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

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Sen, Sambudha.
The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
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In a letter to Mrs. Brookfield, written a few months before he resigned from "Punch," Thackeray declared that he found it impossible to "pull in the same boat" with a "savage little Robespierre" like Douglas Jerrold. Thackeray's outburst is significant for what it reveals not only about his overt political opinions but also about his relationship with certain techniques of representation that my "Introduction," following James Epstein, described as "radical expression," and that Thackeray associated above all with Jerrold.

When Thackeray first joined "Punch," Jerrold dominated the journal and sought to sustain, within an expanding print market, the sort of radical political satire that had gained such popularity through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In these circumstances, Thackeray himself had little option but to provide for the magazine the parodies and caricatures that fed "the quickening and widening of interest in public matters and public men, brought about by the agitation which had preceded the passing of the Reform Bill of 1832 and continued after its enactment." Yet he was also deeply conscious of the artistic limitations of journalistic sarcasm, although he publicly defended his early political satire as a legitimate means of earning his livelihood. These limitations were evident for Thackeray, above all, in the way that the radical journalists represented the elite. Indeed, one way in which to chart more precisely Thackeray's responses to this problem is by focusing on the silences as well as the emphases that
underlie the two long essays he wrote on artists whose work not only overlapped with his early career but also represented the elite from the differing social standpoints that Thackeray associated with journalism, on the one hand, and “literature,” on the other. In the first of these—a two-part essay on Cruikshank—Thackeray creates around the figure of the illustrator a powerful sense of nostalgia for a much-loved world full of fantastic prints and illustrations that Thackeray’s aging generation was losing. In this way, Thackeray touches on the transforming effects of time—a problem that he was to explore with great sophistication in his fiction—but he also commits himself to a certain sympathy for even the kind of political caricature that had seemed to embarrass him in his letters to friends such as Edward Fitzgerald:

Knight’s, in Sweetings’s Alley; Fairburn’s, in a court off Ludgate Hill; Hone’s, in Fleet Street—bright, enchanted palaces, which George Cruikshank used to people with grinning, fantastical imps and merry, harmless sprites,—where are they? . . . Slop, the atrocious Castlereagh, the sainted Caroline (in tight pelisse, with feathers in her head), the “Dandy of Sixty” who used to glance at us from Hone’s friendly windows—where are they?  

This well-known description is so sympathetic that even radical historians have quoted it as a historically accurate account of the milieu in which political prints of the early nineteenth century were produced and disseminated.4 Thackeray’s representation, however, also seeks to smoothen and render as easily negotiable the disjunction between the middle- and upper-class readers for whom he was writing and the plebeian milieu for which Cruikshank produced his political caricatures. More specifically, in Thackeray’s nostalgic recollection of what he projects as a lost world, the militant artisanal communities that gathered around the works of Cruikshank and Hone become “grinning, good natured mechanics,”5 and Cruikshank’s brutal caricatures of the most powerful politicians of the Regency “merry, harmless sprites.” This means that Thackeray’s representation erases not only the confrontationist context in which Cruikshank’s political prints were produced but also the representational modes by which this confrontation with the political elite was expressed.

If Thackeray felt it necessary to evade any analysis of a central feature of Cruikshank’s political caricature—its propensity to represent the political elite from the point of view of the excluded—it was because he believed that Cruikshank’s social location made it impossible for him to produce artistically viable images of the upper classes. Indeed, in a second essay on
his colleague John Leech, Thackeray sharply criticizes James Gillray and, by implication, the brutal caricatural technique which Cruikshank was to bring into the domain of radical journalism precisely on the grounds that the “garret . . . or a tavern parlour” could never emerge as valid observation points for the representation of “public characters.” On the other hand, as a “social painter” who belonged to “the world which he depict[ed] and native to the manners which he portray[ed],” Leech was properly positioned to delineate realistically the details of what Thackeray, addressing his upper- and middle-class readers, describes as “your house and mine.”

Thackeray’s privileging of Leech over Gillray and, by extension, over Cruikshank is important for my purposes because it has implications for the distinction that Thackeray made between journalism and literature, and it looks forward ultimately to Thackeray’s own movement away from “magazinery” to what he saw as the more properly literary vocation of novel writing. More specifically, Thackeray’s comments on Leech, taken in conjunction with his increasingly contemptuous attitude toward the sort of radical satire that appeared in the early numbers of *Punch*, may be seen as part of an ongoing polemic in which Thackeray pits a novelistic aesthetic, based on closely observed, realistic delineations of the social and political elite, against a popular tradition of political representation that developed continuously from Paine to Jerrold and that was predicated on, as Thackeray sarcastically remarked, looking “up at the rich and the great with a fierce, a sarcastic aspect, and a threatening posture.”

The language of radical satire, which Thackeray believed to be incapable of producing that nuanced realism that he associated with literature, was an integral aspect of Dickens’s staple writing. Indeed, in an article entitled “Modern Novelists: Charles Dickens,” the *Westminster Review* argued that Dickens’s authorial tone was inextricably bound up with those high-pitched political debates of the reform years which had sustained Jerrold’s strident sarcasm as well, and “Modern Novelists” concluded with a suggestion that Thackeray would presumably endorse: that by seeking to cater to the tastes of the overpoliticized masses Dickens had perverted “the novel from a work of art to a platform for argument and discussion.”

The *Westminster Review* is right not only in situating Dickens’s early career in the lower rungs of the market for print entertainment but also in suggesting that Dickens (unlike Thackeray) absorbed the language of radical politics into the expressive system of his novels. However, the *Westminster Review’s* condescension toward those forms of novel writing that do not qualify as “work(s) of art” obstructs what might have been a more productive and historically informed inquiry into the relationship between
“literature” and what it vaguely describes as a “highly popular treatment of politics.” Indeed, it is possible to demonstrate that the “reactivation” of radical expressive modes in Dickens’s fiction was not the first or only example of the interaction between literature and popular politics, and that early radical publicists such as William Hone and Thomas Wooler would certainly have contested the separation that Thackeray and the Westminster Review seek to effect between the popular radical writing and what could be properly described as literary. Just now, though, my focus will be on the uninterrupted process of displacements and reactivations by which radical expressive modes became uprooted from the mobilizing texts that had originally sustained them, but continued to lead an active, if reified, existence in the entertainment-oriented Dickensian novel.

One way in which to track this movement is by focusing on what Iain McCalman has called “the Rabelaisian” strands that coexisted within radical journalism with the more austere, rationalist modes characteristic of Paine and Carlile. It was the extensive use that journalists like Hone, Wooler, and Davison made of literary devices such as exaggeration, parody, caricature, rhyme, and meter that made the language of subversion not so much solemn as entertaining and salable.

A very good example of a mobilizing text that might, at the same time, be seen as a landmark in literary entertainment was William Hone’s *The Political House That Jack Built*. *The Political House* was very much an exercise in political mobilization, provoked as it was by the Peterloo massacre. On the other hand, it was also cast as a parodic political nursery rhyme. This allowed Hone to combine colloquialisms, parodic reaccentuations, and the familiar rhythms of nursery rhymes to achieve a mode of political articulation whose most productive afterlife was to unfold in the pages of *Punch* and in the novels of Dickens rather than in a newspaper like *Northern Star* or a book such as *On Liberty*. Moreover, *The Political House* was, in a very basic sense, coproduced by Cruikshank, and the combination of Cruikshank’s etchings and Hone’s letterpress not only inaugurated a format that would prove very successful in the market for print entertainment but also set into motion an interactive relationship between visual and linguistic satire—a process that was to affect the Dickensian aesthetic in significant ways. Above all, *The Political House* did not just anticipate a recipe for a best seller—it turned out itself to be an instant best seller. First published in 1819, *The Political House* sold 100,000 copies even at the relatively high price of one shilling.

The very high sales achieved by a radical pamphlet such as *The Political House* suggests that the demarcation made by one of the greatest historians
of the popular press between “the journalism of a community or a movement” and “market journalism” based on more efficient production and distribution and incomparably higher levels of capitalization was, in fact, never absolute.\textsuperscript{13} It is true, of course, that the commercial press irrevocably broke up the community of radical readers in the process of creating a larger, more diffuse, entertainment-seeking audience and, indeed, the movement of radical satire from the mobilizing pamphlet to the Dickensian novel also implied the uprooting of this satire from real political struggles. On the other hand, it is equally true that radical journalism contributed very significantly to the shaping of the nineteenth-century market for print entertainment. Indeed, the radical journalists themselves often emphasized this. Thus, Hone himself was to claim that the illustrated pamphlets that he produced during the 1820s had “created a new era in the history of publication”:

By showing what engraving on wood could effect in a popular way, and exciting a taste for art in the more humble ranks of life, they created a new era in the history of publication . . . They are parents to the present cheap literature, which extends to a sale of at least four hundred thousand copies every week . . . Besides this . . . my little pieces acquainted every rank of society, in the most remote corner of the British dominions, with the powers of Mr. George Cruikshank, whose genius had been wasted on mere caricature till it was embodied in my ideas and feelings.\textsuperscript{14}

Hone’s anxious egoism is characteristic of many plebeian writers seeking to assert, to a hostile middle-class audience, their contribution to the making of culture, and it should not obscure the substantive point that he was making: that he and other radical journalists (whom Hone characteristically does not acknowledge) had generated formats, expressive resources, modes of articulation which, once they began circulating in the print market, would attract large sections of proreform middle-class readers. In other words, Hone seems to be reflecting, from the hindsight of a decade, on the history of displacements and reactivations by which such imaginative modes of political expression as caricature would move from militant artisanal politics into an expanding economy of print entertainment that would service ever increasing numbers of middle-class consumers. What Hone does not comment on in this passage is that radical expression in the 1830s and ’40s would inevitably have to contend with the demands of respectability. In fact, this tension between radicalism and respectability is visible across an entire sequence of works, from the journals produced by those radical writers who survived the 1830s\textsuperscript{15} through to the early numbers of \textit{Punch}. 

The tension between radicalism and respectability that runs through the early numbers of *Punch* has conventionally been attributed to the prolonged personal antagonism between Jerrold and Thackeray. But while Jerrold’s work did, in fact, prove to be an important conduit by which the expressive strategies that had developed in the work of Hone or Cobbett would move to Dickens’s fiction, it is possible to relate the radical slant in *Punch* not just to Jerrold’s personal influence but also to certain preexisting traditions of representation or, to adapt Roger Chartier’s more precise formulation, to a “preknowledge” that readers of *Punch* would have of certain conventions through which political satire was most effectively articulated. In “Texts, Printings, Readings” Chartier argues:

people read books with previously gained knowledge that was easily evoked in the act of reading. This knowledge was gained from the recurrence of coded forms, from the repetition of themes, and from the books’ images . . . This “preknowledge,” as it were, was mobilized to produce comprehension not necessarily in conformity with that desired by the producer of the text or the maker of the text . . .

Certainly many *Punch* readers worked with the “preknowledge” they had of the literary forms or artistic tropes that underpinned radical expression and that the most recent source of this were the radical newspapers and magazines. Hone’s pamphlets, which had continued to circulate in their original as well as modified forms throughout the 1820s and ’30s, had generated many conventions of representation that were to remain part of the standard repertoire of political satirists throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Clearly, therefore, *Punch* was depending on the “comprehension” that radical representational conventions would produce among its readers, when it deployed the nursery rhyme as a vehicle for political satire or used the allegory of the “political house” or the political menagerie as a site from which it could launch its satiric commentaries on politics and politicians. On the other hand, however, *Punch* was also refashioning these radical tropes so that they would not offend the sensibilities of the increasing number of middle-class readers that the magazine was gathering around itself. For example, *Punch* followed the parodies of Hone in using the nursery rhyme form as the vehicle for its antiaristocratic satire in a mock primer that it devised for Queen Victoria’s children. But *Punch* not only maintained a consistently respectable tone due to the royal nursery; it also used this respectability to contain any excess in content that might offend middle-class tastes. This maneuver by which *Punch* sought both to exploit
the expressive possibilities of radical satire and at the same time to contain these possibilities is evident again in the way that it dealt with a second radical trope: the political menagerie. Here again, *Punch* was following the lead of a pamphlet by Cruikshank and Hone in its use of zoomorphism as a means of political demystification.21 Significantly, however, the element that disappears in the movement from the woodcuts of Cruikshank in *The Political Showman* (1821) to the visual satire of *Punch* is the violence that Baudelaire associated with early English caricature.22 Thus, unlike Cruikshank’s deeply disconcerting representations of the Lord Chancellor as a crocodile, the Duke of Wellington as a scorpion, and the king himself as a water scorpion, the creatures who inhabit an etching like Richard Doyle’s “The Opening of Parliamentary Pie” (1847) have the bodies of birds but faces that are untouched by the venomous distortions of the caricaturist.23

The respectablizing trajectory that diffused the more brutal effects of radical satire for the increasing number of middle-class readers that *Punch* was beginning to attract would alter the basic character of the magazine after the 1840s, shifting its focus from the political to the social. Moreover, Thackeray rode this trajectory, and his movement from the caricatures and parodies that he half-reluctantly produced for the early numbers of *Punch* to the more nuanced social observations of *The Book of Snobs* looked forward to a novelistic aesthetic that would be fundamentally hostile to the methods of the radical publicists. On the other hand, Dickens produced no graphic caricatures and only the occasional political doggerel,24 and he was never a full-time employee of *Punch*. Nevertheless, the Dickensian novel was deeply implicated in the process out of which *Punch* had emerged: the redeployment of radical expressive resources for the production of a certain kind of political satire that would attract a very large, entertainment-seeking, and socially diverse group of consumers. This should call attention to the politically restrictive influence that the print market—and especially the powerful middle-class consumers within this market—exercised on Dickens’s fiction. But it should also help to conceptualize the early numbers of *Punch* and especially the work of Douglas Jerrold as the conduit through which certain strands of radical expression found a continuing, if reified, existence in the novels of Dickens. It is on these strands and on the transformations that they experienced while moving from Hone to Dickens that I will now focus.

The first and most basic of these strands would be what Gareth Stedman Jones called “the language of radicalism” and Kevin Gilmartin later termed “a style of political opposition.”25 One important strategic orientation of the radical “style” would be to constitute as a community all those who were debarred from the processes of an unreformed parliament. Thus, Paine often
used the “present tense and the pronoun ‘we’” to underline the experience of political exclusion that he shared with his readers and, in this way, to generate, as Olivia Smith has argued, “the illusion that he and [they] share the activity of constructing an argument.” Moreover, as William Hone demonstrated during his 1817 trial for blasphemy, Paine’s discursively constituted community could be transformed into a material force capable of exerting real pressure on decisions taken traditionally only by those who wielded power. During his extended trial, Hone used his knowledge of how parody worked in English literature to demonstrate, with great wit and irreverence, that the court could not convict him for blasphemy without at the same time convicting some of England’s greatest writers, artists, and politicians. Indeed, during the process of defending himself, Hone demonstrated how some of the most characteristic resources of radical expression—laughter, parody, and irreverence—could be used to transform the public domain of the court into a site of political mobilization. After successfully mobilizing the very large audience who had gathered in the court into the kind of community designated by Paine’s “we,” Hone pitted this community not only against his notoriously intolerant and conservative judge but also against the much larger problem of censorship. In the 1810s and ’20s, however, mobilizing activities of publicists like Hone were very far from being painless. The “radical style” may have produced politically conscious communities capable of confronting the government, but it also attracted very severe penal retributions from an intolerant and insecure state.

In contrast, Douglas Jerrold, whose work may be said to represent the more improvisational and imaginative forms of the “radical style” during the 1840s, made his name writing for a magazine whose commercial success was based on its ability, on the one hand, to avoid anything that might attract legal or punitive action and, on the other, to sustain the interest of a large, subscribing readership. Therefore, Jerrold’s propensity to position himself among the plebeians while commenting sarcastically on, for example, the Duke of Wellington’s moral exhortations to the poor, was certainly indicative of the greater rights of expression that the radical journalists had fought for and won, and of the state’s increasing capacity to accommodate dissent. But Jerrold’s tone and position would also suggest that the radical division between “us” and “them” could now be used freely in relation to the large, politically diffuse, socially disparate reading audience that Punch was gathering around itself. In this sense, Jerrold’s essays operated within the economy of print entertainment, although they seem, in terms of their tone and orientation, to continue the radical journalistic tradition of the 1820s. More specifically, their significance lay not so much in their continu-
ing ability to sustain radical movements as in their role in redistributing radical expressive energies within the many popular forms that emerged out of the print market of the early nineteenth century. Indeed, Jerrold—as so many of his contemporaries realized—had as much in common with Dickens as with Cobbett. In fact, it is possible to see in Dickens’s frequent use of “us” a novelistic site capable of sustaining the point of view of the excluded, the completion of a process by which the language of radicalism transformed itself from an instrument of political mobilization to a powerful expressive resource within the Victorian period’s dominant form of print entertainment: the novel itself.

There was a dinner party given in the Harley Street establishment, while Little Dorrit was stitching at her father’s new shirts by his side that night; and there were magnates from the Court and magnates from the Lords, magnates from the Bench and magnates from the Bar, Bishop magnates, Treasury magnates . . . all the magnates who keep us going and sometimes trip us up.

Unlike the journalism even of someone like Jerrold who directed his attack against a specific, real-life political adversary, the subjects of Dickens’s discourse—the people to which it refers—have become fictional “nobodies”: mere simulacra that would, at best, absorb and diffuse the antagonism that Dickens’s readers might have felt toward real-life politicians and bureaucrats. However, the movement from Paine’s “we” to Dickens’s “us” suggests not only dissipation but also continuity; not only the fictionalization of politics but also the politicization of fiction. In this sense, it is important to pick up in Dickens’s “us” “the stylistic aura” of “the language of radicalism,” to be alert to the effects that the discursive strategies of the radical style were to have on Dickens’s representation of those great objects of the radical discourse: the processes and people associated with power. Did this discursive confrontation with the establishment imply that Dickens had appropriated for the novel form at least some of the radical publicist’s capacity for political mobilization? The answer, as will become evident later, is that despite major transformations in effectiveness and context, the language of radicalism did not entirely lose its mobilizing charge as it moved from Lord Ellenborough’s court, where William Hone had defended his right to parody the ten commandments, to the virtual space of novels like *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*.

But what were the exact expressive improvisations and rhetorical strategies that drove the language of radicalism? The question is important
because it has not really been addressed in the only exhaustive account of Dickens’s artistic debt to the radical literature of the 1820s. Instead, Sally Ledger’s *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* subsumes within the general category of satire, the complicated and even contradictory ways in which radical writers and artists, in fact, engaged with the discourses of power.

As something that was committed to cutting through the consecrating symbolism of power with, as James Epstein said of Paine’s writing, “an irreverence that proved fundamental to [its] development,” the popular radical language was, indeed, in general, satiric. But it is also important to take into account the differences within radical modes of articulation caused by a tension lodged at the heart of the radical demystificatory project: that between the suspicion about the mystifying functions of icons, emblems, and metaphors and the riot of figures, analogies, and metaphors into which the radical discourse itself so often burst.

The suspicion that icons and emblems, metaphors and figures were vehicles of mystification was integral to English dissident thought since at least the beginnings of Protestantism, and it lies at the very heart of Tom Paine’s *The Rights of Man* (1791)—the document that, in a very real sense, inaugurated the radical journalistic tradition. Paine recognized immediately that Burke’s representation of the French Revolution achieved its most far-reaching effects through what W. T. J. Mitchell was later to call its rhetorical “extremism and excess.” Against Burke’s “pathless wilderness of rhapsodies” Paine generates a discourse based on “facts,” “principles,” and “data” within which the signifier would always be accountable to the signified, and the metaphor would be exposed as a “fraud” that enveloped its object in a mist of illusory connotations: “But, after all, what is the metaphor called a Crown, or rather what is Monarchy? . . . Does the virtue consist in the metaphor, or in the man? Does the goldsmith that makes the crown, make the virtue also? Doth it operate like Fortunatus’s wishing-cap, or the Harlequin’s wooden sword? Doth it make a man a conjuror?”

Paine’s deep suspicion of symbolic consecration as a means of sustaining “Mystery,” “craft,” “fiction,” “superstition,” and, ultimately, “the puppet show of state and aristocracy” was to remain a very powerful strand in radical thinking until as late as Dickens’s condemnation of the ceremonial unfolding of Chancery practice as “barbarous usages that the world has passed by.” Yet it is also true that many radical writers habitually deployed metaphors to counter symbolic consecration. They complicated Paine’s dream of a transparent language where the signifier would be completely accountable to the signified by engaging symbolically in what E. P. Thomp-
son calls “the contest for symbolic authority”—not just by stripping the consecrated object of its mystifying imagery but also by associating it with a new set of images; refiguring it as degraded or ridiculous.

The counterimagistic, allegorical techniques that developed within radical journalism enjoyed a particularly rich afterlife in the pages of those journals that operated during the 1830s and ’40s at the intersection of the profit-driven demands of an expanding print market and a continuing reform movement. Such journals found in allegorical displacements the means of articulating their proreform political concerns without attracting the censorship or taxation that a sharper focus on particular persons or events may have attracted. The allegorical mode, moreover, was capable of endless expressive improvisations and, in this sense, of keeping together a politically conscious but also entertainment-seeking audience. In the following extract from an early contribution that Douglas Jerrold made to Punch, the Harlequin’s ability to effect magical transformations is not contemptuously dismissed but made to drive an elaborately improvised and entertaining story about the Woky Poky Indians:

A throne changed into an armchair! Why, no one, save a Hampden or a harlequin, would think of such a trick. Besides if a throne were once turned into a chair—if such transformations were once begun, who could answer where it would end?

Once upon a time the Woky Poky Indians worshipped the Blue Monkey. Now, the said Blue Monkey had bands of gold about his head, a pearl as big as a swan’s egg in each ear, and a diamond that, if sold, would have kept the Indians and their families for half a century dangling from his royal nose—great was the adoration paid to the Blue Monkey. Now it came to pass that some thieves (republicans) despoiled the Blue Monkey of his gold, his pearls, and his diamonds, leaving the said Monkey in his wooden poverty and nakedness. What followed? Why not a single Indian bent his knee to the god—the gems were stolen, and with them the sacred odour of the idol; therefore every dark skin raised his tomahawk and, splitting the Blue Monkey into logs, the Indians made a fire of them, and cooked the goat’s flesh by their flames, and their embers, yams and bread.

Jerrold’s parable resonates at many levels against the extract from The Rights of Man quoted above. Both are centrally concerned with reducing to their basic material status the consecrating symbols that legitimize the arbitrary exercise of power. Moreover, both pick on the fantastic powers that the Harlequin enjoys on stage to describe the transformations that
metaphors are capable of bringing about in the commoner’s perception of the unfolding of state power. For Paine, however, the (thankfully unrealizable) power of the Harlequin’s bat has the potential to raise dangerous illusions; like the metaphor it is capable of overlaying the metal headgear that the goldsmith designs for the king with a bogus “virtue” that it does not in itself have. On the other hand, in Jerrold’s essay the transformatory power of the Harlequin’s bat (and of the metaphor) destroys the majestic aura of the throne by refiguring it as a wooden armchair. Indeed, like the pantomime itself, Jerrold’s technique thrives on transformations. Thus, Jerrold not only weaves around the object of demystification a range of counter-images but also rewrites the sanctifying protocols that surround the king (the blue monkey god) as an extended comic ritual that ends in an act of radical desacralization.

Jerrold’s political parable exemplifies, at a fairly elaborate level, the working of that familiar impulse toward literary improvisation that writers such as Hone and Wooler had sustained. This impulse, moreover, would enjoy a long afterlife in the relatively alien terrain of the Dickensian novel. Equally, however, the hyperboles, parodies, and allegories that drove the improvisational trajectory within radical writing would expose it to the charge of inaccuracy: a charge which would remain active all the way from the Quarterly Review’s sneering reference to Hone as “a poor illiterate creature,”40 to James Fitzjames Stephen’s accusation that Dickens’s propensity to exaggerate and caricaturize led to seriously distorted pictures of England’s public institutions. What the proestablishment press could not neutralize, on the other hand, was the radical style’s ability—exemplified in Jerrold’s piece—to destabilize the very discursive protocols on which official pronouncements based their legitimacy. Indeed, at its most creative, “the language of radicalism” engaged not only with the arguments made by an established politician or social thinker but also with the educated modes of writing that insidiously vested these arguments with a value that they may not, in fact, have possessed. A very good example would be the following (fairly typical) attack that Cobbett unleashes against Malthus:

The laws of nature [are] written in our passions, desires and propensities . . . Yes, say you: but nature has other laws, and amongst these are, that man shall live by food, and that if he cannot obtain food, he shall starve. Agreed, and if there be a man in England who cannot find, in the whole country . . . [a] shop, house, mill, barn . . . sufficient [food] to keep him alive, then I allow, that the laws of nature condemn him to die. . . .
“Oh!” you will, with Parsonlike bawl, exclaim, “but he must not commit robbery or larceny!” Robbery or larceny! What do you mean by that? Does the law of nature say anything about robbery or larceny? . . . So you will quit the law of nature now will you? (italics in the original)41

The aggression that drives Cobbett’s writing is directed at Malthus’s argument but also at what Raymond Williams has called, in a great but somewhat neglected essay, “the composed, quiet, and connected prose of the formally educated traditions,”42 and especially at the monopoly that this prose exercised in the production of public opinion. Put another way, Cobbett’s strategy is to throw into sharp relief a vital and naturalized function of the educated style: its ability to discredit and marginalize modes of articulation that do not or are not able to confirm to its protocols. Thus, Cobbett invades Malthus’s measured prose with all the accumulated resentment of those shut out from knowledge production by the discursive barriers of formal education. Rather than constructing a logical counterargument in the clear, unencumbered prose style that Paine would have approved, Cobbett draws on the colloquialisms, exaggerations, and hyperboles of popular radicalism to destabilize the legitimizing mechanisms of Malthus’s prose: its formal elegance, its rhetorically constructed illusion of logic, the truth effects that it achieves by the selective deployment of formal knowledge. What Cobbett creatively produces, thus, is a whole hybrid style within which Malthus’s ideas—ripped out of the authorizing context of the scholarly treatise—are rearticulated in colloquial language, and the dignifying inflections of Malthus’s official mode of address, entangled in a tone of absolute contempt, reduced to a “Parsonlike bawl.”

The techniques of satiric overwriting popularized by Cobbett and Jerrold proliferated in the market for print entertainment where Dickens and Thackeray found their feet as writers. The two novelists, however, responded in very different ways to the expressive resources made available by the language of radicalism. These differences had significant effects not only on the internal aesthetics of Dickens’s and Thackeray’s novels but also on the way that these novels were received.

Thackeray was, of course, adept at working with radical expressive modes, as the many antiaristocratic and antimonarchial caricatures and parodies that he contributed to Punch testify. However, Thackeray also argued that the satiric displacements that drove his magazine work were incompatible with the realism that ought to underlie what he described as the “Art of Novels.” Indeed, in the well-known 1849 letter, quoted earlier, Thackeray
follows Paine in invoking the conventions of the pantomime to describe the distorting effects of embellishments, exaggerations, and magical transformation on certain kinds of novel writing. Specifically, he criticizes the Dickensian mode for habitually turning “a coat” into “an embroidered tunic” and the poker into “a great red-hot instrument like the Pantomime weapon.”

For Thackeray then, the Painite suspicion of rhetorical embellishments moves from the domain of the political to that of the literary and is, indeed, made the basis of a system of novel writing that Thackeray associates with “Nature” and “the sentiment of reality.” It is not surprising, then, that Thackeray’s properly realistic representations of the elite, no matter how critical, would be based on the orchestration of details that he felt could be available to only those with direct access to the world of the upper classes. Moreover, Thackeray’s realism would demand that conversations among the socially sophisticated or the speech that a politician might make in parliament be naturalized, integrated seamlessly into the ebb and flow of their everyday lives, rather than be held up for public scrutiny.

In sharp contrast, Dickens self-consciously defamiliarized the language of power, representing it not as it really was but as it appeared to those excluded from its processes. Thus, Dickens worked with techniques that may be associated with Cobbett’s writing—repetition, magnification, exaggeration, parody—to expose and also to ridicule the ways in which languages of power drew upon their internal resources, on the socially sophisticated nuance or on the rhetoric of formality, to constitute themselves into those “practical metalanguage[s]” which, as Pierre Bourdieu argues, disguise semantic arbitrariness with an awe-inspiring formal rigor. The radical aesthetic that Dickens fabricated involved absorbing and redeploying, within the expressive system of the novel, those techniques of rewriting that Thackeray felt were appropriate for journalistic satire rather than literature. This would transform the novel’s representation of the languages of power: the sophisticated language that circulated in what Mrs. Merdle calls “Society” and the ceremonial discourses that came out of such institutions of the state as the law court or parliament. The activation of radical resources within Dickens’s novels would have consequences on the way the nineteenth-century critical establishment would receive these novels.

Radical publicists were adept at working with not just linguistic but also visual satire. The groundwork for the popular political cartoon may have been laid by the ultraconservative James Gillray, whose horrific images of the revolutionaries in France both laid out the expressive parameters within which graphic satire would develop and demonstrated the effectiveness of political cartooning as a means of political mobilization. But by the first
decade of the nineteenth century, radical publicists were using the political cartoon so effectively in their demystificatory project that it was recognized as, in the words of one of their most powerful adversaries, “a deadly weapon.” It is exactly this political efficacy of the radical print that is dramatized in *Coriolanus Addressing the Plebeians* (1820) (fig. 2). Here, Cruikshank depicts King George as Coriolanus, seemingly standing firm against Cobbett, Carlile, Hunt, Wooler, and the rest. But among these radical plebeians two figures stand out. One is, in Jonathan Bate’s summary, “William Hone holding two clubs, one marked ‘parody’ and the other ‘man in the moon-house that jack built,’ and the other is George Cruikshank holding a folio marked ‘caricature.’”

The confrontation that Cruikshank was dramatizing should be taken seriously. A few months before the publication of *Coriolanus*, Cruikshank had demonstrated for a very large, predominantly plebeian audience how opposition to an act or policy of the government could be inscribed in the images of state dignitaries. In a devastating sequence of caricatures that he produced for Hone’s pamphlets Cruikshank expressed the popular anger with the Peterloo massacre and with the king’s marital behavior by portraying King George himself as a “dandy of sixty”—grossly overdressed, overweight, ridiculous in his attempts to appear young and later, in E. P. Thompson’s summary, “blind drunk in his throne surrounded by broken bottles in front of a screen decorated with satyrs and large breasted trollops.”

Moreover, Cruikshank’s *Coriolanus* is concerned with more than caricature’s innate capacity to degrade its subject, or the increasingly public nature of the discursive space within which it was now operating. It is also a self-conscious celebration of the collaboration between caricature and the language of radicalism.

As it happens, Hone, whose satiric fabrications in language are, in *Coriolanus*, shown to complement Cruikshank’s caricatures, commented at length in a later work on the relationship between the caricaturist’s unalterable lines and the more abstract conjurations of language. Referring to a “sketch” of a parish beadle that he had just delineated in prose, Hone acknowledges that the beadle’s “corporeal lineaments are ‘borrowed’ (with permission) from a new caricature, if it be given so low a name by one of the authors of ‘Odes and Addresses to the Great.’” Interestingly, however, Hone’s interest in this particular caricature seems inseparable from its movement away both from the definitiveness which was associated in Romantic theories of representation (as W. T. J. Mitchell has shown) with the visual arts and from the easily recognizable subjects of political caricature. Dissociated from the particularizing compulsions (and energies) of an existence in
FIGURE 2. George Cruikshank, Coriolanus Addressing the Plebeians (1820)
FIGURE 3. George Cruikshank, from *The Queen’s Matrimonial Ladder* (1820)
the theatre of live politics, Hone’s caricature exemplifies a mode of satiric articulation that is “broad and comprehensive,” being directed, not at a person, but at a “class.” One might argue, indeed, that Hone’s “universal parish beadle” hovers on the edge of what Catherine Gallagher has called “the figure’s alluring fictionality which stimulates our desire to witness palpable human fabrications ‘appear as independent beings endowed with life.’”49 Hone himself thinks of his beadle not as mere “caricatura” but rather as “a graphic satire of character”—an imaginary entity which, freed from the fixity of the line drawing as well as the stable referents of real life, strives for those more speculative, abstract effects of literature. Hone’s collaborations with visual caricature—from the improvisations in language with which he complemented Cruikshank’s devastating portraits of King George during the period 1819–21 to the caricature that he raised in his *Everlasting Calendar of Popular Entertainments* (1827) to a “graphic satire of character”—mark in an unexpectedly clear fashion the process by which the radical caricaturist’s capacity to inscribe popular resentments in the very physical image of a state official or dignitary passed into language. Here it remained a potential expressive resource even for discourses that were generated not by the pressures of active real-life politics, but by the demand for satiric, entertaining fiction. Indeed, Hone considers radical graphic caricature in relation not only to real political events or people but also to the novelistic problem of characterization.

As young entrants to the print market of the 1830s, Thackeray and Dickens inevitably encountered both visual and linguistic caricatures of the beadle, bureaucrat, or the Member of Parliament, but they related to these in very different ways. Thackeray’s relationship with the demystifying techniques of radical portraiture was far more paradoxical than that of Dickens: he produced graphic caricatures of monarchs that seem almost like continuations of Cruikshank’s portraits, but he was also committed to a mode of novel writing that would replace the mobilizing, collective orientation of radical portraiture with the psychological complexity, the dense internal detailing, in short the depth of the lifelike character. Thus, as in so much of his other magazine work, Thackeray found himself pushed by the demands for antiestablishment satire in the print market of the 1830s into producing a print like “Rex, Ludovicus, Ludovicus Rex” (1840) where the king, stripped of his royal regalia, is imaged as a physically pathetic specimen of humanity. On the other hand, the movement from “Rex” to, say, the younger Sir Pitt Crawley in *Vanity Fair* is precisely a movement away from a mode of articulation based on extraindividualistic public concerns to one that seeks to unfold a sharply individualized consciousness across time and
in relation to that taken-for-granted, almost unnoticeable orchestration of details that would, in fact, be available only to those with access to the internal world of an aristocratic Whig politician.

How did the techniques of radical graphic satire affect Dickens's characterization? One way to begin answering this question is by engaging with Alex Woloch’s seminal work on characterization and especially with the ways in which this might help in the understanding of the different, almost opposed, ways in which Dickens and Thackeray articulate the relationship between the inner lives of characters and the external social domain. Thackeray’s move in the direction of realistic characterization had been predicated on a shift in emphasis from those external signifiers—the king’s regalia, for example—that gave the figure its social or political identity, to the ways in which the social unfolds within what Alex Woloch has called “the interior life of a singular consciousness.” On the other hand, Dickens’s protagonists, as Woloch himself demonstrates with great insight, are typically constituted as weak subjects. They are “epistemologically and psychologically passive,” subordinate to that which they observe. Indeed, in Dickens’s fiction “the distribution of energy” is often so strongly weighted in favor of the scene and against the viewer, that it “overwhelm[s] contemplation or understanding itself.” The fourth chapter of this book will be more centrally concerned with the extremely interesting connection that Woloch makes between the Dickensian protagonist’s inability to sustain a full inner self and the frenetic, always changing cityscape where he or she so often operates. More relevant for my immediate purposes, however, is Woloch’s argument that the weak subject’s inability to sustain continuous inner contemplation results in his converting “seeing into ‘sights,’ processes into substances.” For Woloch this reflex is, in fact, symptomatic of Dickens’s own method that “consistently replaces incomplete vision with distorted visibility, hardening a social process into a substantive physical phenomenon.” Woloch argues that this incessant transformation of “incomplete seeing into eccentric or obscure sights” may be one of the reasons for the overwhelming presence of minor, caricatured characters in Dickens’s fiction.51

The significance of Woloch’s work on Dickens’s characterization lies in that it simultaneously explains the weak subjective life of Dickens’s protagonists and the incessant proliferation in his novels of caricatured minor characters. It is important, however, to think through the problem of observation that is so central to Woloch’s explanation, in relation not only to the subjectivity of the observer or to the conditions in which observations occur but also to a set of more historically determined and collective ways of seeing. Sketches by Boz, for example, assumes a certain agreement—especially
on political matters—between the point of view of Boz and those who read what he observes and describes. Thus, the opening lines of “A Parliamentary Sketch” invoke a certain taken-for-granted skepticism about parliament and politicians that Boz shares with his readers and that will determine every subsequent observation that he makes: “We hope our readers will not be alarmed at this rather ominous title. We assure them that we are not about to become political, neither have we the slightest intention of being more prosy than usual—if we can help it.”

The “we” in this sentence represents an observer very different from Pickwick or Pip, who are always liable, as Woloch shows, to be overwhelmed by the frenetic action of the world outside. More specifically, Boz here is constituted not as a weak subject but as a figure who has subsumed his individuality under the collective identity that he shares with his readers. For this reason, the caricaturized portraits of parliamentarians that Boz will present have to be understood not as products of “incomplete seeing,” but rather as ways of embodying that skepticism about politicians that is inherent in Boz’s observing position and is indeed encoded in the sentence with which he opens “A Parliamentary Sketch.”

Boz’s situation and observations in “A Parliamentary Sketch” point to the limits of any explanation of Dickens’s caricaturization that is based entirely on the internal dynamics of his novels: on the relationship between the protagonist and the external world that surrounds him and, at a deeper level, on the ways that these novels absorb and replicate within their character systems the historically constituted hierarchies of the social world outside. One way to address this limitation is by focusing on a discursive process to which Thackeray and Dickens related in differing ways: the movement of expressive resources across divergent genres and media. Thus, even Thackeray, who sought self-consciously to insulate his serious writing from the influence of low forms like graphic caricature, found it impossible to write about George IV without getting inundated by the visual details that Cruikshank had set into circulation:

But this George, what was he? I look through all his life, and recognize but a bow and a grin. I try and take him to pieces, and find silk stockings, padding, stays, a coat with frogs, and a fur collar, a star and blue ribbon, a pocket-handkerchief prodigiously scented . . . and a huge black stock, underwaistcoats, and more underwaistcoats and then nothing.53

What Thackeray seems to focus on is the pervasive influence that Cruikshank’s caricaturizing tropes exercised over every subsequent attempt at
representing George IV. Thackeray, who was committed to delineating characters in all their psychological complexity, would certainly find this influence restrictive. But Cruikshank’s satiric visual vocabulary—the “schemata” (in the parlance of art criticism) that he set into circulation could also be thought of as a “cultural legacy,” “a total repertoire of potentialities” available as much to subsequent novelists as to artists. From this perspective, the following caricature of a “doctor of civil law” in *Sketches by Boz* seems to have been produced not by the weak observing subject, as Woloch may have argued, but by Dickens’s redeployment within the novel of techniques of articulating public figures that radical visual satire had pioneered:

There was one individual who amused us mightily. This was one of the bewigged gentlemen in red robes, who was straddling before the fire in the centre of the Court, in the attitude of a brazen Colossus, to the complete exclusion of everybody else. He had gathered his robes behind, in much the same manner as a slovenly woman would her petticoats on a very dirty day, in order that he might feel the full warmth of the fire . . . We shall never be able to lay any credit as a physiognomist again, for, after a careful scrutiny of this gentleman’s countenance, we had come to the conclusion that it bespoke of nothing but conceit and silliness, when our friend with the silver staff whispered in our ear that he was no other than a doctor of civil law, and heaven knows what besides. (87–88)

Replicating within the symbolic system of language precisely those visual details of dress, body, and posture with which graphic caricaturists achieve their effects, this portrait exemplifies what William Hone had described as “a graphic satire of character.” Moreover, Boz’s mode of representation is inseparable from an observing position that comes very close to what the radical journalist Wooler would describe as that of the “crowd”: “While [folly] struts in the robe of office, it is unconscious of the ridiculous appearance which it offers to the crowd. It would render laughter high treason if possible. . . .”

Similarly, it is by positioning himself among those unable to comprehend the protocols of courts that Boz is able not only to cut through the hierarchizing operations of officialdom but also to privilege a petitioner’s disgusted response to the petty domination exercised by some nameless official over an intimate and detailed knowledge of that official’s everyday life. In this sense, this early sketch might help clarify the whole sequence of caricaturized figures who appear in Dickens’s fiction, from Bumble to Tite Barnacle, not as products of Dickens’s unique comic genius or as figures flattened
by the dynamic character systems that Woloch describes, but rather as dis-
placements within a certain form of entertainment-oriented fictionalizing,
of a strand of radical satire oriented toward building around its irreverent
representations of those who wielded political power a community of the
excluded.

In their confrontation with the persons and processes associated with
state power, the radical caricaturists deployed not only the disfiguring tech-
niques discussed above but also that profusion of allegorical detail, which,
as Baudelaire suggested, was integral to the work of the English caricatur-
ists. The “art of the rebus and of the primitive ideographic script” had,
of course, always found expression in the insignia of the aristocracy and
in the emblems of the state, but it had also developed, through the early
modern period, as a burlesque of official heraldry. Moreover, although the
radical discourse itself sustained a considerable iconography which served
as targets for conservative satirists, a great deal of its expressive energies
was generated by the recognition that emblems, insignia, and symbols were
never merely “the trappings of political culture, but often went to the heart
of what was ultimately at issue: how power at all levels of the state and civil
society was to be defined and exercised.”

Radical publicists disrupted the state’s consecrating symbols in many
ways: from burlesquing the general’s cocked hat or the judge’s wig in their
caricatures of these dignitaries of the state to generating full-blown counter-
emblematic reworkings of official protocols. The important thing, though,
is to locate traces of the counteremblematic techniques of radical satire in
the language of popular radicalism after this had moved from the mobiliz-
ing texts of the 1820s to the print market of the ’30s. At this level, too, the
work of Douglas Jerrold proves to be invaluable. Thus, an essay like “The
Order of Poverty” (1846) not only addresses itself directly to the problem
of what it sees as the arbitrary consecrating function of heraldry but also
self-consciously reactivates, within the symbolic system of language, some of
graphic satire’s most effective modes of demystification.

One obvious example of such reactivation is Jerrold’s use of juxta-
position as a means of demystification. Thus, Jerrold habitually uses the
synchronic possibilities of pictorial representation to generate disconcert-
ing juxtapositions—for example, to set off against the prestige that a royal
decoration confers the actual achievements of those who receive such dec-
orations. Moreover, the metonymic extensions through which counter-
emblematic graphic satire attains its most characteristic effects are not only
replicated but, in fact, find freer if more diffused expression in Jerrold’s
prose. Liberated completely from the boundedness of the physical image,
and from even a minimal commitment to visible similarity as the basis of
association, Jerrold can find in the radical indeterminacy of the linguistic
signifier the means of effecting drastic and unexpected transformations on
the object of his satire. Thus, it is not the visible imagery of the “Order of
the Thistle” but its very antiquity that serves as the basis of Jerrold’s desta-
bilizing counterdiscourse. If the “Order of the Thistle” is very old it can, by
a metonymic extension, be said to be as “old as asses” and then be made to
sustain the full-blown counterimage of an asinine “nobility” that “browses”
on thistles. This kind of radical refiguring of traditional imagery generates
unlimited expressive possibilities in Jerrold’s prose: the idea of the “order”
itself proliferates into many parodic orders—for example, the Order of the
Golden Calf whose knights have discarded armor and helmet for “the magic
mail of impenetrable Bank-paper.” Again, since the counteremblematic
imagery that Jerrold fabricates in language exploits but is no longer tied
to the synchronicity of the picture frame, it becomes capable of sustaining
not just a wider range of comic improvisations, but also sequence and, ulti-
mately—as Jerrold’s parable of the Woky Poky Indians testifies—narrative
itself.

The movement of the emblematic techniques of visual satire into the
domain of literary print culture had important implications for the Dick-
ensian aesthetic. It enabled a novel like *Bleak House* not only to generate
a counteremblematic discourse against the ceremonious unfolding of the
Chancery proceedings but also to sustain, within the spatially unconstrained
novel form, a narrative based on the metonymic extensions of visual cari-
cature. It was this new set of expressive possibilities that came to the novel
from visual satire that was to produce the single most inventive episode in
*Bleak House*: the symbolic death of Krook—the grotesque mirror image of
the Lord Chancellor himself—by spontaneous combustion.