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

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IN 1859, many years after he had established himself as the preeminent novelist of his age, Charles Dickens launched what would, for long afterwards, be considered the definitive edition of his novels. The novels that appeared as part of the Charles Dickens Edition were designed for posterity. Each reissued work took the form of a single, freestanding hardbound volume. Every volume, moreover, was embossed with gold lettering and carried a facsimile of Dickens's signature inscribed across its red cover. Clearly Dickens was projecting his books into the future as stable, unified, and autonomous "classics," authenticated by their author's personal stamp. 

As it happens, the Dickensian novel has held its status as a classic long after the publication of the Charles Dickens Edition. In the twenty-first century, it enjoys all the prestige attendant on its longevity, and it is presented to modern readers as a unique and unified whole, to be read and enjoyed in its own right without the distracting influence of any extraneous material. Yet the ideas of unity and permanence were utterly alien to the format with which *Pickwick Papers* changed the dynamics of the nineteenth-century book market and which remained Dickens's preferred mode of publishing until late in his career. Kathleen Tillotson and John Butt provide a clear description of the magazine-like monthly numbers with which Dickens and his publishers cut through the stranglehold that the three-decker novel and circulating libraries exercised over the production and dissemination of novels: "each monthly ‘part’ or number consisted of three or
four chapters, covering thirty-two pages of print, with two plates, and several pages of advertisements. It was issued in green paper covers and was published at a shilling, nominally on the first day, actually on the last day, of each month.” The emergence of the part issue—“the moment of Pickwick,” as N. N. Feltes has called it—was part of a sales strategy that would work very successfully for Dickens and his publishers. But the salability of the Dickensian part issue was inseparable from the form—part novel fragment, part illustrations, and part advertisements—in which it was sold. The hybridity and open-endedness of the part issue should not be mistaken for simple and removable side effects of the monthly number’s publication conditions. On the contrary, the three segments of the part issue were often well coordinated, and they worked with a common set of expressive strategies to unfold as parts of a single field. Thus, as Richard Altick has shown, companies and individuals who advertised in the part issue often chose products that would synchronize with themes, events, or locations that may have appeared in a particular number. Indeed, Gerard Curtis has argued that advertisements were “part of the original reading process of the serial, an integral part of its framing device and of its effects.” To give Curtis’s own example, the advertisement for the Dakin Tea Company that appeared with the monthly numbers of Bleak House drew the viewer into a narrative of sociability based on tea drinking by using a set of visual techniques that were identical to those used by the cover design of the part issue, pictorially anticipating for the reader the story that was about to unfold.

It would seem, then, that the transformation of Dickens’s novels into single-volume, internally integrated “classics” obscured not only the economic underpinnings of novel writing in nineteenth-century England but also the movement of expressive strategies across the disparate but contiguous discourses that constituted the original Dickensian part issue. The latter dynamic, indeed, energized the workings of a much larger entity—the nineteenth-century market for print and visual entertainment—and its hybridizing effects on the products of this market will prove essential for our understanding of the Dickensian aesthetic.

The market in which Dickens found his feet as a writer was characterized by its propensity to not just promote incessant movement of expressive resources across genres and media but also to destabilize demarcations between popular and high art. As Martin Meisel puts it:

After a period from the Restoration forward, of comparative cultural stratification, there was a considerable mingling and enlarging of audiences, in the early nineteenth-century, accompanied by an explosion, technologically
induced, of print and picture. The popular audience of print and picture consumers, reaching all the way from the palace to the city streets, came into its own in the nineteenth-century and found entrepreneurs to provide for it, by the penny and the pound.\(^6\)

One way in which to gauge the extent to which the print market loosened both the social demarcations between the consuming public and generic distinctions between different cultural products is by tracking the transformations experienced by William Hogarth’s prints through the course of their extraordinarily long afterlife that extended well into the nineteenth century.

When Hogarth decided, in 1732, to “publish” a series of four pictures depicting a harlot’s declining career in London and to sell multiple, mechanically reproduced copies to a group of subscribers,\(^7\) he was consciously probing the print market for expressive and commercial opportunities that it might offer. But even he could not have anticipated the kind of afterlife that his prints were destined to enjoy. Produced in multiple copies, focusing often on the varied, everyday life of the city, Hogarth’s prints were, in any case, designed to circulate among a socially varied group of consumers.\(^8\) Moreover, the increasing popular appeal of Hogarth’s pictorial stories through the later eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries caused the artist’s ideas, plot patterns, and modes of characterization to proliferate across a range of disparate genres. The continuing popularity of *Industry and Idleness* (1747), for example, meant that nineteenth-century melodramas, pantomimes, and novels regularly absorbed and reactivated its plot patterns, characters, and, above all, its techniques of unfolding the city. About ninety years after the publication of *Industry and Idleness*, the author and illustrator of the best-selling *Jack Shepherd* (1839) declared that they had worked from Hogarth’s picture series in the attempt to produce what the author described as a “sort of Hogarthian novel.”\(^9\) Moreover, *Jack Shepherd* was itself adapted several times for the stage, and the claim made in a playbill of one of the adaptations demonstrates the enormous expressive possibilities that opened up for popular modes of articulation as they moved from one genre or medium to another. This advertisement claimed that *Jack Shepherd* would offer its viewers a panoramic version of Hogarth’s London, that is, it would unfurl across the large, three-dimensional space of the stage the London that Hogarth had inscribed in *Industry and Idleness*.\(^10\)

The history of transformations experienced by Hogarth’s pictures throws into relief a basic feature of the nineteenth-century market for print and visual commodities: its propensity to encourage, not generic autonomy, but a process of hybridization. This hybridizing process is very clearly exempli-
fied in two texts that are representative of early nineteenth-century popular print culture and that will, moreover, figure prominently through the early chapters of this book.

The first, Pierce Egan’s *Life in London* (1822), is marked in a physical sense by the incessant intersection of genres and media that the print market promoted: its typography is full of attention-grabbing capitalizations and italics, its colored plates depicting sensational city scenes are very much part of its expressive repertoire, and it even contains the full music score for a popular song. In these circumstances it is not at all surprising that in his meandering, loud, and energetic invocation, Pierce Egan ranges across virtually the entire breadth of a stratified cultural field: he hopes to imbibe some of the properly literary talent which animated a “Fielding, a Goldsmith, a Smollett, a Sterne, in their portraiture of ‘Life,’” but also to incorporate, within his book, some of the audience-gathering techniques perfected by “Cribb, admired hero of the stage” and “Hone the king of parodists!” Again, William Hone, who is brought together in Egan’s equalizing discourse with Fielding, was able, in *The Political House That Jack Built* (1819), to dredge out of radical pamphleteering a recipe for an instant best-seller and, in this way, to open up a large market for comic political journalism, precisely by hitching the popular appeal of antiruling class graphic satire to the radical “nursery rhyme.” Hone self-consciously emphasized the hybrid nature of the form that he saw himself as pioneering: the frontispiece of his best-selling radical pamphlet (fig. 1) depicts its two primary producers, Cruikshank and Hone himself, sitting on opposite sides of a table engaged precisely in the act of bringing together the effects of language and of drawing in a single text.

In what ways did the market’s propensity to move expressive strategies across diverse forms and media affect the practice of novel writing? Ainsworth Harrison publicly declared that *Jack Shepherd* drew much more on Hogarth’s picture series than on some properly literary tradition of novel writing. But the hybridizing trajectory within the nineteenth-century novel that Ainsworth’s work represented unfolded against the resistance of several writers and critics who were convinced that the influence of techniques that had originated in graphic caricature or the city sketches could only degrade the novel as a form.

One of the most interesting examples of such resistance is to be found in the work of William Makepeace Thackeray, interesting because Thackeray sought to insulate his novel writing from the corrupting influence of subliterary forms even as he earned his livelihood from the “low” parodies, squibs, and caricatures that he contributed to various magazines.
FIGURE 1. George Cruikshank, frontispiece to *The Political House That Jack Built* (1819)
Thackeray’s dependence on magazine work was especially acute during the early and most difficult phase of his career, when he kept himself financially afloat by producing various comic pieces for *Punch*—a magazine whose very name connected it to the sort of slapstick comedy that Thackeray would find unsuitable for serious novels. But even after his dependence on comic journalism decreased, he defended the more commercially oriented and ephemeral forms of writing on the grounds that authors had the right to sell their wares in the market like other tradesmen. Indeed, in contrast to Dickens, who, in his public pronouncements, often subsumed the economic exchange that was taking place between author and reader within a rhetorically produced sociability, Thackeray frankly described the professional writer as someone who was driven not by the “irresistible afflatus of genius” but by the need to exchange his “literary artifact” for money.

Thackeray’s frequent use of the word “trade” to describe the exchange that took place between writer and reader, and his defense of “fugitive literature” against “the big book interest,” should not, however, be understood as a simple, objective attempt to “undercut,” as Peter Shillingsburg has suggested, “both the social snobbery and the mystical trappings of artist which some writers cultivated.” Rather, these positions express only one side of Thackeray’s deeply divided relationship with the print market. Thackeray may have believed that the print market was a fair regulating mechanism for the *economic* exchange that took place between an author and reader. But coexisting with his defense of writing as trade and his defense of those who produced “fugitive” literature in order to earn a living are the private anxieties about his own magazine writings that he expressed so often to his mother and to his friends. For example, in an 1841 letter to his mother, Thackeray confessed that he had not let anyone know that he was writing for *Punch* because, although it offered a “good pay . . . and an unrestrained opportunity for laughing,” it was a “very low paper.” Moreover, Thackeray’s “odious magazine work” not only compromised his social status but also demanded the kind of literary drudgery that was sure to “kill any writer.” The presence of the “writer” behind the “quill driver,” of William Makepeace Thackeray, whose artistic instincts cry out for expression in an unsympathetic print market, behind Michael Angelo Titmarsh, who floods this market with parodies and caricatures, would suggest a relationship with the print market so divided that Thackeray could sustain it only by formally splitting his authorial personality.

Thackeray self-consciously separated his novel writing from the kind of work that he did for *Punch* because he believed that the extravagant effects
of comic entertainment were fundamentally incompatible with the aesthetic
goals of the novel as a work of “Art.” It was from this perspective that he
sought to distinguish his own mode of novel writing from that of Dickens:

I quarrel with his art in many respects: which I don’t think represents
nature duly; for instance Micawber appears to me an exaggeration of a
man, as his name is of a name. It is delightful and makes me laugh: but
it is no more real than my friend Punch is: and in so far I protest against
him . . . holding that the Art of Novels is to represent Nature: to convey as
strongly as possible the sentiment of reality . . . in a drawing-room drama
a coat is a coat and a poker a poker; and not an embroidered tunic, nor a
great red-hot instrument like the Pantomime weapon.18

In this well-known passage Thackeray formulates an opposition that will
remain important through much of this book: he posits against the popular
appeal of Dickens’s entertainment-oriented effects his own commitment to
convey “the sentiment of reality.” Moreover, although in a maneuver that
would enjoy a long afterlife, Thackeray conflates realism with “Nature,” he
was always aware—as the many comments he made in his letters, prefaces,
and even in his novels testify—that the realistic mode of novel writing itself
worked with a very specific set of representational conventions. Without nec-
essarily imputing aesthetic superiority to one or the other author, this book
will often invoke the representational conventions that Thackeray identifies
with the “Art” of novels in order to throw into relief a very different but
equally powerful set of expressive strategies with which Dickens worked.

Implicit in the passage from Thackeray quoted above is a second criti-
cism of Dickens’s mode of novel writing that has to do with the problem
not so much of realism as of autonomy. Thackeray was not, of course, the
first to argue that Dickens had degraded “the Art of Novels” by opening
his own fiction to the influence of extraliterary forms such as pantomimes
or satiric, political journalism. Indeed, as Kathryn Chitick has shown, the
highbrow press refused, until after Oliver Twist, to even describe Dickens as
a novelist.19 Rather, the customary classification of Dickens’s early writing
as magazine pieces or as periodical sketches inserted them in a promiscuous
discursive field bereft of firm generic contours where expressive modes from
a host of genres could have free play.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Dickens’s early reviewers echoed Thac-
keray in commenting (most often derisively) on the heterogeneous, subliter-
ary expressive modes on which Dickens’s novels depended to achieve their
most characteristic effects. The Spectator, striking a familiar note, compared
the topical satire that insinuated itself so often in Dickens’s fiction to the “passing hits of a pantomime,” while the *Edinburgh Review* commented that in *Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Oliver Twist* Dickens had “called in the aid of the pencil, and [had] been contented to share his success with the caricaturist.” Many years later, after Dickens had established himself as a major if not the preeminent novelist of his period, the quarterly press continued to remind the public of the generic promiscuity that Dickens’s schooling in the lower levels of print culture had encouraged in his novels. The Circumlocution Office passages in *Little Dorrit*, *Blackwood’s Magazine* complained, “betrayed a total want of art” and was “as inartificial as if [Dickens] had cut half-a-dozen leading articles out of an Opposition newspaper, and stuck them in anyhow, anywhere.”

As the phrasing by *Blackwood’s* suggests, the quarterly press often tended to constitute as “irregular” or “desultory” a mode of novel writing that was based on the constant interaction with various, often extraliterary genres. However, Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea that “the most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries of its individual areas and not in places where these areas have become enclosed in their own specificity” might counterpoise against this emphasis on the formal integrity of the novel. From this perspective, the Dickensian novel could be conceptualized as a discursive formation which was characterized by a certain formal indeterminacy and semantic open-endedness and which was always capable of reactivating within itself expressive resources from the numerous popular genres and media that circulated in the nineteenth-century market for print and visual entertainment.

This book will be overwhelmingly concerned with what Dickens’s novels gained from two sub- or nonliterary representational traditions that flourished in the nineteenth-century market for print and visual entertainment. The first of these, which I will, following James Epstein, call “radical expression,” designates the literary and visual satire that entered the discursive domain through the work of such writers and artists as Thomas Paine, William Hone, William Cobbett, and George Cruikshank, and that continued to be an important presence in the print market of the late 1830s, despite the fragmentation of the radical journalistic tradition itself. As young men making their careers in the print market of the 1830s, Thackeray and Dickens would have access to the satiric techniques that developed in the radical journalistic tradition, irrespective of whether they shared the political goals of Hone or Paine. In these circumstances, it is rather surprising that few among the several literary critics and historians who write on the popular
radical satire of the early nineteenth century have attempted to connect this satire with the work of Dickens.26

The one exception (apart from an article of mine that appeared in the English Literary History27) has been Sally Ledger’s recent Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination (2007). Ledger breaks from the influential view that associated Dickens with the middle-class radical politics of the 1840s and 1850s.28 Instead, she connects the populist orientation that so often underpinned Dickens’s political pronouncements to the “language of radicalism” fabricated by an earlier generation of radical publicists in their endeavor to bring the masses excluded from the processes of an unreformed parliament into the political domain.29

The many specific connections Ledger makes between Dickens and writers like Cobbett and Hone is crucial to the argument that this book develops. My criticism of Ledger’s work, though, is that the “Popular” in her title brings together, in a relationship of unmediated continuity, political practices and literary effects, the political mobilization that Hone and Cobbett hoped to sustain through their pamphlets and Dickens’s novelization of “radical expression.”30 Thus, Ledger repeatedly argues that Hone and Dickens were part of a unified, continuous, “truly disruptive” political tradition and that Cobbett and Dickens shared a “similarly instrumentalist” view of writing.31 But Hone’s mobilizing pamphlets and Dickens’s entertainment-oriented novels worked in very different domains and were likely, therefore, to produce very different kinds of political effects. The bloody circumstance out of which The Political House That Jack Built had emerged and the prosecution that always threatened the radical publicists suggest that these publicists were also political organizers capable of confronting the state with serious mass protests. Dickens’s political satires, on the other hand, were not conceptualized as instruments for organizing the masses or for precipitating direct, bloody confrontations. Rather, the Dickensian novel was addressed to a respectable, predominantly middle-class audience, and it achieved its political effects gradually and indirectly in some corner of the mind of the reader who read Dickens in her leisure time for pleasure rather than for political education.

It would seem, therefore, that rather than embedding Dickens in any stable political project, popular radical writing and graphic satire worked their effects deep within the internal dynamics of his fiction. In order to uncover these effects, I will need to address not this or that political goal that Dickens may have shared with Hone or Cobbett but rather the ways in which radical expression helped to produce Dickens’s method as a novelist.
What were the series of displacements that transformed “the language of radicalism” from a powerful instrument of political mobilization to a socially acceptable, relatively nontreating mode of political entertainment? What exact visual and linguistic forms of radical expression were available to writers such as Thackeray and Dickens when they began their careers as writers? What possibilities did “radical expression” hold out for the novel form, for example, for its modes of characterization? In what ways did these modes relate to the increasingly normative protocols of realism? These questions will lie at the heart of this book’s engagement with the first of the two subliterary traditions that, it argues, helped to produce the Dickensian aesthetic.

A second tradition of representation that developed in the domain of popular rather than literary culture and that proved vital to the making of the Dickensian novel were the visualizations of London stretching all the way from Hogarth’s *Industry and Idleness* and the early nineteenth-century city sketches to the images produced, through the first half of the nineteenth century, by such technologically advanced forms as the panorama and the stereoscope.

These visual representations of London sustain, in varying ways, a common tension between, on the one hand, the attempt to grasp the city as a whole, to map and make accessible its far-flung locations and, on the other hand, to bring together these geographically and socially disparate locations in tense, discontinuous relationships. In Hogarth’s inaugural exposition, this tension probes, breaches, redraws, but also seeks to fortify the boundary between such interiors as the home or the workplace and the chaotic, dangerous life of the streets. Moreover, even as London became more organized through the course of the nineteenth century, the city sketch and the panorama sharpened their techniques of mapping the city, of probing into its hidden nooks and crannies, and of encouraging juxtapositions between these and the more respectable parts of the metropolis. By the mid-nineteenth century, the unstable diversity of the city—its propensity to fragment, but also to generate unexpected convergences—could be made to unfold across three- (rather than two-) dimensional space in the technologically sophisticated operations of the stereoscope.

Throughout his career Dickens engaged very seriously with, and often wrote about, Hogarth’s images of London as well as the expressive possibilities offered by the panorama and the stereoscope. These writings suggest that techniques originating in Hogarth’s prints or in the operations of the stereoscope not only influenced his representation of the metropolis but also produced a basic organizational orientation of the Dickensian aesthetic.
This orientation, inseparable from the synchronicity of the visual modes, relates to the unusual way in which time and space are arranged in Dickens’s novels. Thus, unlike realistic novels such as Thackeray’s—which are often driven by the transforming effects of time, especially on characters, rather than by dramatic shifts in social space—Dickens follows the visual forms discussed above by working with the social and spatial diversity of the city and with the tense juxtapositions that these make possible. The space-driven urban aesthetic that Dickens inherited from the visual forms would have a determining influence on such vital features of the Dickensian novel as plotting and characterization.

This book will frequently refer to William Makepeace Thackeray’s Vanity Fair, Pendennis, and, to a lesser extent, The Newcomes. I should clarify, though, that this is not really a comparative work on Dickens and Thackeray. It neglects several features of Thackeray’s fiction including those that may be thought of as nuanced elaborations of issues that interested Dickens as well. For example, I don’t really engage with the way credit works in Vanity Fair to produce unexpected social intersections or with the internal depth that Thackeray manages to give to the world of the aristocracy even while exposing this world as moribund and parasitic. Moreover, a nuanced comparison between the ways in which Thackeray and Dickens responded to the aristocracy would require, for example, researching the relative similarity of positions that they took on the aristocracy’s domination of the bureaucracy. I have not engaged with these problems because Thackeray’s relevance to this book is inseparable from and limited to the effects that his self-conscious rejection of the resources of print and visual entertainment had on his novel writing and to the light that this sheds on the distinctiveness of the aesthetic choices that Dickens made.

Unfortunately, this orientation may draw my book inadvertently into that long-established tradition of scholarship that locks the two greatest male novelists of Victorian England in a rigid binary relationship. This tradition, moreover, has often used the Dickens–Thackeray opposition to privilege one author at the expense of the other. I have no interest in constituting Thackeray as Dickens’s discredited other. Both Dickens and Thackeray found in the novel form the means of elaborating perspectives on, for example, the aristocracy that were underpinned by as many similarities as differences. Moreover, it bears reiteration that this book does not engage with various features of Thackeray’s writing that it would need to bring into play if it were a properly comparative study of Thackeray and Dickens.
Rather than comprehensively comparing the fiction of Thackeray and Dickens or embedding them hierarchically in some putative scale of literary value, my concern is primarily with the making of the Dickensian aesthetic. Thackeray becomes part of that concern because nineteenth-century critics regularly held up his novels as examples of that realism that Dickens never managed to achieve. Thus, if I juxtapose Dickens’s caricaturized representation of Tite Barnacle against Thackeray’s psychologically complex portraiture of Pitt Crawley, it is not in order to assert the superiority of the one over the other but to show that each character came out of a specific set of aesthetic choices that, working within a set of constraints, became capable of producing specific effects. The purpose of this book will have been served if it is able to demonstrate that the expressive resources of various popular subliterary forms that came together in Dickens’s work produced a novelistic aesthetic whose methods were different from those encoded in what Thackeray described as the “Art of Novels” but which were capable of producing effects just as powerful as anything achieved in the great realistic tradition of the English novel.