimity in early life’ have been brought about by strenuous ‘activity and industry’.\footnote{Ibid., 363.} \\

The fluidity of Collins’s persona—effortlessly lazy in one example and restlessly incapable of being idle in another—forcefully questions the received view of him. Equally, there is no reason to suppose that Francis Goodchild straightforwardly reflects Dickens’s complex personality. Goodchild’s behaviour does chime with current biographical preconceptions about a restless and hyperactive author. This is evident even from the opening character sketch, in which he is described as being ‘laboriously idle, and would take upon himself any amount of pains and labour to assure himself that he was idle; in short, he had no better idea of idleness than it was useless industry’.\footnote{[Charles Dickens], ‘The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’, \textit{Household Words} 16 (3 October 1857), 313.} Yet the extract also shows Dickens’s comic
powers in full flow, which makes it difficult to decide how seriously to take ‘The Lazy Tour’ as a source of biographical information. Goodchild is the subject of slightly off-kilter self-parody throughout this peculiar travelogue. It plays upon a comic reversal: that he will only believe he is idle when he is exerting himself. Two examples from the second chapter illustrate this well. The first describes ‘Mr Goodchild, who in the fatigues of such labours congratulated himself on attaining a high point of idleness’.45 The second shows Goodchild bewildered by the idea of repose: ‘Having done nothing to fatigue himself for a full quarter of an hour, Francis began to fear that he was not in a state of idleness’.46 All of this finally comes to a point in the fourth chapter when a frustrated Thomas Idle strongly rebukes Goodchild for his infuriating tendency to ‘make work of everything’.47 The slightly surreal version of Dickens’s restlessness that is presented throughout ‘The Lazy Tour’ certainly sits curiously, even uneasily alongside the already-discussed letters to Forster. That these were written during the same period of Dickens’s life only further underlines his own inconsistency of response to this personal characteristic.

II ‘The idleness into which I have delightfully sunk’: Idling in Genoa and Boulogne

Kate Flint opens the Introduction to the Penguin edition of Pictures from Italy with the claim that ‘Charles Dickens’s Italy was made up of violent contrasts’ (PI, vii). This might equally be rephrased Charles Dickens in Italy was made up of violent contrasts, for the persona projected in the text is often a contradictory one. Elements of this ‘unprecedented pause in his writing life’ (Letters IV, vii), as it is written up in Pictures, are defined by fevered activity rather than stasis. Kate Flint proposes that

45 [Charles Dickens], ‘The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’, Household Words 16 (10 October 1857), 338.
46 Ibid., 339.
47 [Charles Dickens], ‘The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices’, Household Words 16 (24 October 1857), 385.
‘This is the record of travelling impelled by restlessness’ (PI, vii) and this certainly seems the case on occasion. He claims that ‘it is such a delight to me to leave new scenes behind, and still go on, encountering newer scenes’ (PI, 70). Even ‘new’ scenes, apparently, do not satisfy a temperament like Dickens’s; he must instead move on and experience ‘newer’ ones. His apparent desire to experience almost everything of interest in a destination also figures prominently in the way that he categorises his Roman sightseeing:

[W]e went conscientiously to work, to see Rome. And, by dint of going out early every morning, and coming back late every evening, and labouring hard all day, I believe we made acquaintance with every post and pillar in the city (PI, 129).

The successive mood of the extract’s syntax reinforces the fact that here the routine of a tourist is recast as work, and hard work at that. The end result of Dickens’s toiling travel (the etymology of one sense of ‘travel’ can aptly be traced back to ‘travail’48) is, however, disappointment rather than satisfying enrichment. He admits that the group had ‘in particular, explored so many churches, that I abandoned that part of the enterprise at last, before it was half finished, lest I should never, of my own accord, go to church again, as long as I lived’ (PI, 129). Because of a packed itinerary, and because of his hurried visits to so many churches, Dickens’s powers of perception have hit saturation point. He has been reduced, in fact, almost to the kind of English tourist that he satirises in the form of Mrs Davis, who Dickens doubts ‘ever saw anything, or ever looked at anything’ (PI, 129).49

This kind of restless travelling, however, seems at odds with the manner in which *Pictures* is predominantly written. The text forcefully distinguishes itself from the ‘mountain of printed paper’ that is devoted to the study of Italy (PI, 5). It is

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49 Buzard also notices this contradiction in *The Beaten Track*, 93.
emphatically not a detailed or exhaustive travel guide in the manner of those published by John Murray in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Nor is it, as Dickens highlights, a learned or analytical ‘dissertation’ on a ‘famous Picture or Statue’ (PI, 5). Instead, in the Reader’s Passport Dickens sketches out the determinedly personal and improvisational origins of the book: ‘The greater part of the descriptions were written on the spot, and sent home, from time to time, in private letters’ (PI, 6). What Stephen Bann calls an ‘essentially artless, uncontrived mode of writing’, this is best described as a loosely connected series of ‘Travelling Letters’ rather than a weighty and well-ordered book. As Dickens less prosaically has it, it can be imagined as a ‘series of faint reflections—mere shadows in the water’. Dickens almost seems to feel, as a result, that he must apologise for their langorousness:

If they have ever a fanciful and idle air, perhaps the reader will suppose them written in the shade of a Sunny Day, in the midst of the objects of which they treat, and will like them none the worse for having such influences of the country upon them (PI, 6).

Like his own travelogue, being ‘in the midst’ of a lazy summer’s day makes Dickens take on some of its features. In his account of the time he spends in Piacenza, Dickens gives us an extended description of his seminal experience of laziness. He transcribes the sensation in pleasurable, if mildly melancholic terms. With a kind of lazy wonder he claims ‘What a strange, half-sorrowful and half-delicious doze it is, to ramble through these places gone to sleep and basking in the sun!’ (PI, 65) He almost literally takes on some of the features of the decaying picturesque Mediterranean

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50 This improvisational quality seems typical of Dickens’s general approach to correspondence. In a remark to Forster about the composition of the Autobiographical Fragment he suggests it was done with ‘No blotting, as when writing fiction; but straight on, as when writing ordinary letter’ (Forster, 12). Angus Easson also notes that ‘Most [of Dickens’s letters] suggest little hesitation or pause in composition […] Dickens only occasionally drafted letters’. See Easson, ‘Letters of Dickens’, 335.

landscape. The following description employs an image that we have encountered already. He writes:

I feel that I am getting rusty. That any attempt to think, would be accompanied with a creaking noise. That there is nothing, anywhere, to be done, or needing to be done. That there is no more human progress, motion, effort, or advancement, of any kind beyond this (PI, 65).

Unlike the already-quoted letters of 1857 to Forster and of 1867 to Wills, this expresses a kind of enjoyment of the creeping feeling that he is seizing up, and settling into a state of rusty inaction. He experiences release in being spared from ceaseless activity since he realises that ‘there is nothing, anywhere, to be done, or needing to be done’. His ease with himself filters out even into his conception of the wider world, which becomes a calm place rather than one of ‘motion, effort, or advancement’. It is, though, a fleeting feeling of release, interrupted by the energetic entry of his courier at the start of the next paragraph (PI, 66). To invoke his letter to Wills once more, this functions as one of those ‘short pauses’ from action ‘which obliterates a quantity of wear and tear’.

Much of the detail of this scene is transcribed from a private letter Dickens wrote to Count D’Orsay. That letter is not, however, an account of Dickens’s idle vista of Piacenza, but a rendering of the new feeling as experienced at his temporary home at the Villa Bagnerello in Albaro, near Genoa. As John Drew notes, this process of composition only emphasises the ‘discontinuities in the traveller’s persona’, producing ‘a flexible and at times troubled entity built up from the successive revisions of personal letters to different readers’. Deciding whether Dickens’s active or idle ‘traveller’s persona’ most defines his visit to Italy in the 1840s is, then, a particularly difficult task. It is complicated further by considering

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52 See Pilgrim IV, 170.
53 John M. L. Drew, Dickens the Journalist (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 89.
"Pictures, as James Buzard does, within the context of contemporary travel writings about Italy. Seen in relation to similar texts, Dickens's travel book becomes less distinctively impressionistic. Given that, as even Dickens admits, 'Many books have been written upon Italy' (PI, 5), his choice of style is rather a textually-motivated one and a marker of difference in a crowded market. Buzard confirms that 'Frances Trollope's and Dickens's travel books offer evidence of the tactics necessary to maintain a raison d'être for their genre at a time when the redundancy of certain kinds of travel-writing seemed self-evident'.

Some of Dickens's correspondence from the period will perhaps give us a way out of such an impasse. In *Pictures from Italy*, he describes the recollection of his time at the Palace of the Fishponds (his second place of abode in Genoa) as 'a perfect dream of happiness' (PI, 54). This kind of 'happiness' and pleasure in repose is very much evident in letters written from his residences in Genoa that do not make it into the final published account. There is evidence, in fact, that he was planning an idle time even before he left London. With a grasp of the ridiculous and of superfluous detail that would not seem out of place in one of his novels, Dickens tries to impress upon his friend T. J. Thompson that he ought to take an Italian break at the same time as him. His main tactic is to enthusiastically outline the enjoyably idle manner in which their time will be spent:

We must have a few books, and everything that is idle, sauntering, and enjoyable. [...] I see myself in a striped shirt, moustache, blouse, red sash, straw hat, and white trousers, sitting aside a mule, and not caring for the clock, the day of the month, or the day of the week. Tinkling bells upon the mule, I hope? (Letters IV, 72).

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54 Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, 165.
55 A letter to Forster, dated 30 August 1858, usefully corroborates that repose also improved Dickens's sense of the absurd. He suggests that his 'preposterous sense of the ridiculous' has only been improved by a 'long rest'. See Forster, 423.
Once there, it seems, he did enact his plan to do nothing of a very strenuous nature. Part of a letter he wrote to Daniel Maclise on 22 July shows him in playfully idle mood. This also makes it clear that his usually strident walking pace has slowed down somewhat. He informs Maclise that ‘if I choose to saunter, I can do it easily: even in the hot time of the day. I am as lazy however, as—as you are; and do little but eat, and drink, and read’ (Letters IV, 161).

This material is effective in the way that it forces us to re-evaluate the accepted view that Dickens was totally incapable of successful or enriching rest. Not all of Dickens’s biographers have entirely ignored this perhaps unexpected ability. Fred Kaplan, for instance, mentions the ‘occasional languid collapses [that] kept him ready for any amount of activity’.56 Kaplan’s judgement, however, categorises Dickens as a limited, even superficial idler. Two letters in particular, to be considered in detail in due course, qualify such an understanding. They question the assumption, moreover, that as well as not being naturally idle Dickens lacked talent as a contemplative gazer. According to Macready Dickens had: ‘a clutching eye—gets his impressions at once—is given to activity, and would not care to linger for contemplation’ (Letters III, ix). The following letters counter such a view, showing Dickens instead to be capable of passing his time in a complexly reflective state.

He had begun to relax and ease into such a state of mind, it seems, barely a week into his stay at the Villa Bagnerello. In a letter to the artist Daniel Maclise dated 22 July (the Dickenses arrived in Albaro on the 16th) Dickens lyrically describes the view that he has probably been gazing at out of his window since his arrival. The impressionistically effortless quality of the letter’s language makes it worth quoting at length here:

But such green—green—green—as flutters in the vineyard down below the windows, \textit{that} I never saw; nor yet such lilac and such purple as float between me, and the distant hills; nor yet—in anything—picture, book, or verbal boredom—such awful, solemn, impenetrable blue, as in that same sea. It has such an absorbing, silent, deep, profound effect; that I can't help thinking it suggested the idea of Styx. It looks as if a draught of it—only so much as you could scoop up, on the beach, in the hollow of your hand—would wash out everything else, and make a great blue blank of your intellect (Letters IV, 159).

Dickens goes to great lengths to convey the highly visual quality of his experience. He finds delineating the scene difficult, though, and cannot find the right words to describe the rich and unfamiliar Mediterranean palette. Language, memorably tagged as ‘verbal boredom’, is, in the end, just not up to the task. His response to this linguistic failure, perhaps surprisingly for a writer, is not one of frustration but rather of relatively placid acceptance. This shows in the quiet, drowsy control of the passage that is entirely at odds with the melodramatic excesses of the letters that deal with Dickens’s experience of restlessness. Yet, as the use of the second person ‘you’ and ‘your’ suggests Dickens remains, to an extent, distanced from metaphorically drinking down this bracing ‘draught’ of sublime nature. The ‘impenetrable blue’ sea elicits an equally mixed response, being ‘awful’ and ‘solemn’, but also ‘absorbing’, ‘silent’ and ‘deep’. Within this context, the classical analogy that Dickens draws with the Styx is a suggestive one.\textsuperscript{57} Dickens understandably only ambiguously embraces the ultimate rest and metaphorical passage to the afterlife that the scene offers.

A letter written to Lady Blessington during his final period of residence in Genoa in 1845 also demonstrates the idly, even Romantically reflective side of Dickens. Having just returned to the Palace of the Fishponds after his Italian tour, he politely rejects her offer to attend a local feast day in Pisa. His excuse, as it turns out, is profound contemplation of what he has experienced on his journey:

\textsuperscript{57} As James Frazer points out, this underworld river is an image of stasis, known for ‘winding slow with sluggish stream’. See \textit{The Golden Bough} [1922] (London: Penguin, 1996), 848. I am grateful to Erin Louttit for providing me with this reference.
I have seen so many wonders, and each of them has such a voice of its own, that I sit all day listening to the roar they make, as if it were in a seashell; and have fallen into an idleness so complete, that I can't rouse myself to go to Pisa on the Twenty Fifth (Letters IV, 303).

Almost Wordsworthian in spirit, these recollections are particularly intense ones. Not merely ‘pictures’, Dickens’s impressions are something much more mysteriously abstract than that. They are instead ‘wonders’ whose visual essence has been transformed into an almost sublime, sea-like roar heard ‘in a seashell’. The experience Dickens describes here is self-evidently not that of one who ‘gets his impressions at once’. It is of a mind turning perceptions around and around in contemplation. If Dickens is to be believed, moreover, his reflective state will not be a foreshortened one. He intends it to last at least until ‘the Twenty Fifth’, more than two weeks after this letter was written.

There are important features to notice, however, about this epistolary reverie and also the one discussed in the previous paragraph. These can effectively be brought to attention via a more general point made by James Buzard in *The Beaten Track*. Adapting John Urry’s important work in the field, Buzard re-evaluates the apparent dichotomy between ‘tourists’ and ‘anti-tourists’ in the nineteenth century as a much more reciprocal relationship:

>[Anti-tourists or practitioners of the “romantic gaze” required the crowd they scorned and shunned. [...] Even celebrated moments of solitude (for example, in travel books) must be seen as in some measure existing to be celebrated.][58]

This, it should be admitted, is true even of the two personal letters just explored. Dickens’s state of inaction turns out to be as much of a pose put on by this ‘chameleon actor’ as his restlessness.

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With his novel writing, editing of his journals, amateur dramatics and reading tours, amongst other things, Dickens faced several competing demands on his time during the 1850s and 60s. The fact that his attitude to ‘doing nothing’ changes somewhat in the evidence we have for the period offers another challenge to my argument. Dickens’s ability to enjoy enriching repose certainly does not reach the kind of pitch that it achieved during his time in Genoa during 1845 and 1846. That is not to say that it disappears entirely. Especially in letters documenting holidays spent in Boulogne (a place like Genoa of which he was particularly fond) between 1852 and 1854, Dickens often playfully describes his idle moments. A letter to Forster of September 1854 confirms, however, that Dickens’s capability for rest was now a limited one, and that it could be endured only for small stretches. Dickens tells his friend ‘I have rested nine or ten weeks, and sometimes feel as if it had been a year’ (Forster, 638). The use of ‘sometimes’ here hints that it is possible to read this statement more sceptically. It suggests that his experience of time dragging, and of rest becoming unbearable is not his only one, and that it might even be an exceptional or rare sensation.

This might seem a tentative claim, but it becomes a more convincing one when seen alongside a more critical consideration of Forster’s methods as a biographer. There is certainly a strong basis for claiming that his editorial hand was a relatively heavy one,59 and this is made especially clear in the sections dealing with Dickens’s Boulogne letters. In the Life of Dickens more generally, it should be admitted that Forster does not ignore completely Dickens’s idle side. It is acknowledged as part of his time in Italy, and Chapter 4 of Book 4 is titled ‘Idleness at Albaro’. The header of a page referring to a holiday spent in Broadstairs in 1848

59 For a full discussion of the issue of Forster’s ‘editorial integrity’ in assembling Dickens’s letters to him as the Life, see the Preface to Letters I, xi–xvii.
also signifies that it recounts ‘Summer Idleness’ (Forster, 495). But as the already-quoted line from this page (that Dickens ‘did even his nothings in a strenuous way’) shows, his idleness was often obscured, or recast as something requiring effort. This is especially apparent in Forster’s presentation of Dickens’s letters to him written from Boulogne in the early 1850s. Since very few of the letters Dickens wrote to Forster survive in manuscript form, it is only possible to speculate about how they might have been altered by the way Forster excerpted them. But there certainly seems to be an element of manipulation in the manner that he quotes a letter dated September 1853. To the ‘reaction and prostration of laziness’ that Dickens experienced between the completion of *Bleak House* and the commencement of his second Italian tour with Wilkie Collins and Augustus Egg, Forster adds his own editorial adjective, ‘fearful’ (Forster, 571). Collins’s choice of word here may chime with one of the more negative association of ‘prostration’: ‘extreme mental depression or dejection’. But there are much less charged meanings; the word can, for instance, more loosely signify the act of lying or resting horizontally. Without the full context, of course, it is impossible to know which meaning Dickens might have had in mind. Forster also quotes Dickens’s claim in a letter from October of that year that he feels like ‘one entire and perfect chrysolite of idleness’ (Forster, 571), but with little comment or ceremony. This might not seem strange within the immediate context in which Forster uses it. But Dickens does deploy the exact same phrase four years later in ‘The Lazy Tour’ to describe not himself, but that ‘born-and-bred idler’, Wilkie Collins. The distinction between the naturally lazy Collins and ‘laboriously idle’ Dickens is blurred once more.

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60 Madeline House and Graham Storey inform us that: ‘Out of nearly a thousand letters to himself from which Forster quoted, only fifty-five have survived’ (Preface to Letters I, xi). Edgar Johnson also discusses the issue and Forster’s ‘very cavalier attitude towards all correspondence’ in ‘The Art of Biography’, 14.

61 See *OED*, 2nd ed., s.v. “prostration, n.”
It can easily be countered, of course, that those three spells in Boulogne were very productive ones for Dickens. As W. J. Carlton puts it, ‘Here Bleak House and Hard Times were finished, a part of Little Dorrit was written and much of A Child’s History of England dictated to Georgina’. While this is undeniably true, it also only captures a part of Dickens’s time here. A letter to Collins dated 24 June 1853 highlights that Dickens’s residence was a good place to work and to rest: ‘If you have anything to do, this is the place to do it in. And if you have nothing to do—this is also the place to do it in to perfection’ (Letters VII, 101). With the re-entry of Collins into our story, their influence upon each other is stressed again. The letters from this period show both having not only the capacity for hard graft, but also for responsibility-free afternoons spent snoozing on the grass.

It is the latter kind of inactivity that makes Dickens’s correspondence written to varied recipients in the summer of 1854 so engaging. Dickens seems to have spent much of his time relaxing in a kind of ‘half-delicious doze’, occasionally with a book in his hand. In a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell he makes the following admission: ‘I am dreadfully lazy (after finishing Hard Times), and lie so much on the grass, reading books and going to sleep, that I am afraid I observe a new illegibility in my handwriting?’ (Letters VII, 383). There is the sense here that Dickens is putting on a pretence of shame at his idleness for Mrs Gaskell’s benefit. This is certainly not the case in a more playful letter written to Wills only a few days later:

I will endeavour to come off my back (and the grass), to do an opening paper for the starting No. of North and South. I can’t positively answer for such a victory over the idleness into which I have delightfully sunk, as the achievement of this feat; but let us hope (Letters VII, 384).

Doing nothing is here recast as a delight rather than something to be avoided at all costs. Dickens’s letter ends, in fact, with mock surprise at his ability even to

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correspond with his sub-editor: 'I cannot sufficiently admire my prodigious energy in coming out of a stupor to write this letter' (Letters VII, 384).

Further confirmation that this was a time of rest and relaxation for both Dickens and Collins is provided by two of the latter’s letters home. Writing to his mother on 27 July (only a few days before the Dickens letters just cited), he admits that ‘We are living here in such a state of Elysian laziness, that it is an absolute effort to me to write this letter’. Collins stresses here that they were collectively not doing very much, and enjoying it. A letter to his brother Charles dated 31 August confirms this picture of relaxed summer pleasure:

When the morning breeze freshens to what the sailors call “half a gale of wind” we bring out a mighty kite—jointly produced by the labour and ingenuity of Dickens and your humble servant—which is supposed to be capable of taking up more string than can ever be brought to accommodate it. For cool evenings we have a [mammoth] [Trap] Bat, and Ball, and play matches in which there is very little [erased word] science and a great deal of fun.

There is the suggestion here that hard work, specifically ‘labour and ingenuity’, have been involved in making the kite. Collins’s tone, however, is an irreverent one. His designation that this is a ‘mighty kite’ is most likely ironic, since it is also highly impractical, being ‘supposed to be capable of taking up more string than can ever be brought to accommodate it’. It still remains, nevertheless, one of their more unexpected collaborations. This image, moreover, of two grown-up and respected authors making and flying a kite is a memorable and attractive one of summer ease and amusement.

Another important earlier letter to Collins picks up a number of the themes of this chapter, and also provides a fitting conclusion. Writing on 20 December 1852,

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63 Collins, Letters, I: 122.
64 Ibid., 124.
Dickens praises Collins's professional attention to detail in the composition of *Basil* (1852):

It is delightful to find throughout that you have taken great pains with it besides, and have “gone at it” with a perfect knowledge of the jolter-headedness of the conceited idiots who suppose that volumes are to be tossed off like pancakes, and that any writing can be done without the utmost application, the greatest patience, and the steadiest energy, of which the writer is capable (Letters VI, 824).

The committed nature of Dickens's attack here upon gentlemanly amateurs who treat writing as something that should be rushed off without care confirms a standard view of the inimitable. The qualities that he admires are, expectedly enough, 'application' and 'energy'. Or at least this is the case in the main body of the letter. In a postscript, however, we get a glimpse of a much less serious version of Dickens. As he playfully puts it to Collins: ‘If I could only find an idle man (this is a general observation) he would find the warmest recognition in this direction’ (Letters VI, 824). This letter, then, highlights the larger shape of my argument in miniature form. It shows Dickens, strikingly like his younger literary friend, to be capable of ‘application’ and ‘energy’ and also talented at being ‘idle’ too. It has been my intention here to propose that of the poses enacted by a ‘chameleon actor’ like Dickens, his facility for repose as well as constant action should be stressed more concertedly in further appreciating and underlining Dickens’s contradictory personality. This is astutely perceived in the following statement by Edwin Pugh, an early twentieth-century Dickensian:

[T]here are already almost as many versions of the man Dickens as there are people who remember him in the flesh. I have talked with some of his contemporaries, and have been amazed at the diversity of their varying impressions of his personality.65

More than 130 years after his death, we can hardly have a better vantage point.

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65 Quoted in Ackroyd, *Dickens*, 1001–2.
CHAPTER SIX

DANGEROUS DISSIPATION?
IDLE HEROES AND VILLAINS IN DICKENS’S FICTION

I ‘The unredeemed ugliness is that of a slothful People’

During a visit to Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s Knebworth estate in June 1861 Dickens made an excursion with some companions to see James Lucas, a locally notorious hermit.¹ The experience provided the inspiration, and was eventually worked up for that year’s All the Year Round Christmas number entitled ‘Tom Tiddler’s Ground’ (1861). The didactic purpose of this seasonal literary event is made clear by the instructions Dickens sent round to his fellow contributors. He advised them to write pieces that would have ‘some latent bearing by implication on the absurdity’ of the life of a hermit and show ‘the dependence of mankind upon one another—and on the wholesome influences of the gregarious habits of humanity’.² Dickens talks notably about the story’s improving ‘lesson’ in a subsequent letter to Thomas Trollope (Letters IX, 549). This kind of tone is, perhaps surprisingly to modern readers, not unique to ‘Tom Tiddler’s Ground’. It is, rather, a key feature of both the Christmas Books and Christmas Stories, and part of a desire in them to spread a seasonal moral ‘lesson’. For the productions in some years, however, Dickens’s moralising purpose is

¹ See Ruth Glancy’s Headnote to ‘Tom Tiddler’s Ground’ in her edition of the Christmas Stories (London: J.M. Dent, 1996), 417. Specifically, Dickens was accompanied by Lytton, Sir Arthur Helps, Lord Orford, his daughter Mamie and sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth. As Dickens disparagingly notes, Lucas was becoming known nationally too: ‘He had even blanketed and skewered and sooted and greased himself, into the London papers’ (CS, 422).
² Quoted in CS, 417.
warped into (what seems in retrospect) a kind of petty score-settling. Ruth Glancy informs us that ‘The Haunted House’ (1859) ‘was inspired by a recent argument he had held with William Howitt, an ardent spiritualist and believer in ghosts’ (CS, 307). The Christmas number for 1861 is motivated by a similar kind of personal attack upon James Lucas. In the sections of the number in which Dickens (as Mr Traveller) recreates his meeting with Lucas (Mr Mopes in the fictionalised account), the lifestyle of the latter is condemned in much stronger terms than are suggested by the circular instructions to contributors, thus becoming not only ‘highly absurd’ but also ‘highly indecent’ (CS, 427). He confronts what he conceives to be Mopes’s unnatural denial of his ‘social nature’ and assumption that ‘he can in any wise separate himself from his kind and the habits of his kind, without becoming a deteriorated spectacle calculated to give the Devil (and perhaps the monkeys) pleasure’ (CS, 429). He is angered also by the hermit’s general grubbiness achieved, Dickens assumes, by ‘steeping himself in soot and grease and other nastiness’ (CS, 422).

Most relevant here is one particular aspect of Dickens’s attack: his condemnation of Mopes’s (and hence Lucas’s) laziness. Early in the tale Mr Traveller heatedly describes this reclusive gentleman as ‘A slothful unsavoury nasty reversal of the laws of human nature, […]; and for the sake of GOD’S working world and its wholesomeness, both moral and physical, I would put the thing on the treadmill’ (CS, 419). Dickens’s message is glaringly clear: ‘that every man should be up and doing’ (CS, 430). He reinforces this point even further in the last section of the number by

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3 For a fuller account of Dickens’s complex response to spiritualism, and the relationship between this Christmas story and other articles on the subject published in All the Year Round, see John M. L. Drew, Dickens the Journalist (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 148.

using the tinker, a marginal figure in the narrative, as an unexpectedly virtuous counterpoint to Mopes. Mr Traveller assumes him to be ‘a lazy fellow’, but he is instead ‘glad to be employed’ and ‘disgusted’ by the sloth of the famous hermit (CS, 445–46). He then provides the ‘moral’ with which ‘Tom Tiddler’s Ground’ ends: ‘that metal that rotted for want of use, had better be left to rot, and couldn’t rot too soon, considering how much true metal rotted from over-use and hard service’ (CS, 448).

The strength of the general condemnation of idleness in ‘Tom Tiddler’s Ground’ may in part be accounted for by the specific context of the personal attack that is outlined above. It shows a side of his work (and perhaps even personality) that is predictably and angrily in line with the anti-idleness spirit of Thomas Carlyle. For Carlyle, in Past and Present especially, all idleness is maligned as a danger to both individual and society, and as a path to infamy and even moral collapse, which is always placed in emphatic opposition to the glory reached through honest toil. The contrast is effectively illustrated in the following extract:

> For there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair.5

Similar strongly-worded warnings can be found amidst the enthusiastic (if repetitive) praise Carlyle pays to the ‘sacredness’ of work, such as the following one claiming that ‘Idleness is worst, Idleness alone is without hope’.6 He aims his ire not just at the vice; the idler himself also comes in for some declamatory censure:

> And who art thou that bragest of thy life of Idleness; complacently showest thy bright gilt equipages; sumptuous cushions; appliances for folding of the hands to mere sleep? Looking up, looking down, around, behind or before, discernest thou, if it be not in Mayfair alone, any idle

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6 Ibid., 126.
hero, saint, god, or even devil? Not a vestige of one. [...] One monster there is in the world: the idle man.7

The link between the glittering baubles and softening comforts of a Mayfair dandy and the dirty and dishevelled Mr Mopes might not seem an obvious one. It is perhaps made more grasrpable by the remark that also functions as the title for this section, that ‘The unredeemed ugliness is that of a slothful People’.8 The idler, in both of these instances, is spiritually ugly, and not just resolutely unheroic and unmanly, but ‘monstrous’ and even inhuman. Mr Mopes is, as we have seen, described in similarly overwrought terms, if in slightly sub-Carlyle key, as a ‘nasty reversal’ and a threat to the ‘wholesomeness’ of ‘GOD’S working world’.

As the rest of this chapter aims to show, however, Carlyle’s influence upon Dickens’s thinking on the issue is never as straightforward as it is in this initial example. Dickens’s fiction, like the writings of Carlyle, certainly shows little leniency in its attack upon the ranks of the unworking aristocracy.9 Criticism of this group as a class is particularly evident in a novel like Bleak House. The key-note of the presentation of Sir Leicester Dedlock’s ‘cousins’ and cronies is one of stasis and lazy resistance to movement and change. This much is apparent from the great set-piece description of them in Chapter 12 of Bleak House, which Juliet John calls ‘the most important, sophisticated, and direct analysis of dandyism I have found in Dickens’s works’.10 As a collective, these are

7 Carlyle, Past and Present, 174.
8 Ibid., 178.
9 In a recent article, Vincent Newey argues that there are also influences other than Carlyle’s at work in the formation of Dickens’s thinking on the debilitated and declining English aristocracy: ‘Dickens inherits from Byron a sense of the spiritual bankruptcy of the English upper classes and their regime. It is surprising that no one, with the exception of Bernard Beatty in a brief aside, has recognized in the London and Norman Abbey cantos of Don Juan, […] the certain basis of Dickens’s depiction of the atrophying domain of the Dedlocks’ Chesney Wold in Bleak House’. See Vincent Newey, ‘Rival Cultures: Charles Dickens and the Byronic Legacy’, Byron Journal 32 (2004), 85–86. I am grateful to the author for giving me an offprint of his article.
ladies and gentleman of another fashion, not so new, but very elegant, who have agreed to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities. For whom everything must be languid and pretty. Who have found out the perpetual stoppage. [Who are] particularly careful not to be in earnest, or to receive any impress from the moving age (BH, 189).

Not just static, but also dated and past usefulness, these idle aristocrats come in for much censure in the novel's Chesney Wold scenes. Rather than being active participants in wider society, 'The rest of the cousins are ladies and gentleman of various ages and capacities [...] [who] lounge in purposeless and listless paths, and seem to be quite as much at a loss how to dispose of themselves, as anybody else can be how to dispose of them' (BH, 448). The sweep of Dickens's satire is bitingly disparaging about these hangers-on, and occasionally alights on darkly comic individualised types such as the 'languid cousin with a moustache', who is usually 'in a state of extreme debility', and offers verbal contributions from his couch which approximate an exaggerated and amusing form of lazy received pronunciation (BH, 646, 984).  

The novelistic portrayal of 'professional' idlers—those that do little, and do it outside of the confines of an occupational framework—is equally as dismissive, and culminates in the well-known example from *Bleak House*, Harold Skimpole. Although recent criticism has attempted to reconsider Skimpole's villainy, 1 it is difficult to dispute that his is a particularly dangerous brand of idleness. Especially since he is a dilettante 'artist', it can be claimed that his indolence has a particular

1 A line can also be traced from here to Dickens's satire of the Barnacle family in *Little Dorrit* and the Veneering circle in *Our Mutual Friend*. The former group especially is defined by its inactivity and professed knowledge of 'How not to do it' (L.D, 109). None of the idlers in *Little Dorrit* will be discussed here. The generally negative portrayal of idle men in the novel such as Henry Gowan, Sparkler and Tip Dorrit functions within the particular context of its pessimistic critique of the inaction and lack of responsibility of a whole society.

12 See Bruce Robbins, 'Telescopic Philanthropy: Professionalism and Responsibility in *Bleak House*', in Homi K. Bhaba, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routlege, 1991), 222, which claims that 'If Esther represents Dickens at the level of ethics, it is surely Skimpole who represents him better at the level of analysis'. Also, in her *Dickens's Villains*, Juliet John suggests that there is an ambiguous response to him in *Bleak House*: 'many characters in the novel are unable to condemn his amorality, regarding him as a unique enigma' (158).
personal resonance for Dickens. Adam Roberts connects ‘Skimpole’s fondness of staying in bed’ with a poem by Leigh Hunt, noting both similarities and disparities with the work of the famous original for Dickens’s character.\textsuperscript{13} Roberts’s analysis of Skimpole as a version of Hunt, ‘with much of Hunt’s playfulness, but with neither Hunt’s underlying ethical rigour nor (of course) his talent’\textsuperscript{14} is particularly astute. Skimpole thus functions as ‘a sort of mirror-image’\textsuperscript{15} of Hunt, and also in an important way as a kind of reflection or anti-type of the kind of (very professional) artist Dickens was, and thought others should aspire to be.\textsuperscript{16} This more general point of Dickens’s satirical attack upon Skimpole is confirmed by a letter written to Peter Cunningham on 26 December 1851, just as Dickens was beginning work on the novel.\textsuperscript{17} In it Dickens angrily responds to what the Pilgrim editors assume was a suggestion by Cunningham ‘that members of the Guild subscribe for a memorial to the poet Richard Savage’ (Letters VI, 560n):

I think so tremendous a Vagabond never could have obtained an honest living in any station of existence or at any period of time; [...] I think it of the highest importance that such an Association as our Guild should not appear to resent upon society the faults of individuals who were fragrantly impracticable (sic) (Letters VI, 560).

It is clear that the heated tone of this letter is directed not just at the specific cases of Hunt, Skimpole or even Savage, but rather at all such ‘Vagabond’ artists.


\textsuperscript{14} Roberts, ‘Skimpole, Leigh Hunt’, 184.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 185.

\textsuperscript{16} It should be noted nevertheless that an 1840 letter to Leigh Hunt shows the pleasure Dickens was able to take in easeful repose, if only in the imaginative sense. Hunt had sent him a manuscript copy of his blank-verse poem ‘A Rustic Walk and Dinner’; Dickens clearly enjoyed it and responded in kind by playfully informing his friend: ‘Oh Hunt I’m so lazy, and all along o’ you! The sun is in my eyes, the hum of the fields in my ears, the dust upon my feet—and a boy, redolent of the steam engine and sweltering in warm ink is slumbering in the passage, waiting for “Copy”’ (Letters II, 67). The poem is reprinted in \textit{Poetical Works of Hunt}, 269–80.

The strength of the negative position taken in both of these instances perhaps helps explain why the broader interest in varying forms of idleness in Dickens’s work has been obscured. Yet not all kinds of idling are condemned in Dickens’s work. In Chapter 5 I explored the unexpected and invigorating capacity for ease and repose in Dickens’s life. In this chapter dealing with his fictional idlers I suggest that rather than seeing only ‘perpetual despair’ in all kinds of idleness as Carlyle does, he imaginatively identifies with it, and sees inaction in some circumstances as a resourceful act. A similar claim is made by David Trotter in his eloquent and suggestive essay ‘Dickens’s Idle Men’. Here Trotter argues ‘that Dickens occasionally found the leisure in his fiction to reflect upon displays of unconcern; […] that these moments are worth commenting on because they are […] wonderfully poised and inventive’.18 According to his analysis, however, idlers always remain marginal in Dickens’s fiction. They may provide an amusing, and even refreshing diversion for both the reader and for Dickens himself, but ultimately all Trotter says for their narrative function is that they do ‘no harm’.19 My intention here is to claim instead that idlers do have a central role to play in Dickens’s novels, both early and late in his career. I disagree, as a result, with Ellen Moers’s suggestion that ‘Dickens had nothing in common, save unspoken thoughts’ with ‘irresponsible drifter[s]’ like Sydney Carton. I will argue that some might even be characterised as (resolutely un-Carlylean) ‘idle heroes’. The characters under discussion, moreover, are never straightforwardly redeemed for an earnest and striving path that leads to bourgeois respectability.

19 Ibid., 213.
Commentators interpret a change in Dickens's attitude on the subject later in his career, seeing the influence of Wilkie Collins at work. Valerie Purton suggests, for instance, that 'In his novels (until the ambiguities of Our Mutual Friend) hard work is always rewarded and idleness always condemned'. Yet if this is so, then the shift is not a straightforward one. Dickens's attack on idling in 'Tom Tiddler's Ground' in 1861 makes that clear enough. That would seem to belong more to Dickens's late reactionary phase that has been explored by Philip Collins and Myron Magnet. I stress, as a result, that there was no such break in Dickens’s career. His attitude on idleness emerges as a complex one that is more favourable than is usually assumed. It shows affinities, indeed, not just with Carlyle's gloomy take on the issue, but also with more upbeat (if still contradictory) conceptions of the term that were circulating in the previous century. Dickens's familiarity with eighteenth-century and Regency sources hardly needs restating, and has already received some attention in this thesis. What interests me here is the potential influence of a slice of Dickens's very varied diet of periodical reading. Dickens owned and read such titles as Samuel Johnson's Idler and Rambler and Henry Mackenzie's The Lounger as both man and boy, and all three periodicals contain essays that proclaim the merits of idling. Their presentation of the subject is, though, often of a measured and even condemnatory

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23 Two recent chapters in broader studies consider Dickens's relationship to the recent past. See Grahame Smith, Charles Dickens: A Literary Life (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 60-85, and Andrew Sanders, Dickens and the Spirit of the Age (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 154-186.
24 See, for instance, the list of childhood reading that Forster gives in the Life of Charles Dickens, which includes 'the Tatler, the Spectator, the Idler, and the Citizen of the World' (8). John Drew also notes his healthy appetite for such reading matter later in life, and cites his 'holiday reading' of 1839 as the 45 volume Chalmers edition of 'The British Essayists'. See John M. L. Drew, 'Voyages Extraordinaires: Dickens's "Travelling Essays" and The Uncommercial Traveller (Part One)', Dickens Quarterly 13 (1996), 78.
kind. Ronald Paulson crisply analyses this ambiguity, with especial reference to Johnson, 'the best-known example of an eighteenth-century idler':

> [T]he agony he suffered all his life from idleness led to many strong expressions of detestation together with some signs of ambivalence. His moral horror of idleness in his prayers, his *Dictionary*, his essays, and his conversation is well known.

According to Paulson, this 'ambivalence' expresses itself in his 'sometimes affectionate and humorous' 'feelings' about idleness, and these often appeared in *The Idler*. These are values, as we shall see, that are closely associated with idleness in many of Dickens's novels too.

II A 'fascinating gentleman': Chesterfield, Chester and the attractions of idleness in *Barnaby Rudge*

That the fourth Earl of Chesterfield is the original for Sir John Chester in *Barnaby Rudge* is a well-known fact amongst students of Dickens's work. Critics generally cite some key pieces of evidence to back up such a connection. Myron Magnet points up one of the more obvious links that 'Dickens has modelled Mr Chester so closely on Lord Chesterfield as to have given him an abbreviated version of his name'. Andrew Sanders suggests that the reference to Chesterfield, whom he calls one of Dickens's 'great bugbears', is more significant and better-worked than merely providing his novelistic character with a similar name. Instead, 'he systematically puts into his mouth the kind of archly phrased, patronizingly moral expression that the novelist readily associated' with Chesterfield. It is also worth stating that Chester reads Chesterfield, and pronounces him 'the writer who should be his country's pride' and

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27 Ibid., 316.
28 Magnet, *Dickens and the Social Order*, 85.
29 Andrew Sanders, *Dickens and the Spirit of the Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 168. See also Edwin Pugh, *The Charles Dickens Originals* (London: T. N. Foulis, 1913), 232. Here Pugh states that Dickens 'did catch the tone of [Chesterfield's] Letters' and demonstrates his point by providing an unattributed 'medley of original and parody'.
He also knew Chesterfield’s work as an essayist. This likely explains why Dickens was able to catch the style and tone of Chesterfield’s well, and to transfer it into Chester’s complacent speech in *Barnaby Rudge*. He caught or understood the matter of Chesterfield’s worldview is, however, difficult to ascertain. He might, to an extent, have absorbed some of the dissonances about Chesterfield’s well-known letters of advice to his son. The *Letters* published posthumously, had already attracted famously negative comment of the eighteenth-century; Samuel Johnson’s jibe that he possessed ‘the manners of a whore, and the manners of a dancing master’ is probably the best known. He were still read in the nineteenth-century, but had become even further out of what might be considered the mainstream values of the subsequent age, those of sincerity, emotion and communality. He came, therefore, to err wrongs of a past age. Andrew Sanders suspects that Dickens shared this distrust:

Chesterfield and his disciple Chester represent those aspects of the culture of eighteenth-century England which most vexed the progressive Dickens on its supposedly complacent acceptance of social stratification and of che...

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30 A copy of the *Letters* can be seen in Hablot Browne’s illustration in Chapter 32 (BR, 269).
31 See Letters IV, 704–26, 717.
33 Cited in Bonamy Dobrée, ‘Introduction’ to *The Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope*, 6 (New York: AMS Press, 1932) I: 167. Other critics included William Cowper and John Wesley, epigrammatically calls Chesterfield a ‘polished and high-finished foe to truth, / Grey-haire of our listening youth’. Cited in Dobrée, ‘Introduction’, 163. Wesley takes a similar line, ob ‘half his letters inculcate deep dissimulation as the most necessary of all accomplishments’ Dobrée quotes one of Chesterfield’s letters in which he remarks that he knows ‘nothing more mean, and more ridiculous than lying’. See Dobrée, ‘Introduction’, 164.
privilege, and what he believed to be the innate hypocrisy evident in the manipulation of justice and morality by a ruling class interested chiefly in its own aggrandizement and self-preservation.34

Within this context, it becomes clear that Dickens purposely exaggerates certain features of the Chesterfieldian type for satirical ends. Chester is not, though, `closely [...] modelled' upon Chesterfield as Magnet suggests, nor is he as Sanders puts it `his disciple', or at least not precisely. He is instead, as his shortened name confirms, a degraded copy and insipid imitation of the historical figure who inspired his creation.

Chester, indeed, embodies many of the character traits and principles that Chesterfield maligns in epistolary form. Particularly relevant in the context of this chapter is Chesterfield's continued advice to his son to avoid the temptations of idleness, and instead `be a good economist of your moments'.35 Importantly for Chesterfield, 'Idleness is only the refuge of weak minds, and the holiday of fools'.36 Elsewhere he dismisses 'laziness, inattention, and indifference' as 'faults which are only pardonable in old men'.37 Informing his son on what he should aim to do on part of his European tour in Berlin, Chesterfield gives the following advice: `Do what you will at Berlin, provided you do but something all day long. All I desire of you is, that you will never slattern away one minute in idleness, and in doing nothing'.38 Despite such warnings that highlight `the idle lavishness of negligence and laziness',39 Chesterfield does not advise against well-earned rest, suggesting that his son should `divert [himself] heartily' as well as 'study hard'.40 It might be argued that Chester

34 Sanders, Dickens and the Spirit of the Age, 169.
36 Ibid., 138.
37 Chesterfield, Letters, 45.
38 Ibid., 129.
39 Ibid., Letters, 132.
40 Ibid., 200–1.
also wants his son to work hard and ‘make the most of himself’ and provide for his own luxurious wants. This remains, nevertheless, a striking disparity in worldview.

Chesterfield was a man of learning (although distrustful of pedantry) who saw it as his duty to pay attention to the world, and to those around him. He detests, as a result, the following character type, ‘commonly called an absent man’, who

is commonly either a very weak, or a very affected man; […] He fails in all the common offices of civility; he seems not to know those people today, with whom yesterday he appeared to live in intimacy. […] This (as I said before) is a sure indication, either of a mind so weak that it is not able to bear above one object at a time; or so affected, that it would be supposed to be wholly engrossed by, and directed to, some very great and important objects.41

In Barnaby Rudge, Chester is markedly described as one of the ‘hollow vessels [that] produce a far more musical sound in falling than those which are substantial’ (BR, 250). He shows exactly this kind of vacancy in his dealings with those around him in the world. This tendency is particularly clear in an early interview with his son. He complains about a ‘tendency to prose’ in his offspring’s earnest speech, telling him that ‘You know that I cannot fix my mind for any long period upon one subject. If you’ll come to the point at once, I’ll imagine all that ought to go before, and conclude it said. […] Listening invariably makes me feverish’ (BR, 132–33). Chester, then, functions as a kind of hyper ‘absent man’, who cannot even apply himself to one object. He also ‘fails’ noticeably ‘in the common offices of civility’ in his meeting with Gabriel Varden late in the novel. Despite a surface sheen of politesse, Chester forgets who this relatively familiar visitor is (BR, 623).

Chester is, of course, concerned with one object or subject in particular, and that is himself. The following vignette of Chester out riding just before his meeting

41 Chesterfield, Letters, 46.

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with Emma Haredale illustrates his obsessive and focused self-centredness well. The natural scene barely intrudes upon his musings:

The solitary rider went glancing on among the trees, from sunlight into shade and back again, at the same even pace—looking about him, certainly, from time to time, but with no greater thought of the day or the scene through which he moved, than that he was fortunate (being choicely dressed) to have such favourable weather. He smiled very complacently at such times, but rather as if he were satisfied with himself rather than anything else (BR, 239—40).

Such intense interiorisation expresses itself frequently in the novel when Chester takes up his habit of talking to himself. In one instance, the narrator interjects with the comment that ‘he would have said the same had there been nobody to hear him’ (BR, 241). His self-absorption also turns into something more sinister on occasions. Surveying the progress of his plot to make sure his son and Emma Haredale will not marry, he says to himself, with a sneer, ‘Well! [...] The plot thickens; I have thrown the shell; it will explode, I think, in eight-and-forty hours, and should scatter those good folks amazingly. We shall see!’ (BR, 218). In this extract, Chester resembles nothing so much as a soliloquising dramatic villain, with the calculating self-regard of a character like Edmund in King Lear.42

G. K. Chesterton astutely notes that this scheming, calculating side of Chester’s nature clashes with the languorously empty one akin to the type of the ‘hollow man’ so maligned in Chesterfield’s letters. As he puts it, Mr Chester (subsequently Sir), ‘has a boyish pleasure in play-acting; he has an interest in life; being a villain is his hobby. But the true man of that type has found all hobbies fail him’.43 Chesterton is right to claim that there is an inner inconsistency to Chester’s construction as a character. His justification of such a contradiction—that Dickens

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42 For another account of Chester as ‘a parody of the arch-villain of the Victorians’ see John, Dickens’s Villains, 162–63. For more general analysis of the Victorian stage villain see Chapter 2 of her Dickens’s Villains, especially 48–50.
‘could never understand tedium’—undervalues the evident pleasure that is taken in detailing Chester’s idling scenes, to be discussed in due course. Its unexpected prominence in the text, indeed, suggests that there are surprisingly convincing grounds for claiming Chester as a kind of idle anti-hero. This reading becomes an even more persuasive one when it is considered in the light of the novel’s surprisingly negative or unconvincing portrayal of work.

Those characters in *Barnaby Rudge* who, unlike Chester, either value work highly or are thoroughly identified with what they do for a living are shown to be either misguided or troubled. This tendency is most transparently expressed by Gashford, secretary to Lord Gordon, who with a self-satisfied air praises ‘the blessed work of a most blessed day’ (BR, 294), when really he has just been plotting the latest instalment in the anti-Catholic campaign. It also works itself out in more complex ways. Dennis the hangman sees his public role in the following terms: ‘I’m a constitutional officer that works for my living, and does my work creditable’, and claims that ‘My work is sound, Protestant, constitutional, English work’ (BR, 311). While there is little sense that such a warped commitment to work should be valued, it would be overhasty to simplify Dennis’s attitude to his occupation only in these terms. We find out later from Hugh, for instance, that ‘He keeps [his trade] a secret’ (BR, 335), thus living in some senses a divided existence. Even the attachment of a (relatively) more sympathetic character like John Willet to his job is problematic. As we find out in the novel’s final chapter, his identity is so tied up with the Maypole that he must recreate its atmosphere in his retirement after ‘the surprise the Rioters had given him’ (BR, 686). His ‘small cottage at Chigwell’ becomes, as a result, ‘a

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45 Steven Marcus claims that ‘Dennis cannot conceive of himself apart from his occupation, his “sound, Protestant, constitutional, English work”’, and he is certain that the existence of the nation is continuous with his work’. See *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 180.
fictitious Maypole' (BR, 686). The regular bunch of drinking chums even gathers there, and ‘they all four quaffed, and smoked, and prosed, and dozed, as they had done of old’ (BR, 686). The warmth of this account of the ‘fictitious’ inn is clear from the above extract. Pity also emerges in the description of John’s decline, who ‘still appeared to consider himself a landlord by profession’ (BR, 686). His attachment to the illusion is shown to be so complete that his son ‘Joe provided him with a slate, upon which the old man regularly scored up vast accounts for meat, drink, and tobacco. As he grew older this passion increased upon him’ (BR, 686).

It certainly appears that, in his capacity as a locksmith, Gabriel Varden is the exception to the surprisingly negative representations of work discussed above. Dickens’s depiction of manual work, which has already been discussed in Chapter 2, often attempts to transcribe it as an event in sound. This tendency reaches its peak in the short scene at the start of Chapter 41, in which we see (or rather hear) Varden hammering away in his workshop. Hammering, though, does not seem quite the right term, since Varden produces not just a dull, hard bang with his instrument, but a kind of divine music. The chapter’s opening sentence hits the defining note by informing us that ‘From the workshop of the Golden Key, there issued forth a tinkling sound, so merry and good-humoured, that it suggested the idea of some one working blithely, and made quite pleasant music’ (BR, 337). That Varden’s work is of a particularly musical kind is repeatedly stressed in the space of the next few paragraphs, as the ‘cheerful notes’, ‘harmony’ and ‘same magical tink, tink, tink’ arise from this happy workplace (BR, 337–38). Varden’s working sounds represent his cheery contentedness in his job, and also seem to almost transmit the pleasure he takes in it. Thus, once they have heard this ‘perfect embodiment of the still, small voice’, foot-passengers slackened their pace, and were disposed to linger near it; neighbours who had got up splenetic that morning, felt good-humour
stealing on them as they heard it, and by degrees became quite sprightly; mothers danced their babies to its ringing (BR, 338).

The effect of all of this is to create a hymn to honest manual toil. Yet there is also something unsatisfying about it as an account of Gabriel’s labour at the Golden Key. Myron Magnet reads this scene very differently by seeing the ideal vision of manual work that is presented here in a fairly uncritical light. Magnet states that Gabriel is a craftsman, not a laborer, making useful and beautiful objects with his own hands, to his own constantly varying designs, according to his own methods, and at his own pace. He is self-employed and has control over every step of production. [...] What he makes is truly his own work, bearing his imprint, the product of his hand and his brain alike.46

This may well be the case. Magnet’s reading, however, is based only on his own supposition, and upon what is suggested by the idealised portrait discussed in the last paragraph. Rather than being a detailed description of a precise, noisy and possibly enriching trade, this scene of musical work more resembles Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s rosy view of another kind of tradesman in ‘The Village Blacksmith’ (1839). In the following stanza, the noise that the blacksmith makes has similarly musical and religious overtones:

Week in, week out, from mom till night,
You can hear his bellows blow;
You can hear him swing his heavy sledge,
With measured beat and slow,
Like a sexton ringing the village bell,
When the evening sun is low.47

The extract’s sprightly musical tone stands in opposition to another kind of music in the novel, that of Chester’s voice. Sonic parallels, indeed, set up Chester and

46 Magnet, *Dickens and the Social Order*, 57–58.
Varden as oppositional forces in the novel. The ‘tink, tink, tink’ that Gabriel makes is described as being ‘magical’ (BR, 338). It is stated that Chester ‘enchanted all his hearers’ (BR, 228), but, of course, the ‘musical sound’ that he makes is typical of ‘hollow vessels’ (BR, 228), and is often employed to pursue his own manipulative ends. It is evident enough with which character our sympathy should lie. Despite this, it is hard to dismiss the fact that Chester’s idleness is conveyed with much greater attention to its minutiae. Hablot Browne’s illustration for Chapter 15 certainly hints that Chester is a seductively idle character, since he is given the rare honour of being its sole focus.48 The tools of his (non)trade are all finely drawn in Browne’s illustration, so that we see his ‘golden toothpick’, the ‘fragments of his meal’, and the paper to which he is leisurely attending on his lap (BR, 128). Mr Chester’s easeful inactivity is also pleasurable detailed in the chapter. Thus we read that

He had exchanged his riding-coat for a handsome morning-gown, his boots for slippers; he had been at great pains to atone for the having been obliged to make his toilet when he rose without the aid of a dressing-case and tiring-equipage (BR, 127).

Having precisely accounted for the paraphernalia attendant upon Chester’s idle way of life, the narrator seems to almost be seduced by the attractively lazy environment of the Temple, Chester’s place of habitation. His attention, as a result, wanders off into a digression concerning its odd ‘air of repose’ and its merits as a place ‘for basking in the sun, or resting idly in the shade’ (BR, 128). The focus lazily returns to Chester only to further document the tiny actions that constitute his easeful morning:

[O]ur idler, lounged; now taking up again the paper he had laid down a hundred times; now trifling with the fragments of his meal; now pulling forth his golden tooth-pick, and glancing leisurely about the room, or out at window into the trim garden walks, where a few early loiterers were already pacing to and fro (BR, 128).

48 See Jane R. Cohen, ‘The Portrayal of Sir John Chester by Browne and Cattermole’, *Dickensian* 72 (1976), 94: ‘Unlike most of Browne’s scenes, which tend to be crowded, the figure here fills the space. The only character the artist had previously given such solitary treatment was Hugh.’
This kind of specificity is, as we have seen, entirely absent from the parallel account of Gabriel Varden’s work at the Golden Key.

It is certainly clear that there is an interest, even a fascination that lies behind such idle passages as these. Chester nevertheless remains an alluring idle anti-hero but nothing more. I turn now to another figure from an early novel who might properly be called Dickens’s first idle hero: Dick Swiveller in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

### III ‘The cheerful ease of an irresponsible clerk’: Dick Swiveller as idle hero

N. N. Feltes is right to claim that *The Old Curiosity Shop* ‘provides the exceptions to Humphry House’s statement that “nearly everybody in Dickens has a job”’. As he further suggests, ‘It is not only that almost no one works (Dick Swiveller puts in his time, so to speak, and Mr. Garland rewards Kit’s punctuality with a job), but that those concerns which might make a job necessary are simply put by’. There are grounds for claiming it as Dickens’s most idle novel. It is certainly not positive about work, either in reality or in the abstract. The horror of industrial labour is made strikingly clear in scenes in the ‘great industrial town’ discussed in Chapter 2. This may be a nightmarish interlude, set apart from the overall mood of the novel. Yet a negative take on the value of work also surfaces in other sections of the narrative. On their way out of London, Nell and her Grandfather enter ‘a straggling neighbourhood’, and see ‘shabby fathers, hurrying with dispirited looks to the occupation which brought them “daily bread” and little more’ (OCS, 122). Later, when Nell is working for Jarley’s waxworks, an overenthusiastic commitment to the

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50 Feltes, ‘Dickens, Time, and Capitalism’, 261–62. A particularly comic manifestation of this pattern is the behaviour of the Garlands’ pony Whisker, which is represented as a kind of animal idling and avoidance of the proper task at hand: ‘The pony ran off at a sharp angle to inspect a lamp-post on the opposite side of the way, and then went off at a tangent to another lamp-post on the other side. Having satisfied himself that they were of the same pattern and materials, he came to a stop apparently absorbed in meditation’ (OCS, 115–16).
gospel of work is satirised in the scenes with Miss Monflathers, an earnest schoolmistress. The following outburst is aimed at an unfortunate Nell:

Don’t you feel how naughty it is of you [...] to be a wax-world child, when you might have the proud consciousness of assisting, to the extent of your infant powers, the manufactures of your country; of improving your mind by the constant contemplation of the steam-engine; and of earning a comfortable and independent subsistence of from two-and-ninepence to three shillings per week? Don’t you know that the harder you are at work, the happier you are? (OCS, 240)

Dickens’s glancing irony makes apparent the humbug and dreariness of such a view.

The novel’s idle tone is set in its opening chapter. This is perhaps hardly surprising given that Master Humphrey, who is the narrator of the first three chapters of the book, is a follower of ‘idle pursuits’ and something of a geriatric flâneur (OCS, 9). It is implied in the following extract that he hates to hear the sounds of the busy day and of ‘The glare and hurry of broad noon’ (OCS, 9): ‘That constant pacing to and fro, that never-ending restlessness, that incessant tread of feet wearing the rough stones smooth and glossy—is it not a wonder how the dwellers in narrow ways can bear to hear it!’ (OCS, 9) He prefers to contemplate the many [who] stop on fine evenings looking listlessly down upon the water [...] and think, as they look over the parapet that to smoke and lounge one’s life, and lie sleeping in the sun upon a hot tarpaulin, in a dull slow sluggish barge, must be happiness unalloyed (OCS, 9–11).

In a certain sense, of course, the novel is about the enforced ‘never-ending restlessness’ that is suffered by Nell and her Grandfather. But, as N. N. Feltes and other critics have noted, there is also a timelessness about the novel and a resistance to the ordinary cares of the work-a-day world that does not only exist within the chapters narrated by Master Humphrey.51 Such readings, though, imagine this idyllic vision of a world without haste as an exceptional case amongst Dickens’s novels. My intention

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51 Feltes quotes J. Hillis Miller’s comment that the narrative functions as a ‘universe of the moment’ and Steven Marcus’s experience of the novel as an ‘idyllic’ one. See Feltes, ‘Dickens, Time, and Capitalism’, 261.
here is to stress that it is not, and that Dickens’s attitude to stasis is a complicated one throughout his writing life.

The novel contains an unlikely idle hero, in fact, our first in a lineage of such characters in Dickens’s fiction: Richard Swiveller. It should be stated from the start that he is not an idler in exactly the complacent and listless way that Chester is. Rather than being someone who has no work at all to do, Swiveller tends to avoid doing, or do as little work as possible when at his desk. His clerkship with the Brasses, indeed, recalls some details of the clerkship of the young Dickens at the slightly more respectable real firm of solicitors, Ellis & Blackmore. It has already been suggested that both Dickens’s description of lawyers’ clerks in Chapter 30 of *Pickwick Papers* and the various legal characters of Newman Noggs, Mr Perker and Mr Tulkinghorn were inspired by his time there. There also seem to be clear links with Dick’s (perhaps the shortened form of Dickens is a clue) comic incarceration as a clerk in the Brasses’ ‘small dark house’ (OCS, 250). The first of these is a similarity of attire. William J. Carlton tells us that ‘On his very first day at the office young Dickens […] presented himself wearing a blue jacket and a military-looking cap with a strap under the chin’. This is strikingly close to what Dick sports on his first day: ‘a blue jacket with a double row of gilt buttons, which he had originally ordered for aquatic expeditions, but had brought with him that morning for office purposes’ (OCS, 257). The two clerks also share a sense of fun, and possess an eager eye for diversion away from their rather dull work. Dickens was great ‘comic relief’ in his office, and was known for his abilities as a mimic. Dickens’s playful means of passing the time by attempting from his office ‘to drop cherry-stones from the

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53 Ibid., 163.
54 Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Vintage, 1999), 125. Also see pages 124–32 for another account of Dickens’s time at Ellis and Blackmore.
window on the hats of passers-by on the street' also seems to influence the presentation of Dick as office entertainer.\textsuperscript{55}

It would be hasty, though, to claim a neat correlation between Richard Swiveller and his creator. The former certainly has none of the well-known drive and will of Dickens. As J. B. Priestley astutely claims, 'Swiveller is not deliberate, like the parodist; he has just drifted into his happy condition just as he has drifted into debt'.\textsuperscript{56}

As we learn at various points in the novel, furthermore, he (sometimes unhappily) accepts the lot into which he has stumbled, or rather in his own theatricalised parlance, his 'destiny' (OCS, 264). Nor is he entirely sympathetic or heroic, especially in the early phases of the novel, and is tellingly described as only 'in the main a good-natured fellow' (OCS, 423). But there is a huge amount of resourceful exuberance about him as a character. James Kincaid counts Dick among

Those figures [in Dickens] who dance about the earnest folk, who add [...] what is missing, ornament it, play with it, create themselves what they take to be missing, often out of nothing. This second group of performers needs no core for action, no plan, no causality; they use whatever comes to hand as the basis for an impromptu skit, full-scale drama, or opera.\textsuperscript{57}

This generalised analysis of a group of characters does fit Dick well. But there is also a part of him that escapes such a polarised categorisation, so that he is, to employ Kincaid’s dichotomy, not exactly one of ‘the irresponsible’, but not quite one of the ‘steadfast’ either.\textsuperscript{58} His ambiguity is perhaps clearest in relation to the two women in his life.

Since Sally Brass has been brought up to ‘one pursuit and study’ and has ‘passed her life in a kind of legal childhood’, it is unsurprising that she is so dazzled

\textsuperscript{55} Carlton, ‘Office Boy’, 166.
\textsuperscript{56} J. B. Priestley, \textit{The English Comic Characters} (London: John Lane, 1928), 227.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 11.
by the unfamiliar being that is Richard Swiveller (OCS, 274). More like a strolling player than a law clerk, he enlivens

the office with scraps of song and merriment, conjuring with ink-stands and boxes of wafers, catching three oranges in one hand, balancing stools upon his chin and penknives on his nose, and constantly performing a hundred other feats with equal ingenuity; for with such unbendings did Richard, in Mr Brass's absence, relieve the tedium of his confinement (OCS, 275).

This may appear a peculiarly active form of idling. But it impresses Sally Brass, and 'she would entreat Mr Swiveller to relax as though she were not by, which Mr Swiveller, nothing loth, would readily consent to do' (OCS, 275). It is difficult what to make of the strange 'friendship' (one of the stranger ones in Dickens) that develops between these two characters. Especially interesting here is the light that it casts upon Swiveller. Knowing that she is fond of him, 'He would often persuade her to undertake his share of the writing in addition to her own; nay he would sometimes reward her with a hearty slap on the back, and protest that she was a devilish good fellow, a jolly dog, and so forth' (OCS, 275–76). Swiveller hardly seems to be blissfully innocent that he is making Sally plunge deeper into her strangely denuded state of 'lawful innocence' just so that he can put his feet up for a while. But paradoxically he does also, it is pointed out in the same scene, introduce her to an entirely new and exciting sphere of life, thus broadening her unhealthy obsession with the legal profession: 'He imparted to her the mystery of going the odd man or plain Newmarket for fruit, ginger-beer, baked potatoes, or even a modest quencher, of which Miss Brass did not scruple to partake' (OCS, 275). Dick begins to teach her, in other words, to become an 'irresponsible clerk'. There are hints that this has worked when the Punch and Judy men roll into the street in the subsequent chapter:

As Mr Swiveller was decidedly favourable to these performances, upon the ground that looking at Punch, or indeed looking at anything out of the window, was better than working, and as he had been for this reason at
some pains to awaken in his fellow clerk a sense of their beauties and manifold deserts, both he and Miss Sally rose as with one accord and took up their positions at the window (OCS, 281).

As this extract makes ironically clear, Dick’s actions are still selfish ones. They have, nevertheless, awakened a younger, more fun-loving spirit in a woman whose ‘accomplishments were all of a masculine and strictly legal kind’ (OCS, 275).

Much later in the novel, Dick’s talent for leisurely procrastination has similarly mixed repercussions. So that Sampson is left alone to undertake his plot to win the trust of Kit Nubbins, he sends Swiveller ‘if not to Peckham Rye again, at all events to some pretty distant place which he could not be expected to return for two or three hours’ (OCS, 429). But, unsurprisingly, this would often be ‘in all probability a much longer period, as that gentleman was not, to say the truth, renowned for using great expedition on such occasions, but rather for protracting and spinning out the time to the very utmost limit of possibility’ (OCS, 429). Dick’s propensity to idle when he is given the chance, then, allows Brass more time to scheme behind his back while he breezes around town. In the very same chapter, however, when Dick is often left alone in the office while Sampson Brass is energetically pursuing his villainous ends, his silent playing ‘at cribbage with a dummy’ to pass the time leads to his meeting the Marchioness. This is Swiveller’s triumph: he saves both her life and his own, and it is in this romance plot that he becomes a true idle hero.

He is not, however, redeemed straightforwardly by becoming one of ‘the steadfast’, earnestly striving characters that populate Dickens’s fiction. His early scenes playing cribbage with the Marchioness in the cellar highlight the lack of real change in his character since they recall those just discussed with Sally Brass. Sally has had to suffer a ‘legal childhood’, and inflicts a bare, pinched life on the Marchioness, also ‘at work from her cradle’ (OCS, 261). Swiveller, as he had done...
similarly with Sally, happily exposes her to unfamiliar pleasures, of purl and cribbage in this instance, which she takes to enthusiastically. Their romance begins in part for Swiveller as a distraction, as a way of passing the time, at least until she is instrumental in saving his life. He makes then a particularly selfless promise on his sickbed that ‘For, please God, we’ll make a scholar of the Marchioness yet! And she shall walk in silk attire, and siller have to spare, or may I never rise from this bed again!’ (OCS, 504) This remark is admittedly made in the context of Dick having recently ‘fallen into an annuity of one hundred and fifty pounds a year’ (OCS, 504). But, as it is pointed out in the novel’s final chapter, ‘although the expenses of her education kept him in straitened circumstances for half a dozen years, he never slackened in his zeal’ (OCS, 552). What Dick does after this ‘straitened’ period, however, seems not to be an earnest setting-to, but a continuation of what has gone before. He is both ‘a literary gentleman of eccentric habits’ and ‘an attached and domesticated husband’ who seems to spend most of his time playing cribbage with the Marchioness, or dining with Mr Chuckster (OCS, 552).

IV The ‘idlest and most unpromising of men’: Dandies reclaimed?
Dickens’s complex presentation of the figure of the idler continues into the later fiction. If anything, it is magnified. Eugene Wrayburn is a good example of the type and of Dickens’s layered reaction to it. Spending the night with his best friend Mortimer Lightwood in ‘a dismal set of chambers’ in the Temple (we have already encountered this lazy location in Barnaby Rudge of course), Eugene takes up the expected pose of a dispirited young professional gentleman, ‘lying back in his easy chair’ (OMF, 281). As well as being a practising idler who hates his profession, Eugene often voices his opinion upon the ‘tyrannical humbug’ of the work ethic (OMF, 99) or ‘conventional superstition’ of ‘energy’ (OMF, 29–30). As he puts it in
the same scene: ‘If there is a word in the dictionary under any letter from A to Z that I abominate, it is energy’ (OMF, 29–30). In the same way as Chester, but with greater eloquence, Eugene’s lack of ‘energy’ is an amusing and attractive character trait. The less likeable side of him emerges, in fact, when he does become energetic, and finds ‘The amiable occupation’ which ‘has been the solace of my life’: ‘goad[ing] the schoolmaster to madness’ (OMF, 533).

The ending that Eugene is given, however, seems to suggest the imposition of a different set of values. This is hinted at in the following early exchange Eugene has with Jenny Wren:

“Generally, I confess myself a man to be doubted,” returned Eugene, coolly, “for all that.”
“Why are you?” asked the sharp Miss Wren.
“Because, my dear,” said the airy Eugene, “I am a bad idle dog.”
“Then why don’t you reform and be a good dog?” inquired Miss Wren.
“Because, my dear,” returned Eugene, “there’s nobody who makes it worth my while” (OMF, 234).

Eugene’s response to Jenny is a playfully predictable one that casts him in the role of middle-class seducer. But, against expectations, he is—or at least appears to be—reformed in the end. The critical reaction to his reformation has been a mixed one. Many view it as an effective and convincing change. Vincent Newey, specifically, reads his ‘redemption’ as being indicative of ‘Dickens’s project in shaping a middle-class culture’.59 Within such a ‘design’, ‘Eugene Wrayburn [...] is a Steerforth claimed from insouciance for respectability and work, marrying the woman he might have seduced and vowing to “turn to in earnest”’.60 Juliet John’s remark that Eugene’s ‘reparation’ is ‘far more troubling than critics usually concede’61 represents another position on the issue, and it is one that is certainly borne out by the difficulty and indeterminacy of the scene in the novel’s penultimate chapter in which Eugene vows

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59 Newey, ‘Rival Cultures’, 94.
60 Ibid., 94.
61 John, Dickens’s Villains, 195.
to 'turn to in earnest'. This is made evident enough by something that John does not cite. Eugene's very next sentence after his commitment to 'turn to' clarifies his lack of interest in such a change in outlook, since he pithily and ironically states 'Let us say no more of that, for a few years to come' (OMF, 864). Further, if he does 'turn to' work, it is not exactly clear what that work will be. The initial 'idea' he expresses to Mortimer of going to 'one of the colonies' with Lizzie and 'working at [a] vocation there' remains merely that: an idea. What he proposes instead is to defend his wife against any aspersions that Society may cast upon her: 'I will fight it out to the last gasp, with her and for her, here, in the open field' (OMF, 791). Eugene makes this claim vociferously and with great energy, so 'that he looked, for the time, as though he had never been mutilated' (OMF, 791). This, at least, is an enthusiastic change. It is suggested, though, that Eugene's new found energy will only find expression in the arena of Society and not in the professional world.

It is possible, of course, to read Eugene another way, not as a feckless drifter who needs to be redeemed by finding a wife and a vocation, but as a character in whom idle cynicism and earnestness co-exist. The latter quality might only appear fleetingly, but such a 'passing appearance of earnestness, complete conviction, injured resentment of suspicion, [and] generous and unselfish interest' is clearly glimpsed by Lizzie (OMF, 235). It does cause her confusion, though, and both kinds of personal 'qualities' are simultaneously present in her later realisation that

There was an appearance of openness, trustfulness, unsuspecting generosity, in his words and manner, that won the poor girl over; and not only won her over, but again caused her to feel as though she had been influenced by the opposite qualities, with vanity at their head (OMF, 237).

Lizzie's double perception of Eugene's nature neatly encapsulates the ambiguity of his portrayal. This is, despite his belief that Eugene is straightforwardly reformed, an aspect of Wrayburn that Newey emphasises in his reading of the character and more
generally the character type, suggesting that ‘Eugene is always a two-sided, enigmatic
character; in his own words, “an embodied conundrum”’.62 Lizzie’s viewpoint is the
only one we have here, so it is difficult to know how serious Eugene’s intentions are.
The pointed ambiguity of the scene, and of Eugene’s depiction elsewhere,
nevertheless reconfigures our understanding of the idler in this and other late novels.
The distinction between the lounging drifter and his more earnestly active opposite
will be shown to be even less well-defined in The Mystery of Edwin Drood, to which
my attention will turn later.

Such a conflict is also played out in the complex characterisation of Sydney
Carton, the seemingly ‘reckless’ and ‘disreputable’ barrister in A Tale of Two Cities.
Memorably labelled a ‘strange being’ by his more conventional but far less interesting
double, Charles Darnay (TTC, 89), Carton can be considered from many angles. The
most apparent, or at least the first that presents itself to our view, is that of the
disaffecte d, lounging professional. In the court room, we see him, for instance,
‘leaning back, with his torn gown half off him’, and ‘lounging with his elbow against
the bar’ (TTC, 79–81). This, at least in the early phases of the novel, remains his
typical pose when he appears in public. As a result, he is often unnoticed, and
frequently fades into the background of scenes. Seen in this light, Carton has some of
the features of the Carlylean dandy, as they are contemptuously outlined in typically
idiosyncratic style in the following extract from Past and Present:

Of what kind of baking was it that this other brother mortal got, which has
baked him into the genus Dandy? Elegant Vacuum; serenely looking
down upon all Plenums and Entities as low and poor to his serene
Chimeraship and Nonentity laboriously attained!63

62 Vincent Newey, The Scriptures of Charles Dickens: Novels of Ideology, Novels of the Self
63 Carlyle, Past and Present, 111. For a different interpretation of how Sydney Carton relates to
Carlyle’s thinking on dandies and heroes in Sartor Resartus as a ‘blurring of dandy and hero’, see
James Eli Adams, Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity (Ithaca, NY: Cornell
It is true that Sydney’s contempt is more often aimed at himself than his fellow man. But he is often described as a nonentity, and often disembodied in strikingly literal terms. He is so unobtrusive in the first court room scene that ‘Nobody had made any acknowledgement of Mr Carton’s part in the proceedings; nobody had known of it’ (TTC, 85). In his wanderings around the neighbourhood of the Manette household he becomes a ghostly figure: it is stated that he ‘haunted’ those streets (TTC, 155). In the discussion with Lucie that follows, Carton imagines himself to have no physical existence at all, to be ‘like one who died young. All my life might have been’ (TTC, 156). A fleeting moment of self-revelation, of embodiment even, follows. But as a later exchange with Darnay points out, this does not last. In visits to their home, he asks, rather strangely, to be ‘regarded as an useless […] piece of furniture, tolerated for its old service and taken no notice of’ (TTC, 216). A few moments after the visit, he becomes even more spectral again, becoming ‘to all outward appearance, as unsubstantial as ever’ (TTC, 216).

This discrepancy between ‘outward appearance’ and inner being is one that is played out in different ways in Carton’s novelistic life. To those who observe him professionally in *A Tale*, he appears a dilettante, unsuccessful barrister, much in the vein of Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*. In the early trial scene, for instance, Jerry Cruncher (admittedly not the most reliable of witnesses) makes the observation to his neighbour that ‘I’d hold half a guinea that he don’t get no law-work to do. Don’t look like the sort of one to get any, do he?’ (TTC, 79–80). But, of course, he does, or at least does Stryver’s ‘law-work’ for him. Cates Baldridge argues that ‘The political implications of Carton’s opaque character come to the fore as soon as we recall the work he performs, for as Stryver’s “jackal” he enacts what can almost be
termed a parody of the division of labor which upholds bourgeois capitalism'. True as this may be, I am interested more here in the contradiction that this 'idlest and most unpromising of men' (TTC, 90), who lounges unnoticed in the world, is a skilled summariser of legal documents in private. His exertions may be nocturnal ones, and strangely aided by wet towels which have been ‘folded [...] on his head in a manner hideous to behold’ (TTC, 92). His work is of the subjected, even feminised kind, since he works for the merit of Stryver and not himself. Yet it is also noticeable that the extreme concentration that he takes in the task, ‘with knitted brows and intent face’, almost makes him appear a manly manual worker, at the legalistic coal face, as it were. And, as Stryver remarks, his work for the first Darnay trial was ‘very sound’ and made sure that ‘Every question told’ (TTC, 93).

Other hints at an alert and lively buried personality escape, even early on in the novel when our first impression of Sydney is as a ‘careless’ lounger (TTC, 81). In the court room during the Darnay trial we are told that he ‘took in more of the details of the scene than he appeared to take in’ when he is the first to see Lucie Manette is about to faint (TTC, 80). In another context he is described as seeming ‘like a dissipated cat’ (TTC, 90), an image which captures particularly well his active powers of observation. These are even more evident during the sequence in a Paris wine-shop in Book 3 Chapter 8, when Carton’s opacity of manner makes him seem much better suited to being an effective spy than a barrister. His surface ‘negligent recklessness of manner’ persists, and acts as an effective cover in tracking Barsad (TTC, 309). By a process of ‘contemplating’ and ‘deducing’, Carton claims that ‘what [he] had done at random, seemed to shape itself into a purpose’ (TTC, 309).

It is in this scene, indeed, that Sydney's transformation begins in earnest. It is later stated that this new 'purpose' has strong physical implications too. Having 'pressed her hands on Sydney's arm', Miss Pross notices 'a braced purpose in the arm and a kind of inspiration in the eyes, which not only contradicted his light manner, but changed and raised the man' (TTC, 310). The strength of the impression must be a long-lasting one, since she remembers it 'to the end of her life' (TTC, 310). Sydney's ghostly non-presence has been strikingly swapped for a new fleshy and embodied form. His subsequent wanderings in Paris are, unlike his 'irresolute' and 'purposeless' hauntings of streets in London, much more sure-footed and open to the surroundings. He walks 'Perfectly calm and steady', and takes 'a solemn interest in the whole life and death of the city' (TTC, 326). His new found confidence of bearing is well described by the following lines:

It was not a reckless manner, the manner in which he said these words aloud under the fast-sailing clouds, nor was it more expressive of negligence than defiance. It was the settled manner of a tired man, who had wandered and struggled and got lost, but who at length struck into his road and saw its end (TTC, 325).

Even the clouds, it seems, have a new sense of purposefulness.

It is undeniable that Sydney makes the greatest self-sacrifice possible, and becomes a Christ-like figure. Yet there is also the nagging sense that there is something unconvincing about his transformation, and that vestiges of the old idle or self-pitying Sydney remain. The following natural image is used to finally emphasise his newly resolved state:

The strong tide, so swift, so deep, and certain, was like a congenial friend, in the morning stillness. He walked by the stream, far from the houses, and in the light and warmth of the sun fell asleep on the bank. When he awoke and was afoot again, he lingered there yet a little longer, watching an eddy that turned and turned purposeless, until the stream absorbed it, and carried it out to sea.—"Like me!" (TTC, 327)
With its lyrical touches, this passage seems to overstress, even labour the point that Sydney is now at last driving towards a particular purpose, especially since a sense of this has been building in previous pages as can be seen above. There are also later imagistic hints that some of his previous self remains, particularly when he enters Darnay’s cell in the novel’s final stages. He becomes spectral again, and is described as ‘an apparition’, and something ‘that appeared quite supernatural’ (TTC, 363–64). Despite the fact that he is possessed now ‘with a strength, both of will and action’ (TTC, 364), this shows a consistent, if changed use of the image. Juliet John interestingly suggests that ‘There are problems […] with the conventional reading of the ending of *A Tale of Two Cities* which sees Carton as a hero, and also with the text’s sense of him as a Christlike figure. Carton’s climactic, hypothetical “heroic” remarks, for example, betray as much an obsession with self as “selfless dedication to Lucie”’. His ‘hypothetical “heroic” remarks’ are, indeed, fascinating, and open to many different interpretations. John is perhaps not quite right to suggest that Lucie is not what motivates Carton in his heroic moment. She is a striking feature of his last words, especially in the following passage:

> I see that I hold a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. I see her, an old woman, weeping for me on the anniversary of this day. I see her and her husband, lying side by side in their last earthly bed, and I know that each was not more honoured and held sacred in the other’s soul, than I was in the souls of both (TTC, 390).

The marked repetition of ‘I see her’ turns this into a fleeting romantic fantasy, if an entirely selfish one. As James Eli Adams astutely comments, ‘Carton’s meditation offers a vicarious experience of domesticity as a cult of hero-worship, in which he is a divinity freed from further responsibility in human affairs’. Adams’s pointed remark

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65 John, *Dickens’s Villains*, 197.
that ‘Carton’s vision of Darnay’s family does not include Darnay himself—save in imagining his death’\(^{67}\) reinforces this view. It is demonstrated further by a part of Sydney’s ‘remarks’ that John does not quote, those dealing with the future of the Darnay child who will bear his first name:

I see that child who lay upon her bosom and who bore my name, a man, winning his way in that path of life which once was mine. I see him winning it so well, that my name is made illustrious there by the life of his (TTC, 390).

Within this vision the infant is given no independent life of its own, and is forced to live Carton’s instead. He even envisions the boy who will bear his name becoming the ‘foremost of just judges and honoured men’ and bringing his own son (‘with my name’) to the place of Carton’s execution. Sydney, then, seems not so much interested in passing on the chance for life selflessly as ensuring the remembrance of his name.

The reaction to the figure of the idler extends into a new phase with Dickens’s last, uncompleted novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which will be the fitting subject of discussion in what follows, the final section of this chapter and of my thesis. I shall begin by first considering the novel’s idle men within the wider context of a topic that preoccupied us right at the start of this thesis: a concern with the way that characters are identified—or not—with the work that they do.

V ‘I am always afraid of inconveniencing busy men, being an idle man’

In the already-quoted introduction to his paperback edition of *Edwin Drood*, David Paroissien is enthusiastic in his praise for the portrayal of four central characters: Septimus Crisparkle, Lieutenant Tartar, Rosa Bud and Helena Landless. He specifically highlights ‘the capacity the four show for crossing boundaries and defying readerly expectations’ (ED, xxxi). This is a remark that can be extended to

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\(^{67}\) Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, 59.
many of the other often curious characters that populate the fictional world of Cloisterham. Most relevant here is the complex and nuanced interaction that several characters have with their work. A pattern can in fact be traced: some seem to be (and protest, or keep up a pretence that they are) thoroughly identified with their work, when actually they are not, or do little of it in the first place. It might be argued that this play with appearance and reality and with mistaken identity is entirely expected, given that Dickens is working within the generic framework of the detective novel. I do not dismiss such a context here, but my focus, expectedly enough, is upon the strange ways in which work does (or does not) impact upon personality in the novel.

Many of Edwin Drood's more peripheral characters function as part of such a pattern. The schoolmistress Miss Twinkleton, for instance, is (without the spatial distinction) a kind of female version of Wemmick. She, we are told, 'has two distinct and separate phases of being':

Every night, the moment the young ladies have retired to rest, does Miss Twinkleton smarten up her curls a little, brighten up her eyes a little, and become a sprightly Miss Twinkleton whom the young ladies have never seen. Every night, at the same hour, does Miss Twinkleton resume the topics of the previous night, comprehending the tenderer scandal of Cloisterham, of which she has no knowledge whatever by day, and references to a certain season at Tunbridge Wells [...], notably the season wherein a certain finished gentleman [...] revealed a homage of the heart, whereof Miss Twinkleton, in her scholastic state of existence, is as ignorant as a granite pillar (ED, 24–25).

The illusion, however, that 'her scholastic state of existence' is her only one is not only maintained for her young ladies. The furnishings of the 'dainty room' that is her 'own parlor' makes this clear. In it are 'a terrestrial and a celestial globe', which importantly

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68 Paroissien notices elsewhere, for instance, that 'The late novels (Bleak House, A Tale of Two Cities, Our Mutual Friend, and Edwin Drood in particular) derive much of their power from the tension between surface and buried narratives, and the attempts by characters to draw these out'. See 'Detective Fiction', in Schlicke, ed., Oxford Reader's Companion, 158.
imply (to parents and guardians) that even when Miss Twinkleton retires into the business of privacy, duty may at any moment compel her to become a sort of Wandering Jewess, scouring the earth and soaring through the skies in search of knowledge for her pupils (ED, 26).

Her public image, as it is represented by the globes, suggests that her ‘two distinct and separate phases of being’ do not really exist. Her more frivolous side remains hidden, despite seeming the stronger force. Such a drastic splitting of her ‘phases of being’ does not seem to produce particularly marked psychological trauma upon Miss Twinkleton. The tone, as is obvious from the passages above, is instead a comic one. It might be added that, when she becomes Rosa’s tutor in London, she is one of the few characters in this unfinished novel to achieve some kind of resolution, by working out ‘a happy compromise between her two states of existence’ (ED, 250).

A wry playfulness also informs the disparity between the work Durdles the stonemason does, and his own sense of that work. His real self is, though, less of a secret than Miss Twinkleton’s. His appearance has taken on ‘the hue of his stony calling’, and he certainly appears business-like, at least in the following extract: ‘With a two-foot rule always in his pocket, and a mason’s hammer all but always in his hand, Durdles goes continually sounding and tapping all about and about the Cathedral’ (ED, 41). But, it is a well-known fact in Cloisterham that ‘He is the chartered libertine of the place. Fame trumpets him a wonderful workman—which, for aught that anybody knows, he may be (as he never works); and a wonderful sot—which everybody knows he is’ (ED, 41). And yet, despite his tendency to be found dozing drunkenly on a tombstone, Durdles is still very aware of his fame and prestige as cathedral stonemason: ‘But the stony one is a gruff one likewise, and that hazy state of his is always an uncertain state, highly conscious of its dignity, and prone to take offence’ (ED, 44).
A similar kind of affectation works its way, if less comically, into the life of the titular character in the novel. Edwin is a curious creation, and certainly crosses boundaries, if not in quite the same way that the four characters mentioned earlier do. When he first appears with his uncle John Jasper in Chapter 2, much of his actions and life seem to be projected through his profession, that of an engineer. Thus he is described ‘taking a corrected prospect of [the sketch of Pussy] over a level bridge of nut-cracker’ (ED, 17). Or he (mistakenly) bemoans the fact to his uncle that ‘You can take it easily. Your life is not laid down to scale, and lined and dotted for you, like a surveyor’s plan’ (ED, 18). Yet there is also something about him that escapes such occupational categorisation. He is certainly not much like the practical and earnest type of engineer represented by Daniel Doyce of Little Dorrit. He is, instead, self-confessedly superficial, claiming that ‘I am afraid I am but a shallow, surface kind of fellow’ (ED, 21). As a later interview with Rosa makes clear, he has fitted himself to his profession, and this has made his outlook a limited one: ‘I am not clever out of my own line’ (ED, 33). He has not, though, applied himself to the task assiduously: ‘now I come to think of it, I don’t know that I am particularly clever in it’ (ED, 33). In the early scene with Jasper, indeed, his air is idly disaffected rather than committedly professional. We see him ‘glancing up at the sketch [of Rosa] complacently’ (ED, 17). The sketch itself, an ‘unfinished picture of a blooming schoolgirl’, embodies this complacent attitude. There is, we learn, ‘not the least artistic merit in this picture, which is a mere daub’. What is more, ‘it is clear that the painter has made it humorously—one might almost say, revengefully—like the original’ (ED, 14).

These contradictions in Edwin’s character gain fuller, more compressed expression in his angry confrontation with Neville Landless later in the novel. Landless’s restless and impetuous nature, his ‘tigerish blood’ (ED, 80) could hardly
be more different from Drood’s. They clash over Rosa, and Neville sees Edwin’s playful portrait of her as ‘far from flattering the original’ (ED, 75). In the exchange, Edwin is surprisingly defensive about the worth of his profession. In response to Neville’s question if he is reading, Edwin replies (‘with a touch of contempt’): ‘No. Doing, working, engineering’ (ED, 72). He curtly and proudly emphasises his active life, and opposes it to Landless’s contemplative scholarly one by claiming ‘But I live a busy life, and I speak under correction by you readers, who ought to know everything, and I dare say do’ (ED, 73). His insistence, however, is oddly countered by his lounging pose in the scene. Effectively captured in Luke Fildes’s accompanying illustration entitled ‘On Dangerous Ground’, we read that

The air of leisurely patronage and indifference with which this is said, as the speaker throws himself back in a chair and clasps his hands at the back of his head, as a rest for it, is very exasperating to the excitable and excited Neville (ED, 75).

Rather curiously, given his committed defence of the engineering profession, he appears strikingly like an idly complacent dandy here, who, according to Jasper, ‘lounges so easily’ (ED, 76).

Edwin, then, is a striking composite character, containing aspects of both the professional man (if, admittedly a superficial one) and the idler. Such a tension is also played out in the fictional lives of two characters who appear only towards the close of the novel (or at least the close we have). Making an accurate assessment of Lieutenant Tartar and Mr Datchery is understandably difficult given the unfinished state of Edwin Drood. Both hint, however, that Dickens’s attitude to the idler was moving in distinctive new directions. Datchery is perhaps less interesting here, given that his idleness is so often self-proclaimed that it seems merely a cover for keen detective work. This mysterious character with a ‘military air’ announces himself at the Crozier hotel as ‘an idle dog who lived upon his means’ (ED, 202), and is
consistently described in such terms after that (ED, 206, 266). As (probably) a
detective pretending to be an idler, he is not an oddity in the late novels. David Trotter
astutely points out that ‘Dickens slyly compares type and counter-type by allowing his
detectives to masquerade, on occasion, as idlers’.69 When we see him ‘as he lounges
along, like the chartered bore of the city, with his uncovered grey hair blowing about,
and his purposeless hands rattling the loose money in the pockets of his trousers’ (ED,
266), he seems, indeed, somewhat like a benevolent, bumbling Tulkinghorn.

Given the secondary evidence that we have, Tartar’s trajectory in what was to
follow the half of the novel Dickens managed to complete seems much more
predictable. In a late chapter of the Life of Dickens entitled ‘Last Book’, John Forster
summarises what Dickens told him of his plans for the novel ‘before any of [it] was
written’. The relevant working-out of the plot is, according to Forster, that ‘Rosa was
to marry Tartar, and Crisparkle the sister of Landless, who was himself, I think, to
have perished in assisting Tartar finally to unmask and seize the murderer’ (Forster,
808). His role, so it seems, was to have been a straightforwardly heroic one. Tartar’s
manliness, as has already been pointed out in another chapter, is, however, far from
conventional given the fact that he is something of a domestic god in his ship-like set
of chambers. He is also, importantly, a self-confessed idler. As he rather meekly
admits to his new neighbour Neville Landless: ‘I am always afraid of inconveniencing
busy men, being an idle man’ (ED, 200). Neville’s response that ‘I should not have
thought so, from your appearance’ is an intriguing one. It might be implied that
Dickens does not favour listless, wan constitutional idlers, so only casts hearty idlers
like Tartar in a positive light. Alternatively, it proposes a surprising kind of character
for a Dickens novel: the manly idle hero. We can only speculate, of course, how such

69 Trotter, ‘Dickens’s Idle Men’, 211.

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a type would have developed, both in this novel and others that might have followed it. Still, even in unfinished form Tartar and the other characters in Drood that I have just been discussing are much more than a portent of what could have been. They underline finally what defines the nature of Dickens’s engagement with the issue at hand: not a muffled echo of the gospel of work, but an often sceptical and always playfully imaginative response to the ways in which work is inscribed upon the lives of his characters.
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