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MAKING AN ENGLISH VIRTUE OF NECESSITY: Dickens and Collins Bring It Home

In “The Police System of London,” W. O’Brien’s 1852 article on the Metropolitan Police, the writer explains that even now, people do not always recollect that the only essential difference between a civil and a military body is the possession of arms: and that this, which constitutes the power of the soldier, destroys the usefulness of the constable,—for a soldier is necessarily a bad policeman. He cannot use his musket by degrees... Whereas the constable, because he possesses no deadly weapon, may safely be entrusted with the right of interference, and by a moderate application of force at an early period, may prevent the growth and progress of crime, which the soldier could only punish.¹ (10–11)

That this point—a soldier is a bad policeman—still has to be made twenty-three years after the creation of the Metropolitan Police shows that the balance between “moderation” and “force” sought by early-century reformers is not yet fully accepted by the public.² Not quite twenty years later, however, the police are seen as preventive rather than punishing.³ More importantly, the police are not simply considered a necessary evil, but a representative of what it means to be English.

The police baton, metonymically representing the police, also represents this transformation. As O’Brien suggests, the difference between a punishing soldier and a preventive policeman is their respective weapons: The soldier’s musket is deadly, the police baton is not. But what does a weapon do if it does not punish? The police baton was a paradox from its inception, a symbol of
government authority imagined by a man who held that authority in contempt, Chartist radical Francis Place. While the baton is defined above as “no deadly weapon,” it is called “deadly” in Andrew Wynter’s 1856 Quarterly Review article, “The Police and the Thieves,” a contradiction that marks both a residual nervousness about the baton’s (i.e., the police’s) “offensive” nature and an emergent sense that what it represents is in the process of being defined. Wynter praises the policeman’s “care . . . to hide his offensive weapon,” while explaining that French police were “astonished at this forbearance: the Frenchmen could not understand why a man should carry a deadly weapon, unless to make a demonstration with it! In this little incident we see the essential difference between the French and the English character” (170–71). By 1870, neither the baton nor its meaning is concealed. An article in the same journal explains:

The baton may be a very ineffective weapon of offence, but it is backed by the combined power of the Crown, the Government, and the Constituencies. Armed with it alone, the constable will usually be found ready, in obedience to orders, to face any mob, or brave any danger. The mob quails before the simple baton of the police officer, and flies before it, well knowing the moral as well as physical force of the Nation whose will, as embodied in law, it represents. (1870, 90–91)

Here the baton is both the arm of the police and the arm of the government and thus metonymically links two entities thought irreconcilable in the first half of the nineteenth century: the police and the English nation.

What happened in the 1850s and 1860s to transform the police into something that represented “the Nation”? The articles themselves provide a clue. O’Brien credits the recent “admirable descriptions in the ‘Household Words’” for what little sympathetic understanding of the police then exists (12). The 1856 Quarterly article similarly praises Dickens’s “excellent papers” on the Detective Police and even recounts one of his anecdotes. In arguing that the detective narratives of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins are central to what “happened” in the 1850s and 1860s to make an English virtue of the necessity of the police, I am both within traditional accounts of detective fiction and squarely at odds with them.

Most accounts of the emergence of the police and the detective narrative address the significant contributions of Dickens and Collins. Dickens’s contemporaries credited him with having “discovered the modern detective” (qtd. in Philip Collins 196), a sentiment echoed in twentieth-century treatments of the genre. T. S. Eliot’s famous characterization of Collins’s The
Moonstone as “the first and greatest of English detective novels” (464) has influentially posited Collins as the father of the modern detective and his genre. Even those critics who do not see the arrival of the classic English detective story until Conan Doyle at least acknowledge Dickens and Collins as having provided important pit stops, such as plot twists, multiple narrators, and eccentric sleuths, on the seemingly inevitable road to Sherlock Holmes. Significantly, one of the innovations Dickens and Collins are credited with is the introduction of Empire into the genre; together they inaugurate a “tradition which set the English countryside crawling with Oriental assassins, Egyptian mummies, signs of four and the like” (Trodd xvii).7

In their often quite different representations of detectives, Dickens and Collins did both less and more than critics suggest. As Dickens and Collins are not showing up until the second half of this account of detective fiction as the explanatory genre of Empire, I am clearly not arguing that they provide the DNA for the genuine nineteenth-century English detective, nor that they introduce the Empire into the genre. For all the originality of their writings, Dickens and Collins do not invent but rather inherit the cultural debates on the nature of British authority and the national identity of detective work begun over half a century earlier. Such ongoing debate, of which the Edinburgh and Quarterly articles are examples, attempted to reconcile the at times violent authority the nation needed for law and order with the mild justice that was the very justification for an expansion of its authority at home and abroad. Well before Bucket and Cuff, these debates asked what kind of nation might the New Police come to represent and used the figure of the detective to explore possible answers. By the time Dickens and Collins are writing, then, earlier detective narratives have already established that Britain’s expanding empire provided the conditions which made the police necessary, and that in creating the good cop, rather than the good soldier, England can demonstrate the “moral force” needed to legitimize its empire. These earlier narratives helped make sense of the Empire for English readers.

It is in their insistence that detective stories “make sense of England” and their representation of a resulting “imperial Englishness” that Dickens and Collins have the greatest influence on the detective genre and on the English reader.8 Several years before Kipling would famously pose the question, the detective narratives of Dickens and Collins ask what do they know of England, who only England know?9 The impact of imperial involvement on English character is the foreground rather than the background of their detective writings. Many critics argue that, to the contrary, detective fiction in general—and Dickens’s and Collins’s in particular—reduces the imperial and political into the domestic and personal. Mummies and moonstones are,
ultimately, only bits of not-so-local color. Hence the critical commonplace that English detective fiction reduces the problems it presents, that it, as D. A. Miller has influentially suggested, “performs a drastic simplification of power” (69). Such readings articulate the logic of a particular version of English nationalism as well, which divides the nineteenth-century imperial imagination into a domestic core that was purely English and a colonial periphery that was purely foreign. Dickens’s and Collins’s detective narratives, often taken to provide just such exclusive reassurance about both the “homegrown” character of the genre and the nation, instead place the detective squarely in the contact zone produced by Victorian imperialism.

The England of each author displays the messiness of a new imperial world that makes the detective necessary. Rather than the English detective arriving tidily and triumphantly as the imperial garbage man, however, his “necessity” suggests a position that the public has regretfully endorsed. As O’Brien explains regarding the public’s attitude toward the rise of the New Police, “the jealousy which watches such changes is slow in subsiding” (32). In different ways, Dickens and Collins both attempt to make a virtue of this necessity by reconciling the detective with English virtues. Dickens finds the English public within the detective, where Collins works to place the detective within the English public. But Englishing the detective cannot erase the new imperial world that his authority—and, I would argue, his very existence—signifies. On the contrary, accepting the detective means understanding imperialism to be a central part of English identity.10 Precisely because their detectives connect English culture with Empire, then, Dickens and Collins bring the detective into English culture in a way that earlier writers could not. After Dickens and Collins have written their influential detective stories, it is not the English public but rather “the mob” that “quails before the simple baton of the police officer.” Their creations are, then, both formative and defining, but not for the reasons traditional criticism would have us believe.

DICKEYS AND IMPERIALISM’S NECESSARY DETECTIVE

Dickens’s The Mystery of Edwin Drood, a story of orientalized, opium den–hatched plots, which throws the shadows of violent mystery onto an “ancient English Cathedral town,” is both a story about imperialism and a work of detective fiction. While the identity of “Datchery,” the white-wigged detective, who tantalizingly appears in the final installments, remains a mystery, it is clear that circa 1870, Dickens felt both that the “colonial question” could be best characterized as a mystery and that the figure of the detective
was necessary for waking the novel from its nightmare of an empire out of control. But while *Drood* certainly documents the persistent imbrication of Empire and detection in Victorian culture, Dickens’s writings in the early 1850s do far more to produce the detective as both a necessary imperial interpreter and a necessarily English figure than his more explicitly imperial foray into the detective genre. In his articles on the New Police, often dramatizations of expeditions the author took with detectives, Dickens addresses the issue at the center of the debates about the rise of the Empire and the police. If the writings of Godwin and James Mill, and the Thuggee narratives, were focused on the character of English law, Dickens sees the question as literally one of English character. Dickens newly emphasizes the *English* character of the detective as he makes him a familiar figure in his writings. In showing the English detective to be an agent of imperialism, his work during the 1850s, especially his journalism and *Bleak House*, shows Empire to be part of English identity.

Dickens wants the detective—both his work and his national identity—to be visible to the English reader. While the visibility of the detective in detective narratives might seem like an obvious point, it goes against both traditional and more recent readings of Dickens’s detective narratives, which tend to ignore the history of the genre as a product of heated debates about the rise of the police and the Empire. Rather, critics have traditionally suggested that Dickens writes about detectives simply because he finds them so straightforwardly good. But it is because Dickens is aware of the exact nature of the problems his readers have with the police, such as their potential for violence and suspected foreignness, that he must make manifest the New Police’s English virtues. More recent readings, such as D. A. Miller’s enormously influential essay on *Bleak House*, argue that Dickens represents detection as panoptical invisibility. This has been a particularly persuasive reading because the fantasy of Dickens’s writings, as I argue below, is of an orderly imperial world in which power would circulate so naturally as to be invisible. But to be satisfied with this reading is to ignore the more murky imperial reality that the very existence of such a fantasy suggests. It is a reality quite apparent in his detective writings.

Although his feelings about Empire figure prominently in Dickens’s argument for detectives, it is not an easy task to situate him within Victorian discourses of imperialism. There are as many camps on Dickens’s attitudes toward Empire as there are positions on imperialism itself. The debate over Dickens’s “imperialism” usually pits his vitriolic response to the 1857 Mutiny and the substantial—and substantially untroubled—presence of the Empire in his work against his critique of imperial concerns in the face of domestic
social problems, for example *Bleak House*’s famous representation of the “homegrown” victims of “telescopic philanthropy.” Dickens appears to speak directly to this debate in an essay on the ill-fated Niger Expedition when he warns real-life Jellybys: “The work at home must be completed thoroughly, or there is no hope abroad” (134). However, to make imperial involvement an either/or choice, as Dickens at first glance seems to be doing here, is to overlook that Dickens’s imperial vision, like that of many Victorians, is myopic.12 Reading Dickens’s insular focus as the absence or opposite rather than the necessary complement of “imperialist feelings” replicates a cultural logic that attempted to preserve a particular national identity while working to generalize English civilization across the globe.13 Part of the problem in assigning “imperialist feelings,” particularly to Dickens, is that it is hard to tell where imperial concerns begin and domestic concerns end.14

A similar problem faced politicians as they assigned the first police jurisdictions. From their official inception in 1829, the Metropolitan Police had been prevented from operating in the City as a way of placating those police opponents worried about local autonomy. Police historian Clive Emsley suggests that such restrictions became problematic as the “Metropolitan Police performed ‘imperial’ tasks such as protecting the Queen, the royal palaces, Parliament and public buildings, as well as protecting society from the Fenian threat. . . . As the capital of a large empire the orderly government of London remained an ‘imperial’ rather than a local concern” (81). The imperial nature of domestic culture, and the confusion that results, is obvious as Dickens’s “Metropolitan Protectives” perform their “imperial tasks.”

For Dickens, then, as for most Victorians, to expand or not to expand is never the (only) question. The focus is instead on how to manage an expansion that has already blurred lines between imperial and domestic. Dickens’s *fantasy* of imperial involvement is one of clear jurisdictions. He argues in “The Niger Expedition” that “the stone that is dropped into the ocean of ignorance at Exeter Hall, must make its widening circles, one beyond another, until they reach the negro’s country in their natural expansion” (133). Dickens here attempts to balance “the home and the foreign works” through a concentric imperialism, which naturalizes the expansion of English authority as it places London at the center of an imperial world. And yet, what looks like an English insularity, a *centeredness*, is also an expression of doubt about what the expanding modern nation is.15 Dickens’s city, “fog-bound and fever-haunted, brooding over its dark, mysterious river,” G. M. Young suggests, registers the mid-Victorian conversion of London “into the imperial capital” (82). London and its empire are circuitously rather than concentrically connected. Dickens’s fantasy of order is fogged in.
This is why detectives are necessary, and Dickens’s New Police at once register this mysterious reality and represent the fantasy of an orderly imperial England. Philip Collins writes in his classic *Dickens and Crime* that Dickens’s inability to “sympathize with established authority” has two “conspicuous exceptions”: “the New Police and, overseas, . . . those who resolutely disciplined the turbulent native” (47). For Dickens, however, these figures are more or less the same exception, the same characterization of sympathetic authority. In short, the Dickensian detective is an agent of imperialism. The demands of being an imperial capital, Dickens suggests, make the potentially dangerous power of the police necessary. The detective returns the favor by making imperial power (its authoritarian implications and attendant threats of increased crime) safe for England. In order to make this argument, and to prevent the detective from backsliding into its earlier representation as a threatening “other,” Dickens must complete the propolice reformers’ mission of defining the detective as the upholder of national virtue. In making an English virtue of an imperial subject, Dickens also links Englishness to England’s imperialist function.

A few years before Bucket, it is clear that Dickens figured out that the first step toward public acceptance of the detective would be to give him an English character. Dickens shepherds detectives into the national flock by twisting a typical antipolice argument that “the mass of the English people are their own trustworthy Police” (1868, 279) to suggest instead that the New Police embody the virtues of the English masses. A *Household Words* article, written by Henry G. Wreford, uses the Continental “spy police” as a foil for the English police:16 The Secret Police system is “not merely a political institution, but [has] now become national. . . . I have seen it under all phases, and the effect has been to produce a want of faith in all that is high, generous and noble, and to form a low national character” (1850e, 613). As opposed to the victim of the spy police “across the Channel,” the Englishman at home “has not the slightest fear” because “he knows that even if his fellow-passenger be a Sergeant Myth or an Inspector Wield, no harm will come to him” (1850e, 611).

Not only do English police value the English virtues of personal liberty and discretion; they marry these with a patient, familial benevolence. Two pages into Dickens’s “The Detective Police,” we know the detectives are “reserved and thoughtful,” “well-spoken,” “polite” men with “bright complexions” who do not interrupt their “brother officers.” They more than observe the laws of human decency, getting a criminal his coat before taking him in, and scheming to get a murder suspect out of the sight of his devoted father before arresting him. Inspector Witchem modestly recounts a story about a famous horse

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stealer, Tally-ho Thompson, and reveals his own nonviolent, indeed friendly, methodology. Allowing Thompson a prebooking brandy, Witchem tells him, “I’m willing to behave as a man to you, if you are willing to behave as a man to me. Give me your word that you’ll come peaceably along, and I don’t want to handcuff you” (1850a, 367). Benevolence in Dickens is always linked to domestic comfort. When we first meet the detectives, they have been “most obliging” in accepting an offer into the “Sanctum Sanctorum of Household Words” (1850a, 358). Dickens feels comfortable letting these men into his home away from home, and he elsewhere represents policing as a homey, family business. He describes the station house at Wapping, formerly the Thames police office: “the old Court, with its cabin windows looking on the river, is a quaint charge-room: with nothing worse in it usually than a stuffed cat in a glass case, and a portrait, pleasant to behold, of a rare old Thames Police-officer, Mr. Superintendent Evans, now succeeded by his son” (1850b, 415).

By insisting on the New Police’s Englishness, Dickens raises questions about what this identity means. In other words, the formerly foreign detective becomes newly English because there is something newly foreign about England. As Dickens floats “Down with the Tide” in 1853 with the Thames River Police, he experiences the river as an imperial hodgepodge:

A very dark night it was, and bitter cold; the east wind blowing bleak, and bringing with it stinging particles from marsh, and moor, and fen—from the Great Desert and Old Egypt, maybe. Some of the component parts of the sharp-edged vapour that came flying up the Thames at London might be mummy dust, dry atoms from the Temple at Jerusalem, camels’ footprint, crocodiles’ hatching places, loosened grains of expression from the visages of blunt-nosed sphinxes, waifs and strays from caravans of turbaned merchants, vegetation from jungles, frozen snow from the Himalayas. (405)

In case the reader forgets where in the world he is after this list of peripheral particles, Dickens concludes, “Oh! It was very very dark upon the Thames, and it was bitter bitter cold” (405). The challenges of being an imperial city are particularly pronounced in the early 1850s when actual foreign bodies blew into London for the Great Exhibition. The potential for “conspiracies of a comprehensive character” worried many Englishmen and stimulated Dickens’s interest in an article on “The Metropolitan Protectives.” In a letter to W. H. Wills, his subeditor at Household Words, Dickens proposes their accompanying detectives on nighttime rounds: “It would make a wonderful good paper at a most appropriate time, when the back slums of London are going to be invaded by all sorts of strangers” (qtd. in Stone, 253). In the
resulting article, London is the scene of distinctly international “mischief and confusion”:

A complicated web of machination is being spun—we have it on the authority of a noble peer—against the integrity of the Austrian Empire, at a small coffee-shop in Soho. Prussia is being menaced by twenty-four determined Poles and Honveds in the attics of a cheap restaurateur in the Haymarket. (Stone 254–55)

As he makes the detective seem English, Dickens makes England seem foreign. If England is foreign and the detective is English, however, this new figure for social order would be ill equipped to do his job, unless being English means being an imperialist as well.

Because modern London needs more than a town crier, the New Police must also be imperial explorers. Dickens’s detectives have a global beat, evident in his depiction of the police at the Great Exhibition. He describes a rendezvous at St. Giles with a detective sergeant who is “weary of speaking French all day to foreigners unpacking at the Great Exhibition” (1850d, 389). Dickens gives this sergeant a multilingual ability not to hint at a kinship with the gendarmerie, but rather to show that the detective is in control of this new global London, center point of colonial wealth and destination of “foreigners.” Thus the detective speaks French for the protection of England, though his fatigue reminds the reader that this is not the language with which he feels most at home.

That the English detective is an imperial explorer is best represented by Inspector Charles Field, who, Dickens explains in tones of awe, is “equally at home wherever we go” (1850d, 400). Dickens’s descriptions of Field, a veteran detective and former Bow Street Runner believed to be a model for Bucket, make a point of reconciling familiar English virtue with global English authority. Inspector Field, making the rounds at an East End tenement with Dickens in tow, “is received with warmth and respect. Coiners and smashers droop before him; pickpockets defer to him; the gentle sex (not very gentle here) smile upon him” (1850d, 395). In “On Duty with Inspector Field,” the eponymous detective is delayed from the aforementioned rendezvous because

to-night, [he is] the guardian genius of the British Museum. He is bringing his shrewd eye to bear on every corner of its solitary galleries, before he reports “all right.” Suspicious of the Elgin marbles, and not to be done by car-faced Egyptian giants with their hands upon their knees, Inspector Field,
sagacious, vigilant, lamp in hand, throwing monstrous shadows on the wall and ceilings, passes through the spacious rooms. If a mummy trembled in an atom of its dusty covering, Inspector Field would say “Come out of that, Tom Green. I know you!” (389)

Dickens shows Field having command over the spoils of colonial crimes as well as local English criminals and—crucially—knowing the difference between the two. Like the British Museum itself, Field interprets the objects and, implicitly, the objectives of Empire, making them accessible, literally safe, for the public. When Field finally joins Dickens he is shown having come “from the Parrot Gods of the South Sea Islands, and from the birds and beetles of the tropics, and from the Arts of Greece and Rome, and from the Sculptures of Nineveh, and from the traces of an elder world, when these were not” (1850d, 390). Guarding treasures of empires past, Field is both a symbol of England’s imperial present (its “guardian genius”) and a reminder that, if not guarded by detectives, this present could end up in a museum with the detritus of dead empires.

As Field walks his beat, then, he is both an agent of imperial fantasy and a sign of the perilous imperial reality that makes him necessary. As his “duty” takes him from the museum to his nightly patrol, he links an empire made familiar and therefore safe, symbolized by a well-patrolled British Museum, with the much more foreign world of darkest London. Dickens, accompanying Field, wonders “how many people” would recognize “this compound of sickening smells, these heaps of filth, these tumbling houses, with all their vile contents, animate and inanimate, slimily overflowing into the black road” as “a not remote part of the city in which their lives are passed?” (1850d, 390–91). In these houses, specifically “Rat’s Castle,” Field is threading his way through an urban Africa that he must domesticate. Dickens follows Field “through a labyrinth of airless rooms, each man responding, like a wild beast, to the keeper who has tamed him, and who goes into his cage” (1850d, 401). The abject, indeed animalistic, inhabitants are awed “before the power of the law, the power of superior sense . . . and the power of a perfect mastery of their character” (1850d, 395). While Field is described as “the Sultan” of Rat’s Castle, he in fact demonstrates new English virtues of vast knowledge and restraint: He knows everyone and collars no one. To make it clear that detection is an imperial methodology, Dickens describes the one in terms of the other:

To compare great things with small, suppose Leverrier or Adams informing the public that from information he had received he had discovered a new planet; or Columbus informing the public that from information he had
received, he had discovered a new continent; so the Detectives inform it that they have discovered a new fraud or an old offender, and the process is unknown. (1850a, 378)

Though he says he is comparing “great things with small,” the effect of Dickens’s comparison is to elevate the work of the detectives, rather than to deflate the discoveries of Leverrier, Adams, or Columbus.

In characterizing the detective as an imperial explorer, Dickens endorses the imperial fantasy that investigation is tantamount to management. An article written with Wills in *Household Words* describes the “incessant system of communication” of the New Police, which

day and night, is kept up between every station of the force; we have seen, not only crime speedily detected, but distress quickly relieved. . . . We have seen that everything that occurs is written down, to be forwarded to head quarters; we have seen an extraordinary degree of patience habitually exercised in listening to prolix details, in relieving the kernal of a case from its almost impenetrable husk; we have seen how impossible it is for anything of a serious, of even an unusual, nature to happen without being reported. . . . We have seen that the whole system is well, intelligently, zealously worked. (Stone 273)

The beauty of this system, like the identical system employed by the Thug Police, is that it makes a virtue of the imperial necessity for inquiry; detection, the methodology of a well-run empire, relieves distress.

This fantasy of benevolent imperial authority is most fully realized in Inspector Bucket, and in saying this I am far from alone. Since D. A. Miller’s influential essay “Discipline in Different Voices” most critics have read Bucket as an example par excellence of the power of liberal authority.19 Indeed, Bucket’s panopticism is as legendary in *Bleak House* criticism as it is in the world of *Bleak House*, and the connection with imperial policy has not gone any more unnoticed by Dickens’s readers than by Dickens himself. Bucket indeed exemplifies the colonial observer in his “ability,” in the words of Timothy Mitchell, “to see without being seen.” Such an ability, Mitchell continues, “confirmed one’s separation from the world, and constituted at the same time a position of power” (306). Bucket explicitly assumes this position as he rides during Tulkinghorn’s funeral procession

quiet among the undertakers and the equipages . . . Mr Bucket sits concealed in one of the inconsolable carriages, and at his ease surveys the crowd through
the lattice blinds. He has a keen eye for a crowd—as for what not?—and looking here and there, now from this side of the carriage, now from the other, now up at the house windows, now along the people's heads, nothing escapes him. (770)

But the reader sees Bucket if the crowd does not. And the importance of this distinction is overlooked in recent readings of the novel. What makes the dominant reading of Bucket's panoptical power unsatisfactory is precisely that at the time Dickens is writing Bleak House, he does not want to confirm the detective's "separation from the world." Dickens's energies are entirely in the opposite direction, as he tries to depict these formerly un-English figures as a national antidote for the uncertain English culture of the 1850s. To read Bucket's power as panoptical is to hear only the first half of his motto. Like Field, Bucket's refrain "I know you" demonstrates his power, but sensitive to the uneasy implications of his knowledge, he gently adds "and you know me."

As Dickens creates and celebrates an imperialist subject position, he must make of this necessity a visibly English virtue. Rather than rendering policing power invisible (Miller 17), then, Dickens must make a spectacle of the English authority of imperialism's necessary detective. This is the purpose of Bucket's trip to Tom-All-Alone's. As Field surveyed the mummies in the British Museum, Bucket masters the "concourse of imprisoned demons" (368) that is the otherworldly darkness at the heart of Chancery. Dickens's description of Tom-All-Alone's is unmistakably taken from his first-hand experiences on duty with Inspector Field:

It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people. . . . Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards. (272)

When Snagsby is mildly commanded to accompany Bucket to Tom-All-Alone's, Dickens has the timid law stationer express the identical sense of uncanniness he himself beheld when making the rounds with Field: "Mr Snagsby passes along the middle of a villainous street . . . reeking with such smells and sights that he, who has lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses" (364). Bucket, however, is in control of these unnerving surroundings, demonstrating the "thorough acquaintance with the geography of their respective sections" that Smiles would admire in 1870 (101). So familiar is Bucket with the population at Tom-All-Alone's that he instantly
notices who does not belong: “What are you doing here?” he asks. “You don’t belong to London” (365). But rather than rousting the “vermin” from their hiding places, Bucket pauses, “not rough at all about it,” to show concern for a newborn baby (366). Bucket emphasizes not the hustle of his work, but rather the “necessity of patience in our business” (799). Such an approach garners him the assistance of the inhabitants of Tom-All-Alone’s. Resembling the respect with which Field is greeted at Rat’s Castle, “the crowd flows round and from its squalid depths obsequious advice heaves up to Mr Bucket” (365) when he enters their territory in search of Jo.

My point that Dickens insists on the visibility rather than panoptical invisibility of Bucket’s power may seem like a small one, but the implications are nevertheless large for a tradition of detective fiction criticism that has relegated the contested rise of the police and the Empire to the background. To allow Bucket’s power to disappear in its guise as something else is to ignore the work Dickens has been doing to make the imperial combination of benevolence and authority an explicitly English virtue. It is to participate in the fantasy of traditional detective fiction criticism that the detective story is effortlessly English. Like the real-life detectives Dickens followed, Bucket, aiming “to make things pleasant,” famously throws a cloak over George Rouncewell’s handcuffed wrists. “I was mindful of your feelings when I come out, and I brought this on purpose. There!” Bucket exclaims as he literally cloaks authority with benevolence, “Who’s the wiser?” (735). Because Dickens’s earlier journalism has shown us the contact zone patrolled by imperialism’s necessary detective, we are.

**Collins and Detective Fiction’s Necessary Imperialism**

While Wilkie Collins has been traditionally portrayed as a protégé of Dickens, deeply influenced by his writing, editing, and friendship, critical tradition regards the protégé as much more critical of social institutions than the master. The most widely noted instance of Collins’s independence from Dickens is their seeming difference of opinion about the ultimate midcentury exercise of British state power: the suppression of the 1857 Mutiny. Dickens and Collins together represented the kind of “vexed responses” the Victorian public had to the Mutiny (Thomas 1993, 237). Collins “was much less aghast than Dickens” over the uprising, and though the former attempted to please the latter by contributing to a special Christmas Number of *Household Words* emphasizing English heroism in the face of mutiny, the
resulting story, “The Perils of Certain English Prisoners,” is hardly patriotic. But if Collins was less comfortable with the virtue of authority than Dickens, his detective narratives, I would argue, actually go to greater lengths to render such authority acceptable to the English reader. The skeptical Collins does more than the celebratory Dickens to represent detective work and the detective narrative as the explanatory vehicle for a new imperial world and to cast the detective as a figure made both necessary and English by it. In so doing, Collins requires that we change the protocols of reading detective stories as domestic stories.

The question of how imperial expansion shapes the domestic world is central both to The Moonstone and to the criticism about it. The Verinder family’s loyal retainer, Gabriel Betteredge, suspects as much when he wonders that in “an age of progress, and in a country which rejoices in the blessings of the British constitution” a “quiet English house” can be “suddenly invaded by a devilish Indian Diamond” (36–37). Dickens famously commented on the uncanny quality of Collins’s novel in an 1867 letter to W. H. Wills. “It is a very curious story,” Dickens writes, “wild, and yet domestic.” Indeed, Collins begins his detective story about a “quiet English house” with a narrative providing an eyewitness account of a violent crime committed by an Englishman during the storming of Seringapatam. More than a few critics have noted how The Moonstone’s prologue foregrounds imperial concerns, only to push these concerns aside with the profession: “what I write here about my cousin (unless some necessity should arise for making it public) is for the information of the family only” (6). In other words, Collins’s novel ultimately reduces the wilderness of imperial politics to the far more manageable domestic problems of the Verinder family. What “begins as a violent military invasion,” Ronald Thomas suggests, “gradually degenerates into nothing more than the unmasking of a spurned lover and an incorrigible chaser after women” (1993, 239). But such a position enables the “imaginary construct” that posits “empire and nation” as a “contradiction,” and so denies “the formative nature of the colonial event in the domestic scene” (Gikandi 56). The family will with certainty (“necessity”) become the larger family of the “public.” What The Moonstone demonstrates is the necessity for an imperial interpretation of the novel’s events. If Dickens locates English family values within the detective, then Collins shows how the figure of the detective necessarily draws the insular family—the Verinders and the English reader—into the larger world.

Similarly, what The Moonstone illustrates, as a definitive English detective novel, is that the tradition of detective fiction is by no means a domestic genre. Inheriting a tradition from such works as Caleb Williams and Confessions of a Thug, The Moonstone shares nineteenth-century detective fiction’s two central
concerns: (1) interpretations of the Empire for a formerly sluggish, now newly engaged (indeed, in Collins’s terminology, “feverish”) English reader and (2) the necessity for the English detective in an imperial culture. Such a reading challenges many critical beliefs about both this novel’s and the genre’s relationship to imperial concerns. In relation to the first point, critics have written abundantly on the imperial issues at the heart of the novel, but none of these otherwise important readings have linked the imperial issues to the work of detection that organizes the novel.24 Indeed, the opening scene of imperial crime recedes in importance, critics would have it, precisely because the novel becomes a domestic crime story.25 I argue that *The Moonstone* is able to remain a detective story, however, because knowledge imported from the imperial periphery keeps the investigation in play. In relation to the second point, D. A. Miller’s influential reading of the novel argues that the text in fact demonstrates the lack of necessity for the professional detective. “The detective disappears . . . ,” Miller writes, “and although he reappears to clear up some incidental matters at the end, the mystery is solved without his doing” (37). Because so many critics, like Miller, focus on what Cuff, the novel’s professional detective, fails to do, it is important to recover what it is that Cuff actually does.26 Cuff’s ultimate return to the narrative is far from “incidental.” While it might not signify his necessity for solving the literal investigation (an arguable point),27 it shows his necessity to the story being told about detection itself and its evolving relationship to national identity in “an age of progress.”

According to traditional readings of detective fiction, the story about detection that the detective story tells is one of the reduction of meaning. Anne Humphreys, comparing the detective novel to the more expansive “mysteries” genre, provides a classic description:

> In the detective novel . . . there is usually one central mystery and one detective. . . . The result of the detective’s work is an affirmation of order and coherence. But the limited nature of the crime and its detection . . . also limits the potential for reading any large social significance into the solution of the “mystery”. (457)

While this characterization does not fit *The Moonstone*, with its famous “team-effort” narration and multiple mysteries, nevertheless Miller’s influential reading of the novel, which argues that there are many detectives, makes a similar case that “the novel is thoroughly monological” (54), that the many voices speak as one.28 *The Moonstone* is neither a story of one master sleuth nor of no master sleuth. Collins is writing at a time, and certainly about a time (the novel is
set in the late 1840s) when the detective still occupies an unsettled and unsettling position in English culture. He therefore cannot stand above the culture nor disappear into it. Like Linda Colley’s definition of nineteenth-century nationalism, in which commonality is superimposed on differences, *The Moonstone*’s story about detection emphasizes the detective’s necessary imbrication in the larger culture while insisting on preserving what makes him different: his specific expertise, which, we have seen, has become imperial in character. As in Dickens, such experts are necessary because the mysteries of Empire, in the words of the novel’s lawyer, Bruff, “set all scrutiny at defiance” (311). And while “detective fever” does grip the nonexperts in the text, it is the *dialogical* relationship between the novel’s experts and this newly engaged public that Collins emphasizes, not the latter replacing the former. For example, when Murthwaite, the celebrated imperial explorer, gives the inquiring Bruff two options—“Tell me . . . whether you will penetrate the Indian’s motive for yourself? Or whether you wish me to save you the trouble of making any inquiry into it?” (315)—Bruff chooses both: He wants to do the detective work but needs Murthwaite’s knowledge of the imperial periphery to proceed. Collins foregrounds the relationships between the “expert” detective figures with both the public and one another, rather than, as Miller suggests, “discard[s] the role of the detective” (42). The detective is required by the English reader to understand this new imperial world because a knowledge of this world has become necessary for the solution of English mysteries.29

Collins wastes no time making the case for the detective, showing the dawn of a new era of policing in, literally, the changing of the guard. Superintendent Seegrave, called first to the scene of the stolen diamond, is replaced by Cuff. In the few pages in which Seegrave appears, the “commanding” officer demonstrates “military . . . manners,” a “military way,” and a “military voice” (93,110,116). Just as O’Brien warned in the pages of the *Edinburgh Review*, Seegrave’s militarism makes him a bad policeman: He alienates the repository of all domestic knowledge, Betteredge, by looking sharply at the servant’s daughter with an eye that “was not a very pleasant eye to see” (99). “A more complete opposite to Superintendent Seegrave than Sergeant Cuff,” Betteredge explains, “I defy you to discover, search where you may” (107). Cuff embodies the virtues reformers desired for the New Police: patience, sympathy, discretion. He meets abuse with forbearance because “in my line of life, if we were quick at taking offence, we shouldn’t be worth salt to our porridge” (149). Though he does not “get many chances of exercising that virtue in my line of life” (126), Cuff is “tender to human infirmity” (126), looking out for the interests of Rosanna Spearman even as she seems to be a prime suspect. Sensing that he is “treading on delicate ground” (132) at the Verinder home,
and emphasizing that he has a “reputation to lose” (180)—something that certainly distinguishes him from the old police—Cuff moderates his detective work with sympathetic understanding. As a New Policeman, Cuff does not have to sacrifice authority for sympathy. While his eyes are not militaristic, they are “immovable” (112). His voice is not authoritarian, “it was spoken very respectfully, but very firmly at the same time” (178). Collins demonstrates the difficulty inherent in such characterization; he describes Cuff’s logic as having a “horrid clearness” and “an abominable justice” (184).

As with Inspector Field, these contradictory characteristics are made more palatable to the English reader by the detective’s methodology: local knowledge. This type of detective work requires, as we saw in Dickens, sympathetic familiarity with the investigated and so neutralizes the potentially threatening work of detection. While Betteredge initially finds Cuff’s method a “roundabout manner of going to work,” it could not be more straightforward. Cuff’s literal knowledge of English subjects enables him to mine, albeit carefully, English subjects for information. In conversation with the poor countrywoman, Mrs. Yolland, Cuff

began with the Royal Family, the Primitive Methodists, and the price of fish; and he got from that (in his dismal, underground way) to the loss of the Moonstone, the spitefulness of our first housemaid, and the hard behaviour of the womenservants generally towards Rosanna Spearman. . . . In about a quarter of an hour from the time when we entered the kitchen, good Mrs. Yolland was persuaded that she was talking to Rosanna’s best friend. (139)

Readers have pointed out that Cuff’s knowledge, while extensive, is partial and therefore fallible. If Cuff sometimes loses, however, his method of detection—local knowledge—always wins. Cuff and Betteredge consult a local, “a man whose knowledge was to be relied on” (176), in deciphering the depths of the Shivering Sand. Jennings’s personal knowledge of opium enables him to solve the mystery of Blake’s sleepwalking. Murthwaite’s specialized knowledge of Indian character provides crucial links in the story of the stolen diamond. When Cuff’s lack of familiarity with Rachel’s character leads him to suspect her, those with “special knowledge” of her character maintain her innocence. They are ultimately vindicated.

Miller would argue that the triumph of local knowledge represents the ascendance of generalized detection, rather than consolidation of that power in an agent of government. Conversely, critics intent on defining the genre of detective fiction focus on just this consolidation of “brilliant ratiocination [in] a mastermind to whom all the universe is, given half an hour, knowable”
(Trod xv). These critics read detection as the work of superior individuals somehow set apart from the culture at large. Hence Cuff’s “failure” in both these readings. What Collins is showing, however, is not failure but precisely the need for detectives to work within the larger culture. Cuff’s initial limitations, as a sleuth and a suspect Englishman, force him to become part of the general culture, part of the “team-effort” that famously comprises Collins’s novel (Trod xv), while his special expertise keeps him from blending in. Cuff dramatizes the position of the detective in the mid-nineteenth century: As he balances English virtues of liberty and authority, he must similarly forge relationships with those figures who initially set themselves against him. This development is symbolized, to an almost ludicrous extent, by his love of roses, significantly the “white musk rose . . . our old English rose” (108). Cuff has a running debate with the Verinder’s gardener about the best soil in which to grow the national flower, and in this debate the reader is shown a hybrid—“angel and devil by turns,” to use Bucket’s description of the detective—trying to graft himself onto the English nation.\^30

While Cuff’s association with roses symbolizes the detective’s implantation in English culture, the real work of grafting the detective to the nation is accomplished as Collins gives him an English everyman as an interpreter, inaugurating a crucial aspect of the emerging genre. Cuff befriends Betteredge, who becomes a Watson to his Holmes. According to John Cawelti, the Watsonian narrator, “a standard feature of the classical detective story,” is important because he provides a “perspective and commentary on the detective’s activity” (83–84). Through Betteredge, the work of detection and the evolution of English authority are explained to the reader. The symbol of “English common sense” (Taylor 202), Betteredge is the self-described “medium of introduction” (143) between Cuff and the common Englishman.\^31 The Verinder’s devoted family retainer has the most direct relationship to the reader in addition to the most pages of narration; he often begs to “excuse the faults of this composition,” faults that stem from “my talking so much of myself, and being too familiar, I am afraid, with you” (213). Betteredge’s familiarity with the common Englishman—his local knowledge—is precisely why Cuff deputizes him. Cuff explains his position to Lady Verinder: “I felt that a person of Mr. Betteredge’s character and position in this house—knowing the servants as he did, and having the honour of the family at heart—would be safer to take as an assistant than any other person whom I could lay my hand on” (187). The local knowledge of the average Englishman, then, supports but does not supplant the detective’s work.

As the detective needs the common man to understand a new mystery, Collins argues, the common man needs the detective to understand the mys-
In the character of Betteredge, Collins dramatizes an Englishman’s evolution from suspicion to appreciation of what Cuff represents: a complex imperial world and the profession (detection) such a world makes necessary. While some critics see Betteredge as an example of pure Podsnappery, the condition of Betteredge, like the condition of England, is changing as he is caught between past loyalties and present mysteries. Betteredge’s ties to English tradition are best revealed by his twin devotions to *Robinson Crusoe*, the urtext of British imperialism, and to Lady Verinder, “a mistress to serve . . . in ten thousand” (119). And yet, this loyal servant also represents a new public in a new era. Though the novel is set in the late 1840s, it was written during the debates over the Second Reform Bill. So while Betteredge is loyal to the family and to the duties of his position, he frequently casts his own vote, evident in his ambivalence toward several characters: Blake, whom he both serves and satirizes; Jennings, whom he tells that he will do anything he is ordered to, but makes it abundantly clear how these orders conflict with his own proper sensibilities; and Cuff, of whom he says, “I couldn’t help liking the Sergeant—though I hated him all the time” (200).

Betteredge’s famous “detective fever” is a symptom of his transition. Betteredge gives into both his curiosity and his affections for Cuff as he learns, along with the English reader, that the world is not local, not controllable by the authorities of the past: Lady Verinder dies suddenly in the first half of the text as the apparently bloodless empire building of *Robinson Crusoe* is replaced by the violence of nineteenth-century imperialism.

In this new world, Collins asserts, the marginal figure of the detective has moved to the center of English culture. But rather than providing a tidy barrier between center and margin—between quiet English houses and devilish Indian diamonds—the detective illustrates that Empire is already part of English culture. Collins demonstrates this by linking the detective with a character almost always ignored in readings of the novel: Murthwaite, the celebrated explorer of the wilds of India. Where Dickens’s New Policeman is characterized as an imperial explorer, Collins’s imperial explorer is characterized as a New Policeman. Murthwaite is so substantially similar to Cuff that the knowing reader of detective fiction might raise an eyebrow at the fact that the two never appear together in the text. Both the celebrated detective and the celebrated traveler are famous nationwide. Murthwaite, like Cuff, displays the characteristics of the already established detective type. He has a “steady, attentive eye” and a “cool immovable way” (73). Murthwaite is similarly “not an easy man to astonish” (314). He displays a protean mobility; he sneaks up on the Indian performers unseen and withdraws “as quietly as he approached” (78). Not only does Murthwaite look like a detective, he acts like...
Blake seeks him out, feeling “bound . . . to tell you something which may possibly put the clue into your hands” (80). Cuff knows he needs to consult Murthwaite to further his investigation. After their (offstage) meeting, Cuff suggests they are of one mind about the Indian travelers: “there isn’t a doubt on my mind, and there isn’t a doubt on Mr. Murthwaite’s mind, that they came to this place to steal the Moonstone” (165). In Cuff’s absence, he serves as a consulting detective, and often a literal interpreter. Murthwaite’s “long experience” with “the Indians and their language” makes him a valuable resource (152). Bruff is the Betteredge to Murthwaite’s Cuff, trusting him “to lead me blindfold through the last windings of the labyrinth, along which he had guided me thus far” (321).

Murthwaite’s otherness—he is described as “long, lean, wiry, brown, silent” (73)—would seem to underscore his peripheral value to the text and thus be a perfect example of the ultimate silencing of the imperial story by the domestic story. In characterizing Murthwaite as a detective, however, Collins asserts both that an agent of Empire is an English figure and that detective work, privately undertaken for an English family, requires a mastery of information about the imperial world. Murthwaite’s “superior knowledge of the Indian character” (319) enables him to know what it means to be English, evident in his summary of the Indians’ performance at Rachel’s party:

The clairvoyance in this case is simply a development of the romantic side of the Indian character. It would be a refreshment and an encouragement to those men—quite inconceivable, I grant you, to the English mind—to surround their wearisome and perilous errand in this country with a certain halo of the marvellous and the supernatural. (317)

Murthwaite demonstrates the detective’s unromantic “English mind” in his suggestion that the troublesome diamond be sent off to Amsterdam to be cut up. Sounding like one of Dickens’s detectives, he articulates his deductive process, in contrast to the Indian method:

we have nothing whatever to do with clairvoyance, or with mesmerism, or with anything else that is hard of belief to a practical man, in the inquiry that we are now pursuing. My object in following the Indian plot, step by step, is to trace results back, by rational means, to natural causes. (317–18)

If we persist in reading Murthwaite as we have read Cuff, as colorful but limited characters who ultimately retire to the periphery (to the Indian and English countrysides respectively), we miss seeing how Collins makes an imperial story
central to a domestic story. In making an agent of Empire a detective and making a detective part of the English family, Collins’s novel suggests that imperialism is central to being English. While the ending of *The Moonstone* contains marriages, inheritances, and babies—the traditional conclusions of domestic novels—Collins has Cuff and Murthwaite conclude the novel, writing in from their distant locales to report on the exodus of the Moonstone from England to its original Indian home. Ignoring these missives in order to focus on domestic resolution would be akin to overlooking St. John River’s inscrutable letter from India at the end of *Jane Eyre* so that Jane and Rochester’s strange and wonderful domesticity would be the novel’s parting image.

Nineteenth-century reformers promised in their accounts of the un-English police and the rapacious British Empire at the turn of the century that what began as signs of violent English authority could become symbols of triumphant English liberty. As weapons could become preventive rather than punishing, things that threatened the nation could come to defend it. In choosing a composite detective/explorer to solve the mystery of *The Moonstone*, Collins makes the same point. What begins as a violent failure of military order (from Seringapatam to Sergeant Seegrave) can become a triumph of local knowledge. By the end of the novel, English authority rests in the hands of good imperial detectives rather than bad imperial soldiers. This resolution does offer a narrative tidiness, but not, as critics have suggested, because of the work of a single mastermind or of the disappearance of troublesome imperial issues. As Collins, like Dickens, links the detective with the explorer and makes this imperial figure one to whom the English reader can relate, he suggests that the mystery of what it means to be English “in an age of progress” must be solved from the outside.33