From Xenophobia to Xenophilia: Dickens's Continental Drift

Sean Grass


Published by Penn State University Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/707284

For content related to this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=707284
From Xenophobia to Xenophilia: Dickens’s Continental Drift

Sean Grass

In the decades between Charles Dickens’s portrayal of Count Smoltolk in *The Pickwick Papers* and his account of the foreign visitor who smashes Mr. Podsnap’s chauvinism to atoms in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens’s attitude toward Continental foreigners seems to have undergone a radical renovation. This essay argues that one key to understanding Dickens’s “drift” from xenophobia to xenophilia is to trace its imaginative origins in the essay “Travelling Abroad” (1860), which centers upon an English traveler on the Continent who is dogged by nightmarish visions of cannibalism and corpses—who is riddled through, that is, with the powerful compulsion to consume what he sees. “Travelling Abroad” thus foreshadows and bridges the sophisticated economic critiques of *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*, and it does so in the act of indicting Englishness, not foreignness, for the barbarity implicit in its narrator’s imagined acts. In this sense, I suggest, Dickens’s apparently softened view of foreigners in *Our Mutual Friend* has much to do with his hardened attitude toward England, and particularly his hardened view of the psychological and cultural effects of its maturing capitalism.

The measure of Charles Dickens’s changing attitude toward Continental foreigners during his long career might best be taken by comparing two memorable scenes, one from his first novel and the other from nearly his last. In chapter 15
of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37), Mr. Pickwick attends Mrs. Leo Hunter’s ridiculous literary brunch and meets a “well-whiskered individual in a foreign uniform”—Count Smorlork—who is “gathering materials for his great work on England” (225). A tourist of unspecified national origins, the count is laughable from the start, not only because he mutilates Pickwick’s name as “Pig Vig,” “Big Vig,” and finally “Peek Weeks,” but also because his limited English promises to mutilate his literary project, too.\(^1\) When he tries, for instance, to take down Pickwick’s platitude about English politics, he manages to write only, “The word poltic, surprises by himself—” before trailing off, the narrator says, into “such variations and additions as the count’s exuberant fancy suggested, or his imperfect knowledge of the language occasioned” (225–26). The scene is funny and chauvinistic, its light-hearted xenophobia reinforced by the ludicrousness of the *fête champêtre*, itself an unhappy importation from France. It also contrasts starkly with the famous “Podsnappery” chapter of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), in which another Continental foreigner—this time clearly a Frenchman—smashes to atoms the offensive prejudices of the great English boor, Mr. Podsnap. Speaking loudly as if to a child, correcting the foreigner’s pronunciation, and extolling the unlimited virtues of “The Constitution Britannique,” Podsnap blunders headlong into a verbal minefield:

> “I Was Inquiring,” said Mr. Podsnap . . . “Whether You Have Observed in our Streets as We should say, Upon our Pavvy as You would say, any Tokens—”

> The foreign gentleman, with patient courtesy entreated pardon; “But what was tokenz?”

> “Marks,” said Mr. Podsnap; “Signs, you know, Appearances—Traces.”

> “Ah! Of a Orse?” inquired the foreign gentleman.

> . . .

> “It merely referred,” Mr. Podsnap explained, with a sense of meritorious proprietorship, “to Our Constitution, Sir. We Englishmen are Very Proud of our Constitution, Sir. It Was Bestowed Upon Us By Providence. No Other Country is so Favored as This Country.”

> . . .

> “It was a little particular of Providence,” said the foreign gentleman, laughing; “for the frontier is not large.” (136–37)

In a handful of lines, *Our Mutual Friend* transforms the Continental foreigner from Pickwickian laughingstock to penetrating critic of English self-importance. We might read this as evidence that by the time he wrote the later novel, Dickens had arrived at a very different sense of the continental other, a sense that rejects the overt xenophobia of *Pickwick* and of many of his other earlier works besides.

Despite the title of this essay, it is not quite true that Dickens drifted easily from xenophobia to xenophilia during the thirty years between these two novels. For one thing, his attitudes toward the Continent were always complex, in
large measure because he understood that “the Continent” was comprised of many
different nations and peoples and had much in it that might be lauded or con-
demned. For another, Dickens seems never to have really disliked the Continent,
since by the time he began writing about it in any detail he had already learned
to consider it a valuable retreat, spending a year in Genoa during 1844–45 in a
deliberate attempt to grow as a writer (Slater 219). The time in Genoa was the
first and longest of several residences abroad for Dickens, most of them in Paris or
Boulogne but also leading to more extensive Continental travels. In all, Dominic
Rainsford estimates, Dickens made at least thirty trips to the continent between
1837 and 1868 (3). His letters, journalism, and *Pictures from Italy* (1846) all tes-
tify to his complex responses to what he saw. At first he hated the dirt and disorder
of Genoa, but he grew to love the city, just as he grew to love Switzerland and his
“French watering-place,” Boulogne (*Dent* 3: 231). He found Venice a wondrous
dream, Rome a mixed bag, and Naples and Lyons mostly detestable. To Paris he
responded differently at different times, his imagination finding the city endlessly
(if wickedly) alluring. In many instances, as we see from his accounts of Rome
and the “Goblin of Avignon” in *Pictures*, his dislikes simply mirrored his anti-Ca-
tholicism. Yet his religious bigotry did not temper his irritation with the unreason-
able prejudices of his countrymen, perhaps more because he came increasingly to
deplore the state of things at home than because he particularly admired things
abroad. From Paris he wrote to Forster in 1846, “It is extraordinary what non-
sense English people talk, write, and believe, about foreign countries”—a disdain
that probably accounts for the care he generally took to avoid other English tour-
ists during his travels (*Letters* 4: 676). A decade later he complained of Britons’
“Insularities” in an essay for *Household Words*, scoffing at the John Bullism that
“generate[s] prejudice, conventionality, and a cherishing of unreasonable ways
of acting and thinking, which have nothing in them deserving of respect, but are
ridiculous or wrong” (*Dent* 3: 339–40).

Podsnap is the Dickensian John Bull par excellence, part of a lineage that
includes Mr. Lillyvick in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39) and extends through Mr.
Meagles in *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) and Mr. Sapsea in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*
(1870). Yet the xenophobia that Podsnap shares with these other characters masks
one particular uniqueness: of Dickens’s many xenophobes and boors, he is the
only one exposed and mocked by the very Continental foreigner he derides, and
in a scene that simultaneously diminishes the idea of Englishness and celebrates
the acuity of a continental point of view. Whatever feelings he expressed privately
to his friends, and however dissatisfied he became with England, Dickens almost
invariably peopled his fiction with Continentals who are laughable like Smoltork
or sinister like *Bleak House’s* (1852–53) Mademoiselle Hortense. In this, Dickens
was perhaps mainly playing to popular prejudices or bowing to literary conven-
tions, as he had with Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1837–38). But the fact remains that
even as Dickens was making Hortense a murderess, he was planning a retreat to
Boulogne to save himself from overwork and illness—such illness, he confided to
Forster after he had reached France, that had he “lingered in London, [he] never could have got through” (Letters 7: 97). He wrote Bleak House’s Nos. 17, 18, and 19/20 at Boulogne, therefore, oscillating between epistolary descriptions of his wonderful landlord at the Chateau de Molineaux and fictional ones of his French maid, with her deadly hatred of Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn. After finishing the novel he spent two blissful months traveling Italy, Switzerland, and France with Wilkie Collins and Augustus Egg. Yet eighteen months later he began Little Dorrit with a scene in the prison at Marseilles and two characters who indicate a deep ambivalence regarding Continental foreigners: John Baptist Cavalletto, a childishly lovable Italian, and Monsieur Rigaud/Lagnier/Blandois, “a cosmopolitan gentleman” who menaces partly because his continental rootlessness contrasts so sharply with the presumed solidity of English identity (Little Dorrit 10). Even A Tale of Two Cities (1859) mostly Anglicizes its positive characters and locates Frenchness in the remorseless Madame Defarge, whom Dickens kills off by means of the conventionally English Miss Pross. Considered against such characters, Podsnap’s French guest seems to represent something new in Dickens. Moreover, the innovation seems to belong imaginatively and ideologically to Our Mutual Friend’s ferocious exposure of social and economic conditions in England.

One key to understanding this innovation, this essay argues, is to trace its imaginative origins in the essay “Travelling Abroad,” a piece of journalism that Dickens published in All the Year Round in 1860, just a few months before he began writing Great Expectations (1860–61). Centered upon an English traveler on the Continent who is dogged by nightmarish visions of cannibalism and corpses, “Travelling Abroad” suggests that these visions originate not in any particular barbarity inherent in the Continent but rather in the traveler himself, riddled through with the powerful compulsion to consume what he sees. In this sense, “Travelling Abroad” extends a central preoccupation of Household Words, examining “the part played by mid-Victorian commodity culture in forming the subjects who inhabited it” (Waters 140). It also foreshadows and bridges the sophisticated economic critiques of Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend, and it does so in the act of indicting Englishness, not foreignness, for the barbarity implicit in its narrator’s imagined acts. Sally Ledger has noted that when writing of the continent Dickens never really left behind his core concerns with economics and social class (85–87).7 In Pictures from Italy, for instance, amid a description of the gaiety of Naples, he pauses to caution, “let us not keep too studiously out of view the miserable depravity, degradation, and wretchedness, with which this gay Neapolitan life is inseparably associated! It is not well to find Saint Giles’s so repulsive, and the Porta Capuana so attractive” (166). The comment reminds us that Dickens was sensitive to not only the parallels between home and abroad but also the ways in which a sense of “home” could inflect the English traveler’s perception of foreign people and places. Thus, as Bjørn Tysdahl writes, the recurrent comparison of Paris with London in A Tale of Two Cities “gives greater depth and power to [Dickens’s] indirect political commentary, not least that which
examines the price paid in England for early capitalism,” and James Buzard finds in Dickens’s novels of the 1850s a sustained engagement with the question of “whether a novel passionately concerned with Britain’s national wellbeing needed to be exclusively national in focus” (Tysdahl 115; Buzard 54). Certainly by 1860 Dickens understood the domestic and foreign as entangled, particularly economically, even if he envisioned England at the center of the vast imperial and commercial web. In a recent essay on Dickens and xenophobia, Marlene Tromp has argued that Little Dorrit and Edwin Drood register a “xenophobic response to wealth laden with the taint of the foreign,” especially insofar as both novels figure “the foreign” as the East (31). Probably so, but his literal and figurative returns to the European continent were both more frequent and more complex. “Travelling Abroad” is one such return, and one that—in its autobiographical form, its anxieties regarding cannibalism, and its portrayal of the capitalist compulsions that drive the Victorian subject—sheds considerable light on the ideological reasons for Dickens’s drift from xenophobia to xenophilia in the years just before he wrote Our Mutual Friend.

I

“Travelling Abroad” belongs to that period of Dickens’s career, extending roughly from the publication of Hard Times (1854) to the publication of Our Mutual Friend, during which he wrote his most aggressive and systematic critiques of Victorian capitalism. With apologies to George Bernard Shaw, who called Little Dorrit “the climax” of Dickens’s “tremendous series of exposures” in this respect, his angriest and sharpest attacks on capitalism came during the decade that followed (72). Elsewhere I have argued that Great Expectations offers an especially complex economic critique, indicting capitalism through both metaphor and form.8 Pip is commoditized thoroughly and irremediably: peddled by Mrs. Joe and Uncle Pumblechook, rented for a time by Miss Havisham, and then bought up entirely by Magwitch, who boasts after he returns from Australia, “If I ain’t a gentleman, nor yet ain’t got no learning, I’m the owner of such” (242). For good reason, Pip suffers from nightmares of industrialization when he falls ill; for equally good reason, the threat of cannibalism is one of the novel’s most insistent themes. In Great Expectations Dickens underscores capitalism’s power to commoditize people in a text that is itself an identity made into a commodity, a deeply interior and protracted self-narrative that he designed thoroughly for the literary market (Grass 618). On the one hand, the novel was intensely autobiographical for Dickens, his regrets welling up into fiction as if from a psychic wound; it was shaped by the economic exigencies that Dickens faced in the aftermath of his separation from his wife and his creation of All the Year Round. On the other, though he intended initially to make Great Expectations his first three-volume novel, he
changed his plan after he began writing, electing instead to publish the novel in weekly parts in order to boost sales of his new magazine. The novel was driven, then, by psychological and financial imperatives, which may explain why Pip’s story is shaped so powerfully by the anxieties of both self-narrative and economic production—why, unlike *David Copperfield* (1849–50), it offers not a portrait of the artist as a young man but rather a portrait of the clerk becoming a cog in the capitalist/imperialist machine.

If *Great Expectations* is the troubled autobiography of an unwilling commodity, *Our Mutual Friend* is the story of all commodities, and of the legal and textual processes by which Victorian England came to commoditize the subject so reflexively that it began to appear a natural thing, equal parts Marxist reification and Darwinian ecology. Like the infamous dust mounds at its center, the novel is comprehensive and acquisitive, taking in all manner of people and “all manner of dust,” then heaving forth a literal and symbolic topography that seems to include the world and everything in it: waste and wealth, matter and spirit, decay and regeneration, quiet individual lives and the noisy excrescences that swallow them up in the modern commercial metropolis (*OMF* 284). As J. Hillis Miller has observed, “*Our Mutual Friend* presents a fully elaborated definition of what it means to be interlaced with the world,” particularly if we take “interlaced” to mean hopelessly entangled with inanimate things, and with structures of legal and social power that collapse the subject “naturally” into the commodities around it (280). The novel’s world trades in corpses, whole and in parts. But it commoditizes the living, too—Bella Wilfer, John Harmon, and Bradley Headstone, among a host of others—by rendering them shockingly vulnerable to capitalist demands. Yet no single Pip commands our attention here; no particular Miss Havisham or Magwitch is to blame. Nor does the novel give hope that the commoditization of the subject it describes is only individual or idiosyncratic, delimited by private experience or autobiographical form. Instead, *Our Mutual Friend* implies that Pip’s pinprick perspective is a single vantage upon a commoditizing culture that is endemic and entire, so vast that it appears organic to the world of the novel. The dust mounds are an urban mountain range. The Thames participates equally in natural cycles of death and regeneration and economic ones of production and exchange. Everything eventually becomes part of the novel’s life-giving and wealth-giving dust. Where *Great Expectations* is portrait, *Our Mutual Friend* is panorama.

“Travelling Abroad” stands between these complementary critiques, imaginatively and nearly chronologically. The essay appeared in *All the Year Round* on April 7, 1860, as the sixth installment of the Uncommercial Traveller series, designed from the first by Dickens—despite its name—to play a distinctly commercial role in the magazine. At the time, *All the Year Round* was still a fledgling enterprise, having published its first issue in April 1859. As editor and publisher, Dickens stood to profit handsomely if the magazine succeeded and suffer serious loss if it failed. To give the magazine every chance of success, he made
From Xenophobia to Xenophilia

A Tale of Two Cities its first serial, but he worried that once his novel finished its run he might need to find some other way to keep his writing present in All the Year Round to guarantee continued sales. Assuming the narrative guise of an “Uncommercial Traveller”—working, he wrote in the first essay, solely “for the great house of Human Interest Brothers”—Dickens contributed sixteen essays to All the Year Round between January and October 1860, when Great Expectations commenced, and he found the formula so useful that he returned to it in 1863 and again in 1868 (Dent 4: 28). As luck had it, Dickens need not have worried about his magazine, for A Tale of Two Cities was followed there by The Woman in White (1859–60), and these novels drove the weekly circulation to more than 100,000 in its first year. Still, there is something telling in Dickens’s decision to masquerade as an uncommercial traveler for essays designed to serve deliberately economic ends, and also in the fact that he did so not long after embarking upon his lucrative career as a public reader, touring England, Scotland, Ireland, and eventually the United States, thus cashing in on himself in unprecedented ways.

“Travelling Abroad” may thus have served Dickens as an imaginative preliminary to Great Expectations, for it works through the same dense imbrications of form, symbol, and capitalist critique that show up so powerfully in the novel. The essay takes most of its shape from two crucial scenes, the first of which comes before its traveler even departs England. Inside a massive German chariot, the traveler spins away from London “at a pace so lively, that I was over the river, and past the Old Kent-road, and out on Blackheath, and even ascending Shooter’s Hill, before I had time to look about me in the carriage” (Dent 4: 85). He is, in fact, headed east by southeast, toward Dickens’s childhood home. Though contemporary readers did not know it, this is where the essay’s autobiographical work begins. Between Gravesend and Rochester, the traveler notices “by the wayside a very queer small boy” and takes him up (Dent 4: 86). As the chariot nears Gad’s Hill, the boy points to the house atop it and says, “my father . . . has often said to me, ‘If you were to be very persevering and were to work hard, you might some day come to live in it,’” to which the traveler replies inwardly, “that house happens to be my house, and I have reason to believe that what he said was true” (Dent 4: 86). Thus the essay recounts the now-famous exchange that a young Dickens once had with his father, and that John Forster used to open his Life of Charles Dickens (Forster 2–3). Rewritten for “Travelling Abroad,” the scene offers a striking autobiographical tableau: Dickens the man in dialogue with Dickens the child, the split subject of autobiography made manifest. More to the point, as he would soon do in Great Expectations, Dickens here transforms intensely personal memories into narrative in the service of deliberately commercial aims. However much the remainder of the essay reflects Dickens’s experiences on the Continent, then, the imaginative framing of “Travelling Abroad” belongs to a more comprehensive vision of subjectivity, authorship, and capitalist exchange.

The essay’s second crucial scene comes when the traveler reaches Paris and is—as always, he writes—“dragged by invisible force into the Morgue. I never
want to go there, but am always pulled there’” (Dent 4: 88). He has been there on Christmas Day, “when [he] would rather have been anywhere else”; he has been there “[o]ne New Year’s Morning” with the sun shining and a young flaxen-haired man laid out “with a bullet-wound in his fair forehead and his hands cut with a knife” (Dent 4: 88). On the particular visit described by “Travelling Abroad,” he views the sodden corpse of “a large dark man whose disfigurement . . . was in a frightful manner, comic, and whose expression was that of a prize-fighter who had closed his eyelids under a heavy blow . . . O what this large dark man cost me in that bright city!” (Dent 4: 88). After a few moments of staring at the corpse, he turns ill and lurches out into the street, but even there he finds that he cannot escape what he has seen. He tries to refresh himself by swimming, but “in the full enjoyment of a delightful bath” he is suddenly “seized with an unreasonable idea that the large dark body [is] floating straight at [him],” and in his panic to leave the water he swallows some of it and becomes “sick, for [he] fancie[s] that the contamination of the creature was in it” (Dent 4: 90). Dining out, he finds that “some morsel on [his] plate look[s] like a piece of him” and rushes away; watching a boxing exhibition, he sees the resemblance between one combatant and the terrible “prize-fighter” corpse (Dent 4: 90). At the theater, in his hotel, along the glowing arcades, the sights and sounds of Paris resolve themselves insistently into this nauseating presence, which the traveler regards darkly as a “possession” he cannot “get rid of . . . until it was worn out” (Dent 4: 90). Even when it is worn out, and when the traveler is sure that the corpse has been taken away, his obsession is such that he returns to the Morgue one last time to study the dead man’s clothes.

Dickens’s fixation on this corpse in “Travelling Abroad” is striking but—for him, at least—not entirely unusual. His novels turn often to corpses and churchyards, whether in Oliver Twist’s apprenticeship to Mr. Sowerberry, Bleak House’s ruinous burying ground, or Great Expectations’ opening scene or “living corpse,” Miss Havisham (Janes 182).10 In many instances, his accounts of such things were meant to criticize England’s unhealthy burial practices or the needless expense and show of its middle-class funerals. But Dickens was equally preoccupied with corpses during his travels abroad, particularly in Italy with its unfamiliar system for pauper burials and innumerable Catholic churches, each of which had its own ghastly display of sacred relics and remains. Pictures from Italy calls attention repeatedly to such spectacles, most notably in the case of San Carlo Borromeo, whose shrunken remains lay in a subterranean chapel in the Duomo in Milan.11 Nor was “Travelling Abroad” the first or only occasion upon which Dickens wrote of Paris’s famous Morgue. Visiting it for the first time in December 1846 at the start of a three-months’ residence in Paris, Dickens fell quickly into the habit of going to the Morgue until, according to Forster, he was “shocked by something so repulsive that he had not courage for a long time to go back” (445). Yet he did go back, time and again, in his memory and his writing, returning often to the spectatorship/cannibalism motif that eventually appeared in “Travelling Abroad.” In “Lying Awake,” written for Household Words in 1852, the insomniac narrator’s
thoughts drift to a memory of the Morgue, with its “swollen saturated clothes hanging up” and its single corpse looking “like a heap of crushed over-ripe figs” (Dent 3: 94). Four years later in “Railway Dreaming,” the narrator underscores the Morgue’s spectacular commoditizing function by remarking that it looks as if “Death . . . [is] keeping a shop, and displaying his goods like a Regent Street or Boulevard linen-draper” (Dent 3: 375). This latter essay also hints that the Morgue inspires something more sinister than economic desire, for the narrator imagines that some fellow spectator might be thinking how his rival would look behind glass, murdered and made into a corpse for the grim display.

To the extent that “Travelling Abroad” describes the traveler’s desire to consume such a spectacle—and, for that matter, to the extent that it shows the Morgue’s spectacular capacity to provide it—the essay adopts Dickens’s characteristic stance when describing his travels. In her excellent introduction to Pictures from Italy, Kate Flint observes, “Dickens is a prototype of the flâneur . . . as we see above all in [his] descriptions of the Carnival scenes in Rome” (xiii). Michael Hollington notices this, too, pointing out that Dickens spent much of his time during visits to Paris “casually strolling in search of visual experience” (1: 155). He went to Paris three times during its Carnival season, and when he moved his family there from October 1855 to May 1856, he chose lodgings along the Champs Elysées so that the gay spectacle beneath the window would entertain Catherine and the children (Hollington 2: 201, 1: 158). He also understood that Paris’s scintillating spectacles originated in the pervasive interplay of commodity and exchange, much of it sexual, as in the cases of the lorettes and grisettes he encountered during his prowls with Collins and Spencer Lyttelton. But as Hollington has also pointed out, some spectacles were suggestive in other ways.12

In 1853 Dickens printed in Household Words an essay by Dudley Costello titled “Blank Babies in Paris,” which details the procedures for registering new arrivals to Paris’s Foundling Hospital. Received there, Costello reported, a baby is named, ticketed around the neck, and laid upon an inclined plane alongside “seven or eight [similar] little objects all in a row, who might have passed for the Marionettes”—or who might have been, for that matter, tiny versions of the corpses Dickens had seen so often at the Morgue (Costello 381). “In mid-century Paris,” Hollington writes, “one might conclude that in their ‘progress’ from cradle to grave human individuals constantly present themselves, or are presented, as commodities for recognition and/or purchase” (1: 156).

Yet the large dark corpse that haunts Dickens’s traveler seems to suggest much more than this, to be excessive not only in its physical bulk but also in the psychic demands it places upon the traveler. It appears as a surplus spectacle, a commodity that disturbs and disrupts because it must go on being consumed long after the consumer has had his fill. The unsettling darkness of the corpse makes it tempting to regard “Travelling Abroad” partly as an account of Victorian—or at least Dickensian—anxieties regarding racial otherness. Certainly Dickens did little in his published work or private letters to hide his scorn for the “savage”
who exists outside of civilization and an essentially Christian moral code. In his essay “The Noble Savage,” written for *Household Words* in 1853, Dickens begins by observing:

To come to the point at once, I beg to say that I have not the least belief in the Noble Savage. I consider him a prodigious nuisance, and an enormous superstition. . . . I don’t care what he calls me. I call him a savage, and I call a savage a something highly desirable to be civilised off the face of the earth . . . [for] he is a savage—cruel, false, thievish, murderous; addicted more or less to grease, entrails, and beastly customs; a wild animal with the questionable gift of boasting; a conceited, tiresome, bloodthirsty, monotonous humbug.

(*Dent* 3: 143)

Particularly offensive to Dickens were those who fawned over the savage, celebrated him, and put him on display, as Mrs. Jellyby does in *Bleak House* until she is finally “disappointed . . . in consequence of the King of Borrioboola wanting to sell everybody—who survived the climate—for Rum” (912). The same unappetizing attitudes suffuse Dickens’s comments on Eskimos in his essay on the lost Arctic expedition of Sir John Franklin, while the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion seems to have brought Dickens’s simmering impatience and anger to full boil. In the wake of the Indian conflict, Dickens wrote to Angela Burdett-Coutts of his furious desire “to exterminate the Race . . . to blot it out of mankind and raze it off the face of the Earth,” a task that he undertook imaginatively later that year by writing the ferociously xenophobic story “The Perils of Certain English Prisoners” (*Letters* 8: 459). By the 1860s—when Dickens sided with the Confederacy (though he opposed slavery) and supported Edward Eyre’s violent suppression of the rebellion in Jamaica—these attitudes had clearly hardened. In this sense, and in light of Tromp’s discussion of xenophobia in Dickens’s later novels, we might read the traveler’s sickening consumption of the corpse in “Travelling Abroad” as another example of Dickens’s resentment regarding English imperialism and the nation’s economic entanglements abroad.

But we ought not to confuse the darkness of the corpse in “Travelling Abroad” with the kind of racial otherness with which Tromp is concerned. Though dark and bloated, the corpse does not really belong to some exotic tribe—no more so than does the corpse in “Lying Awake” that resembles a pile of over-ripe figs. Rather, the corpse is presumably a Frenchman’s, a familiar Continental foreigner rather than one separated from Dickens by a gulf of race, distance, or creed. Even in *Pictures from Italy*, though he despises the historical barbarism of the Catholic Church, and though he refers often to the “people” of Italy, Genoa, or Naples, he never quite imagines them as a race apart. The closest he comes is in writing of Rome, the epicenter of pre-modern barbarity, when he remarks that “[t]he Italian face changes as the visitor approaches the city; its beauty becomes devilish; and there is scarcely one countenance in a hundred, among the common people in the
streets, that would not be at home and happy in a renovated Coliseum to-morrow” (118). Yet he writes this only after having exclaimed excitedly, a few pages earlier, that from a distance Rome looks exactly like “LONDON!!!” (115). Throughout *Pictures*, in fact, he takes pains to suggest that what separates Italy from England is its baggage of history and Popery, not anything stemming from a Victorian or postmodern notion of “race.” More to the point, in “Travelling Abroad” the brutality anyway runs in the other direction. It is the English traveler, not some dark-skinned other, who is drawn irresistibly to cannibalism and savagery. It is the surplus desire of the traveler to consume, not the surplus spectacle offered by the corpse, that compels and recurs and sickens.

What “Travelling Abroad” offers, then, is a new and powerful vision: not of a laughable or terrifying foreigner, nor even really of a foreigner at all, but rather of a Victorian subject shaped by capitalism, loosed upon the world, and driven compulsively to consume—or at least to imagine consuming—the foreign other. The corpse is not in itself especially disturbing or grotesque. On the contrary, the traveler notes, the large dark man looks “in a frightful manner, comic” and as if he will any moment open his eyes, “shake his head, and ‘come up smiling’” (*Dent* 4: 88). But it becomes disturbing and grotesque because of the irresistibility of its psychological recurrence—because the English subject conditioned by capitalism *must* treat the other, and go on treating him, as a spectacle to be commoditized and consumed. This logic is implicit in Dickens’s *flânerie* in *Pictures from Italy*, where he capitalizes narratively not just on corpses but on living subjects. It is implicit in “Travelling Abroad,” written for deliberate commercial purposes and taking up not just the corpse but also other spectators at the Morgue, the shopkeeper Straudenheim and his housekeeper in Strasbourg, and a bevy of Swiss maids with enormous goitres who sell “eggs and honey, butter and fruit, and [suckle] their children as they [sit] by their clean baskets” (*Dent* 4: 94). Moreover, as the beginning of “Travelling Abroad” reminds us by encoding Dickens’s autobiographical narrative in the exchange between the traveler and the queer small boy, the subject is always both self and other, both the subject and object of a compulsive economic desire. In this sense, “Travelling Abroad” develops a nightmare of cannibalism that far exceeds Pip’s tamer fears. For while we can read the recurrent images of commoditization and cannibalism in *Great Expectations* as belonging intrinsically to Pip’s experience or to the phenomenon of autobiographical form, “Travelling Abroad” suggests that they are part of a broader psychological and cultural condition, a compulsive psychological yielding to the consumerism that capitalism requires. In *Novels Behind Glass*, Andrew Miller describes the plate-glass windows, gas-lit streets, and spectacular displays of Victorian capitalism as offering a new “world of show . . . present[ing] the commodity fetish in all its glory,” and Catherine Waters has demonstrated brilliantly the extent to which Dickens and his stable of writers took up this brilliancy of display in *Household Words* from the time of the Crystal Palace (*Miller* 4; *Waters* 102–06). “Travelling Abroad” offers a different vision, of the plate-glass of the
Morgue and the glitter of Paris giving way to a primal nightmare of cannibalism and recurrent psychological trauma—to the horror, not of being commoditized and consumed, as Pip fears, but of being drawn irresistibly to consume the other. That horror exonerates the large dark corpse and moves us near to the comprehensive capitalist consumption that characterizes Our Mutual Friend.

The Morgue scene of “Travelling Abroad” in fact undergirds several parts of that novel, particularly the early chapters centered on the Hexams and the water-logged corpse they pull from the Thames. Like the traveler, John Harmon views the corpse at the police station only to find himself sickened, “leaning against the chimneypiece with drooping head” and repeating, “It’s a horrible sight . . . a horrible, horrible sight!” (34). Moreover, as with the start of “Travelling Abroad,” this scene functions metaphorically as the self’s encounter with itself, figured here as John Harmon looking upon the corpse of his doppelgänger George Radfoot and recast later, explicitly, as Harmon exploring his divided identity in the chapter “A Solo and a Duett.” But of course the implications—nausea, cannibalism, commoditization—extend well beyond such considerations of plot. It is a large part of the novel’s point to contrast the Hexams, who make their living by trading in corpses, with a broader Society that commoditizes living subjects, either by sporting with them through inheritance law or tacit speculation (as with Bella Wilfer and the legion of prospective “Johnny Harmons”) or by conditioning them to commoditize themselves as a way of achieving bourgeois respectability, as Bradley Headstone does by turning his mind entirely into a “place of mechanical stowage” (218). In other words, by the time he wrote Our Mutual Friend, Dickens had integrated his sense of the Morgue’s implications into a massive critique of English capitalism, a comprehensive sense of the Englishman at home rather than of the Frenchman he might encounter abroad. This, after all, is the point of “Podsnappery” and its foreign gentleman. For what is offensive about Podsnap is less his crude John Bullism than his insidious willingness to accept all that English capitalism requires: faith that matters of economics are Providential; the callousness to let the poor starve in the streets; the gullibility to perceive the psychological ruptures and moral failures engendered by capitalism as parts of an ineluctable natural order. The problem at the heart of Our Mutual Friend is that Society already consists of subjects pervaded by capitalism, and they are much less sensitive or self-aware than Dickens’s traveler.

At the end of “Travelling Abroad,” of course, we learn that the traveler has never left England—that he has been in London all along attempting, appropriately, to carry out a simple commercial transaction. Entranced by a view of the “bright blue water” of Lake Geneva, the traveler hears an English voice asking, “How do you like it? Will it do?” and he confesses,
and manner of the chariot, as I tried the cushions and the springs, brought all these hints of travelling remembrance before me.

(Dent 4: 95–96)

This, too, is autobiographical sleight-of-hand. Dickens did buy such a chariot—“a good old shabby devil of a coach”—for himself at the Pantechnicon in May 1844, just before his first residence in Genoa (Letters 4: 127). More significantly, this conceit of the daydream turns “Travelling Abroad” into a kind of parable of the compulsiveness of compulsions by suggesting that although this daydream might have been about any of Dickens’s experiences abroad, it takes up his old obsessions with spectacle and self-division, cannibalism and consumption. The thing about traveling abroad, the essay suggests, is that being abroad mostly sharpens one’s sense of what is ingrained deeply within, what constitutes trauma and desire, what comprises the English self rather than the French other. Our Mutual Friend allows its foreigner to mock Podsnap’s xenophobia precisely because that xenophobia is based upon a sense of Englishness that is only self-referential, never having been tempered by any experience abroad that might have cast the insidious compulsions of home into high relief. Instead, Podsnap chooses to see what is foreign by staying at home, much like Dickens’s last boor and xenophobe Mr. Sapsea, “the purest Jackass in Cloisterham,” who claims in The Mystery of Edwin Drood to know about other countries—though he has traveled nowhere—because goods have come to him from everywhere “in the way of business” (23, 25). Neither Podsnap nor Sapsea sees, as Dickens could by the time he authored them, that this way of knowing the foreign is both reflexive and compulsive, a response conditioned by capitalism’s thorough pervasion of the Victorian subject.

II

To be sure, Dickens’s drift toward xenophilia during especially the last decade of his career probably stemmed from several causes, only one of which was the complex anxiety about capitalism that suffuses “Travelling Abroad,” Great Expectations, and Our Mutual Friend. After 1857 he spent more and more time abroad, particularly in France, and more particularly—at least for a time—in the quiet village of Condette where he could steal happy hours with Ellen Ternan. Under such circumstances, it would have been natural for his attitude to soften, for him to develop a special fondness for France and the French, and even for him to lampoon Forster as Podsnap in his impatience with his old friend’s stodginess on matters of morality and class. But even if Dickens developed an affinity for France for these personal reasons, he still can have used the substance of that affinity, just as he used the substance of his frustrations with England, to achieve
both aesthetic and ideological ends in his fiction. Indeed, there is a sense in which Dickens’s unique status as the consummate Victorian commodity—the great author, the great showman, the great Inimitable public figure—helped during the last decade of his life to drive his divergent responses to France and England. The champion of the domestic hearth, concerned with his “legacy” in every sense of that word, Dickens went to desperate lengths to hide his relationship with Nelly and preserve his relationship with his readers even as, year after year, in every orphan novel he wrote, he was cashing in on his most painful experiences by hiding them in plain sight. He lived within England’s commodity culture and made enormous sums. He bowed to it as a practical matter while railing against it in his art. It may even be that his writing on economic matters—on, as Bella Wilfer puts it in *Our Mutual Friend*, “what money can make of life”—is so brutally incisive because he bowed, as low and often as he could, and he understood too well what all that bowing cost (455).

In other words, I would suggest that Dickens’s apparently softened view of foreigners in *Our Mutual Friend* has much to do with his hardened attitude toward England—particularly his hardened view of the psychological and cultural effects of its maturing capitalism—and that this is what “Travelling Abroad” reveals. From the Morgue, the Foundling Hospital, the *lorettes* and *grisettes*, and the Parisian Carnival, Dickens knew perfectly well that France was susceptible to these same effects. Yet, as Olga Stuchebrukhov has argued, from the 1850s on Dickens seems always to have regarded France as a “middle-class nation-state that [was] more successful than Great Britain at balancing order and control with the culturally and emotionally satisfying communal life of a nation” (393). Moreover, during these same years Dickens’s writing about England was becoming not only more ferocious in its social criticisms but also more prone to return to cannibalism as the prevailing metaphor for both the effects of capitalism and his activities as an author, particularly when these tended toward recollection and self-narration. To live “civilized” in capitalist England, Dickens came increasingly to understand, was to enact and endure forms of savagery that nearly exceeded representation, but that were implied in the spectacle of the Morgue. In this context it is worth remembering that the final chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*, “The Voice of Society,” finds Lady Tippins welcoming Mortimer Lightwood back to the privileged circle as a “[l]ong banished Robinson Crusoe” and then asking him, “how did you leave the savages?” (793). He replies, “They were becoming civilized when I left Juan Fernandez. . . . At least they were eating one another, which looked like it” (793). Cannibalism belongs now to civilization and to culture, not—or at least not solely—to the dark bodies Dickens had written of so mercilessly a decade before.

Describing Dickens’s fondness for France, Andrew Sanders has argued, “Paris was to him a fantasy of light and pleasure, not the focus of his political concerns” (139). This may be generally true, but it is hard to find light and pleasure in the Paris of “Travelling Abroad,” or in a traveler so haunted by his compulsive, imagined cannibalism that he can see nothing besides the large dark corpse
behind plate-glass. For Dickens in 1860, Paris seems instead to have been a vehicle or a foil: a brilliant purveyor of spectacle, perhaps, but shot through with a light that served primarily to reveal the compulsive rapacity of the English subject who cannot help but dehumanize, commoditize, and consume. Three years after writing “Travelling Abroad,” in his second series of Uncommercial Traveller essays, Dickens made one more narrative return to the Morgue, this time in a piece originally titled “The Paris Morgue” (1863) but renamed, when collected, “Some Recollections of Mortality.” This essay, too, came before Our Mutual Friend, though Dickens was certainly considering ideas for the novel by the time he wrote it. In the new Paris ruled by Napoleon III and renovated by Georges Haussmann, many of the city’s most wicked sites had been modernized or torn down, impressing Dickens just as the Embankment project along the Thames would in the last years of his life. But “the obscene little Morgue” yet stood, “slinking on the brink of the river . . . [and] looking mortally ashamed of itself, and supremely wicked” (Dent 4: 220). The narrator describes the feeling of expectation among the crowd as a new corpse arrives, and their impatience as they wait for it to be made ready for display. “[T] hose next the gates,” he writes, “beat at them impatiently, as if they were of the cannibal species and hungry” (Dent 4: 223). When the corpse finally appears, “there [is] a much more general, purposeless, vacant staring at it—like looking at waxwork,” and the spectators all possess “the one under-lying expression of looking at something that could not return a look” (Dent 4: 223).

Much of this repeats Dickens’s earlier essays on the Morgue: again the spectacle, again the cannibalism, again the narrator who watches the spectators nearly as much as he observes the corpses themselves. Indeed, the narrator’s is also a cannibalistic and commoditizing stare, for he treats the spectators as well as the corpse as objects devoid of subjectivity, incapable of looking back. But there is no haunting here, no compulsiveness or recurrence. Instead, in the second half of “Some Recollections of Mortality,” the narrator notes that the scene at the Morgue has reminded him of two experiences in London, one in which he saw a woman’s corpse dragged from the icy Thames during the “hard winter of 1861,” and another earlier experience when he served as a juror for a coroner’s inquest and was shown the corpse of an infant resting on a clean white cloth, looking just “as if the cloth were ‘laid,’ and the Giant were coming to dinner” (Dent 4: 224, 226). Situated comfortably and nostalgically in the past, the cannibalism here belongs not to the Morgue and Dickens’s capitalist nightmares but rather to the realm of English fairy tale swaddled by the law—to the terrifying stories that Dickens’s nurse told him as a child, but with their terror contained and neutralized by the rationality of social order. His reaction to the Morgue during the 1860s was never quite so childish or playful. What terrified Dickens by then was that this social order had come to instill and depend upon a compulsion to consume that was endemic, that underpinned and enervated capitalism rather than just appearing as one of its pernicious effects. We cannot know for certain whether Our Mutual Friend’s
wonderful foreign gentleman appeared on the scene precisely because of these worries, or whether that novel really signals a renovation of Dickens’s attitude toward Continental Europeans. But perhaps we can at least surmise that, however much he drifted toward xenophilia late in his life, Dickens’s evolving response to the Continent had less to do with any sense that such foreigners were just as good as Britons than with a nagging, gnawing fear that they could not possibly be worse.

NOTES

1 Though Dickens does not give a country of origin for the Count, Kathleen Tillotson pointed out in 1957, and David Parker has reiterated since, that he is likely based upon two contemporary figures: Prince Hermann Ludwig Heinrich von Pückler-Muskau and Friedrich von Raumer, a professor at the University of Berlin. See Tillotson’s “Dickens’s Count Smolrtork” and Parker’s “Romanticism in the Den” (95–96).

2 Christine Huguet points out that even after Dickens spent this period in Genoa, seven years passed before he depicted his first Italian character in “To Be Read at Dusk” (194).

3 Rainsford estimates this figure from studying the letters and biographies but conjectures that the number could well have been higher, given Claire Tomalin’s findings regarding Dickens’s furtive trips across the Channel to see Ellen Ternan between 1862 and 1865.

4 Dickens published “Our French Watering-Place” in Household Words on November 4, 1854, as a follow-up and companion to the earlier essay “Our English Watering-Place” (1851) describing Broadstairs. Of Boulogne he wrote, “To be sure, it might have fewer bad smells and less decaying refuse. . . . Still, it is a bright, airy, pleasant, cheerful town,” and its citizens “are an industrious people, and a domestic people, and an honest people” (Dent 3: 232, 235). All references to Dickens’s journalism are to the 4-volume Dent Uniform Edition, ed. Michael Slater, and are given parenthetically as Dent.

5 Many critics have traced Dickens’s anti-Catholic feelings, particularly in Pictures from Italy. See for instance Dominic Janes, Sally Ledger, Susan Schoenbauer Thurin, and Paul Vita.

6 Philip Collins, Marie-Amélie Coste, David Parker (“Dickens Abroad”), Tore Rem, Andrew Sanders, and Thurin all discuss Dickens’s dismissive attitudes toward the prejudices of other Britons.

7 In making this argument, Ledger draws also from Kate Flint’s excellent introduction to Pictures from Italy.

8 See my essay “Commodity and Identity in Great Expectations.”

9 In a meticulous reading of Our Mutual Friend’s presentation of the Veneerings and their social circle, Andy Williams, too, calls attention to this objectification and fetishization of living subjects, or what he calls the “rhetorical slippage” between commodities and human beings (82).

10 Many critics have noted Dickens’s fascination with corpses in “Travelling Abroad” and his other work. See for instance Harry Stone, Janes, and Vita.
11 See *Pictures from Italy*, 95. For an excellent discussion of Dickens’s response to San Carlo Borromeo’s remains, see particularly Janes.

12 Lyttelton accompanied Dickens to Paris for the Carnival season in 1851; Collins did so in 1855. Both men, Hollington writes, were rather “louche companions” for a married man like Dickens (201).

13 See “The Lost Arctic Voyagers” (1854) where Dickens writes, “There are pious persons who, in their practice, with a strange inconsistency, claim for every child born to civilisation all innate depravity, and for every savage born to the woods and wilds all innate virtue. We believe every savage to be in his heart covetous, treacherous, and cruel” (*Dent* 3: 260).

14 Dickens co-authored “Perils” with Wilkie Collins for *Household Words* in 1857, making the story the special Christmas number of the magazine. For an excellent discussion of the story’s xenophobia—and Collins’s efforts to soften it—see the essay by Maria K. Bachmann.

15 Stone discusses the relation between Dickens’s experiences at the Morgue and the opening chapters of *Our Mutual Friend* at length (86–100, 151–61).

16 Slater describes this purchase, too, in his headnotes to “Travelling Abroad” (*Dent* 4: 83–84).

17 Edgar Johnson was perhaps the first to associate Forster with Podsnap (2: 1052–53).

18 I discuss Dickens’s planning of the novel at length in *Charles Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend: A Publishing History* (41–45).

19 Work on the Victoria Embankment commenced in 1865 under the supervision of Joseph Bazalgette. In January 1869 Dickens wrote to his friend William de Cerjat, “The Thames embankment is (faults of ugliness in detail, apart) the finest public work yet done. From Westminster Bridge to near Waterloo, it is now lighted up at night, and has a fine effect” (*Letters* 12: 268).

20 For more on the frightening stories Dickens’s nurse told him as a child and his reaction to them, see “Nurse’s Stories,” published in August 1860 as the fourteenth essay in the first Uncommercial Traveller series (*Dent* 4: 169–80).

**WORKS CITED**


Coste, Marie-Amélie. “Literal-minded British and Stereotypical Foreigners in Dickens: The Limits of National Identity and the Definition of the Personal.” *Dickens and...*


