London, Radical Culture, and the Making of the Dickensian Aesthetic

Sen, Sambudha

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Sen, Sambudha.
The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/23961.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23961

🔍 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=898157
THIS BOOK, which is about Charles Dickens and the popular print and visual culture of nineteenth-century Britain, has been written almost entirely in India. My location in Delhi turned out to be very helpful not because it enabled me to sustain some shopworn postcolonial perspective but because it provided a context that helped to explain, in ways London no longer can, some of the central concerns of the Dickensian aesthetic: the fabrication of a language of opposition in a society characterized by deep disparities and the expressive possibilities of an internally fractured cityscape. For their interest in my engagement with these problems, their many illuminating suggestions, and also for their skepticism and the many, quite brilliant jokes that they improvised about “pedagogues” and “mug-pots,” I want to thank the following Delhiites: Abhibsha Chakraborty, Aratrika Das, Arindam Sengupta, Ashok Bhattacharya, Baidik Bhattacharya, Deabashish Chaterjee, Debolina Dey, Maitrayee Roychoudhury, Nivedita Basu, Prasanta Chakravarty, Shilpi Malhotra, Swagat Sen, and Teja Varma.

I also thank A. N. Kaul, Pradip Datta, Shirshendu Chakrabarti, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, and Udaya Kumar, all of whom were or continue to be associated with the University of Delhi where I work. When I look back on the ten years or more that it took me to write this book, I am struck by how dependent I was, at every stage, on the interest each one of them showed in my work. I am very grateful to them for the many tough, specific questions that they asked and for their willingness to take my project for what it was rather than judge it by the protocols of this or that academic trend. I want to thank A. N. Kaul again for giving me the benefit of his leg-
endary abilities as a teacher and for instilling in me the conviction that has kept me going—that there is no research problem in this world that cannot be confronted with an idea. From the others I learned several general but vital lessons: that, for example, it may be necessary to work with a range of sub- or nonliterary material while attempting to track the genealogy of a literary effect or that the worth of a piece of academic writing may lie not in its display of scholarship but in the power of its explanations. I am particularly grateful to Udaya for the selfless commitment and hard work with which he single-handedly transformed the institutional space where we all work into a site where ideas such as those outlined above could emerge.

A book such as this could never have been written if I had not gained access to material housed in libraries in Britain and the United States. I am extremely grateful to Clare Hall, Cambridge, The Huntington Library, Pasadena, The Rockefeller Foundation, and The Leverhulme Trust for generous fellowships that enabled me to spend extended periods of time in the Cambridge University and the Huntington libraries. I am very grateful to the library staff at Cambridge University Library and the Huntington for the courtesy and cooperation that I invariably received from them. I am still trying to figure out why I was transported to the Villa Serbelloni with no responsibility except to soak in its many splendors, write, and spend the evenings drinking with some remarkable men and women, and I thank the Rockefeller Foundation for the absurdly high level of happiness that they provided for me through the course of writing one of my chapters. Thanks also to the Leverhulme Foundation for a generous fellowship that enabled me to spend an extended period of time at the Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. It was the availability of uninterrupted writing time and free access to the Cambridge University Library that enabled me to finally put my book together. The English Department at Anglia Ruskin turned out to be a warm, welcoming, and intellectually vibrant place, and I want particularly to thank Rowly Wymer for helping me fit into the Anglia community with innumerable, thoughtful gestures, Rebecca Stott for lending me her office, and the two Johns, Gardner and White, for their friendship which, as the three of us know, will last through the rest of our lives.

This book, together with the research opportunities that facilitated its writing, would have merely remained pleasant fantasies if I did not have the long-term support of two remarkable people: Andrew Miller and Catherine Gallagher. I first got to know Andrew about twelve years ago when he sent me his response to an essay full of typographical, spelling, and formatting errors that I’d submitted to Victorian Studies. In his three-page editor’s response Andrew summarized the readers’ comments, cautioned me about
the technical errors that I was making, and gave me several specific and very serious suggestions about how I could take my work forward. Andrew’s letter turned out to be the beginning of an incredibly generous relationship that we sustain to this day. His comments on sections of this book and finally on the book as a whole helped me address several problems ranging from the specific and local to those related to the book’s structure and argument. Andrew’s continuing interest in the work of a person whom he had never met and who did not have any claim on his time represents for me that utopian impulse that has never really faded in academia. I want him to know that it was his commitment to keeping in touch with people working far away from the centers dedicated to the study of Victorian culture that kept this work going.

I cannot adequately express my gratitude to Cathy Gallagher for the many ways in which she has supported my work through the last fifteen years. As will become evident, this book works all the time with conceptual categories that Gallagher developed in her books and essays. What may not be obvious is the extent to which her responses to my work helped to shape it. She led me to several readings that turned out to be seminal and transformed the arguments that I was making. Her own comments—razor sharp in their ability to open up conceptual flaws—have been, by far, the most important influence on this work, for it is around those comments that the vital organizing knots of this book have been tied. Of course, I alone am responsible for any shortcomings from which this book is bound to suffer, but readers should know that without Cathy’s help there would be no book.

I thank Sandy Crooms for the firm but always cheerful way in which she handled this manuscript in its early, unformed stages and even more for the outstanding external readings that she organized for the complete manuscript. The comments of my anonymous external readers were enormously helpful, and I hope that they will read this book if only to see how much they have contributed to its final version. Thanks also to Rimli Borooah and Maggie Diehl for giving this work the benefit of their considerable copyediting skills at differing points of its evolution from a manuscript to a book.

This book uses material from the following essays that have been published previously: “Radical Satire and Respectability: Comic Imagination in Hone, Jerrold and Dickens,” in The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain, ed. Aruna Krishnamurthy (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), Copyright © 2009; “Hogarth, Egan, Dickens, and the Making of an Urban Aesthetic,” Representations 103, no. 1 (Summer 2008), © 2008 by the Regents of the University of California; and “Bleak House, Vanity Fair, and the Making of an Urban Aesthetic,” Nineteenth-Century
Literature 54, no. 4 (March 2000): 480–502, © 2000 by the Regents of the University of California. I thank the University of California Press and Ashgate for permission to reprint.

The other figures that appear in this book gained a great deal from the professional skills of my nephew, Anshuman Sen, who produced high-resolution digital images from the frayed, old prints that I gave him. Other members of my family helped in the writing of this book simply by being who they are—individuals who respect other people’s individuality. My eighty-seven-year-old father, who remains independent yet deeply connected to anything concerning me, has been a great source of strength over many years. My mother, whose bright and far-reaching optimism sustained me through many difficult periods, would, if she were here, have been proud of this book. So, I hope, will Polu and Milu—my scientifically minded children—who never let their skepticism over my activities get in the way of helping me out in a million specific ways. And I was really lucky to have met Nivedita when I was eighteen because without her friendship, support, and tolerance I would have sunk long ago.