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

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CHAPTER 2

The Aesthetics and Politics of Caricature

Bleak House, Little Dorrit, and Vanity Fair in Relation to “Radical Expression”

In CHAPTER 50 of Pendennis, Archer, a pillar of the “Corporation of the Goosequill,” boasts of his encounter in the palace anteroom with the Lord Chamberlain, who walked in “holding the royal tea cup and saucer in his hand” (vol. 1, 313). This vignette is significant because in it Archer’s claim about providing an insider’s account of activities in the palace anteroom is satirized but also constituted as part of a process by which the world of Pendennis is itself partially produced. On the one hand, Archer is exposed satirically, from the point of view of the skeptical outsider, as a lackey of aristocratic politicians whose birth invests them with arbitrary power. On the other hand, however, Archer ferrets out a form of news that is shown to be not only in great demand in the world of Thackeray’s novels but also vital to the way that Thackeray himself represents this world. Thus, Pendennis is full of people hungry for inside information on the social and political affairs of the elite. It is this constituency that Finucane, the subeditor of the Pall Mall Gazette, services by never allowing “a death or a dinner party of the aristocracy [to] pass without having the event recorded in the columns of his journal” (vol. 1, 356). Indeed, it would hardly be possible for Thackeray himself to represent the details of aristocratic life that circulate so incessantly in the world of his novels without acquiring some knowledge of those details.

Thackeray’s representation of Archer’s boast both as the object of his satire and as symptomatic of his method corresponds to a flexibility of
authorial position that he always managed to sustain. At one level, thus, Thackeray represents the aristocratic public figures from the satiric point of view of those subjected to their arbitrary governance. In “Going to See a Man Hanged” (1840), for example, aristocratic members of parliament are reduced to faceless and nameless abstractions who are engaged perpetually in “shouting, yelling, crowing, hear-hearing, pooh-poohing, making speeches of three columns, and gaining ‘great Conservative triumphs,’ or ‘signal successes of the Reform cause.’” Yet even in this essay, which belongs to the radical *Punch* phase of his career, Thackeray gestures toward a different kind of social allegiance when he apologizes to his (presumably middle-class) readers for the “unconscionable republican tirade” that he has just unleashed against members of parliament.\(^1\) Of course, Thackeray’s apology is ironic, but he always thought of irony as a response that was finer, more nuanced, and based on a more detailed knowledge of its object than the one-sided and uninformed sarcasm that he associated with radicals such as his *Punch* colleague Douglas Jerrold.

The flexibility that underlies Thackeray’s self-positioning in relation to the social domains that he describes is often consciously discussed as part of an author’s responsibilities, as he moves from his journalistic pieces to his novels. For example, the comradeship that the narrator of *Vanity Fair* is able to claim with his predominantly middle-class audience is based on their common exclusion from those “august portals . . . guarded by grooms of the chamber with flaming silver forks with which they prong all those who have not the right of the *entrée*.”\(^2\) But Thackeray also uses the outsider’s status that his readers and he share to whet the former’s curiosity about what really goes on in the drawing rooms of the gentry. For this reason, Thackeray considers it his responsibility as an author to acquire the social knowledge that will enable him to delineate aristocratic life with the accuracy of an insider. In a demystifying, metatextual gesture in *Vanity Fair* that would become increasingly rare with the progress of realism as a mode of novel writing, Thackeray exposes, as in an X-ray plate, the hidden authorial diligence that sustains the apparently spontaneous unfolding of upper-class life:

> With regard to the world of female fashion and its customs, the present writer, of course, can only speak at second hand. A man can no more penetrate or understand those mysteries than he can know what the ladies talk about when they go upstairs after dinner. It is only by inquiry and perseverance that one sometimes gets hints of those secrets; and by a similar
diligence every person who treads the Pall Mall pavement, and frequents
the clubs of this metropolis, knows, either through his own experience or
through some acquaintance with whom he plays at billiards or shares the
joint, something about the genteel world of London, and how, as there are
men (such as Rawdon Crawley, whose position we mentioned before) who
cut a good figure to the eyes of the ignorant world and to the apprentices
in the Park, who behold them consorting with the most notorious dandies
there, so there are ladies, who may be called men’s women, being welcomed
together by all the gentlemen, and cut or slighted by all their wives. (357)

In contrast to Thackeray’s ability to move between two authorial
positions, Dickens, in *Little Dorrit*, entrenches himself firmly outside the
charmed circle of the elite. Dickens’s “us,” in the description of Mr. Merdle’s
glittering dinner that I have already quoted, may not denote the already
mobilized and confrontationist community encoded in Paine’s “we” or Cob-
bett’s “us,” but it is the “stylistic aura” of precisely these collective pro-
nouns that determines Dickens’s representation of Merdle’s guests as not
individuals but personifications of institutional power: “magnates from the
Court and magnates from the City, magnates from the Commons and mag-
nates from the Lords, magnates from the bench and magnates from the bar,
Bishop magnates, Treasury magnates, Horse Guard magnates, Admiralty
magnates.”

The differing authorial positions that Dickens and Thackeray adopted in
relation to the inner world of the political elite produced larger divergences
in the ways in which they represented the aristocracy-dominated domain of
parliamentary politics. To understand these differences and more specifically
the ways in which Dickens’s radical heritage pushed him in a direction that
was different from Thackeray’s realistic method, one could, to begin with,
focus on the relationship between their novels and the discourses spawned
by an unreformed parliament. Here the two contemporaries would have had
to necessarily engage with the legacy of the radical journalists, since these
journalists had all along been at the forefront of the long and complex strug-
gle for the right to print and publicize parliamentary proceedings. Moreover, as Kevin Gilmartin has shown, “radical interventions in parliamentary
representation extended well beyond . . . printed reports of debates”: they
commented critically on or parodied every form of political speech, whether
delivered in election campaigns or inside parliament. Satirizing the discursi-
ve modes that legitimized the parliamentary system, shifting the arena
of political discussion from “the parliament and parliamentary classes” to
“popular counter authorities,” the radical journalists consolidated a politi-
cally aware audience that was capable, in the words of *Fraser’s Magazine*, of judging “men in high station” with “keen and scrutinising minuteness.” As Olivia Smith puts it:

Tom Paine’s hope and Dougald Stewart’s fear that the loss of mystery would diminish the supremacy of the upper classes were in part fulfilled. The radical press scrutinized the government’s behavior and attacked traditional practices by which the government protected itself. Cabinet ministers, especially Sidmouth, Canning and Castlereagh, were exposed and reviled as was the Prince Regent . . . For several years from 1819–22, writers and readers released themselves from previous constraints. They were incessantly, aggressively, willfully and hilariously rude. The manacles had broken and the people laughed and laughed.

Thackeray’s relationship with the “popular counter authorities” was complex. In “Going to See a Man Hanged” he may have drawn on the mocking idioms of the newly politicized masses while reducing parliamentary debates to mere “shouting, yelling, crowing, hear-hearing, pooh-poohing,” but he also argued that the “language of radicalism” was inseparable from rabble-rousing and was, in this sense, uninformed and unreasonable. In *The Newcomes*, “radical expression” energizes nothing more significant than the outpourings of the “brawling tap orator,” and far from uncovering for a large all-class audience the interests that lie hidden beneath the elevated rhetoric of parliamentary debating, it is confined, in *Pendennis*, to the shabby quadrangle in inner London “hidden from the outer world” where “Ballad-singers come and chant in . . . deadly guttural tones, satirical songs against the Whig administration, against the bishops and dignified clergy, against the German relatives of an august royal family; Punch sets up his theatre sure of an audience, and occasionally of a half-penny, from the swarming occupants of the houses . . .” (vol. 2, 34).

In *Pendennis*, Thackeray himself claims far greater knowledge of the nuances of parliamentary speeches than what is expressed by the street musicians in their “deadly guttural tones.” But this claim is sustainable only because Thackeray tracks Pen’s emerging career as a future parliamentarian from within that very Oxbridge club whose members had been shown, in “Going to See a Man Hanged,” to reduce parliamentary debating to mere noise. The insider’s knowledge that informs Thackeray’s delineation of young Oxbridge men training for a parliamentary career does not necessarily make him less critical of parliamentary activity than writers who focused on the exclusionary mechanisms of an aristocracy-dominated
parliament. However, in *Pendennis* speeches made in parliament are inevitably integrated into the discursive universe of the elite. These speeches, indeed, do not even operate in a domain that can properly be described as political. Rather, they represent a set of skills that guarantee, to adept practitioners, very wide social visibility. For the Major, Pen’s entry into parliament is important chiefly because it will enable him to display the full range of his “oratory” and, in this way, earn for him “a name that his sons shall be proud of” (vol. 2, 220). Displaced from the domain of politics itself, parliamentary debating—or rather Pen’s skill in this activity—re-enters an elite public sphere as a sign within the system of signs by which social status is calibrated in the world of Thackeray’s fiction.

A very different orientation drives Dickens’s representation of parliamentary debates. The well-known Circumlocution Office passages in *Little Dorrit*, for example, are based on an approach that refuses to take what Major Pendennis admiringly calls “oratory” at face value:

> It is true how not to do it was the great study and object of all public departments and professional politicians all around the Circumlocution Office. It is true that every new premier and every new government, coming in because they had upheld a certain thing as necessary to be done, were no sooner come in than they applied their utmost faculties to discovering How Not to Do It. It is true that from the moment that a general election was over, every returned man who had been raving on hustings because it hadn’t been done . . . began to device How it was not to be done. It is true that the debates of both houses of Parliament the whole session through, tended to be the protracted deliberation, How not to do it. It is true that the royal speech at the opening of such sessions virtually said, My lords and gentleman you have a considerable stroke of work to do, and you will please to retire to your respective chambers, and discuss How not to do it . . . All this is true, but the Circumlocution Office went beyond it. (145–46)

What connects this passage to the language of radicalism is not so much its content as its *style*. One way in which to throw into relief Dickens’s stylistic debt to the radical journalists is by comparing this passage with, say, John Stuart Mill’s rigorous and well-informed argument against reactionary oppositions to the idea of a competitive examination as the basis for filling positions in the civil services. Mill’s mode of presenting his argument bears all the marks of a logical, educated mind accustomed to intervening in the processes of decision making:
Another objection is that if appointments are given to talent, the Public Offices will be filled with low people, without the breeding or the feelings of gentlemen. If, as this objection supposes, the sons of gentlemen cannot be expected to have as much ability and instruction as the sons of low people, it would make a strong case for social changes of a more extensive character. . . If, with advantages and opportunities so vastly superior, the youth of higher classes have not honour enough, or energy enough, or public spirit enough, to make themselves as well qualified as others for the station which they desire to maintain, they are not fit for that station, and cannot too soon step out of it and give place to better people.11

As is well known, the satire against the Barnacles in Little Dorrit, too, drew upon and fueled the agitation against an aristocracy-dominated administration whose incompetence had recently been exposed by the Crimean War.12 So Dickens would agree completely with the content of the argument that Mill makes about the importance of building a merit-based administrative cadre. But Mill’s tone is that of an insider: it is determined by the assumption that a logical argument can influence the decision made by a governmental committee. The Circumlocution Office passage, on the other hand, is positioned very differently in relation to the domain within which the discourses of power circulate. A measure of this difference is Dickens’s lack of interest in the specificities of the debate on administrative reform and, indeed, his refusal to take the debate on its own terms. Rather, the tone of the Circumlocution Office passages suggests a radical lack of trust in discourses that emerge from the domain of governmental decision making, and the propensity to treat such discourses as obfuscations rather than attempts to reform. Accordingly, like Cobbett who invades Malthus’s learned prose with the colloquial skepticism of those debarred from the processes of formal education, Dickens seizes upon the legitimizing conventions of parliamentary debating—its ceremonious modes of address and its lofty-sounding rhetoric—and juxtaposes these against what, from his position amidst the excluded, appears to be the essential underlying function of the bureaucracy, which is, “How not to do it.” In this way Dickens fabricates a hybridized style in which the utterances of the king, the prime minister, and professional politician become entangled in a tone of absolute disbelief and contempt; in which the ceremonial phrasing and leisurely cadences of parliamentary rhetoric are met not with logic or reason but with, to adapt the terms used by Richard Terdiman in his analysis of Daumier’s caricature, a “specifically counter-discursive oppositional” mode that “signifies the assertion of difference in the strongest possible terms” (italics in the original).13
The generative effects of the radical style on Dickens’s novelization of the languages of power unfold across not only the political field but also the social. Olivia Smith has argued convincingly that one of the achievements of the radical writers was that they successfully challenged the upper-class use of “refined” language as an instrument of domination and that a great deal of radical writing such as Cobbett’s *Grammar* were, among other things, attempts at exposing the equivocations of a “refined” language based, in Cobbett’s angry words, on “sound instead of sense.” The impact of such perspectives on Dickens’s relationship with language—with language as both mode and object of representation—is clear, considering how much he deviated from the aesthetic norms that would, through the course of the nineteenth-century, become consecrated as realism.

These norms unfold, in their most evolved form, in the realistic yet critical delineations of high-society conversations that appear so often in the work of Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy regularly used high-society conversations to expose the snobbishness and hypocrisy with which he associated the elite. However, his representations of these conversations were invariably nuanced: he registered, with an insider’s knowledge, the accents and inflections of aristocratic speech, and he distinguished between the speech patterns of individual speakers. This insider’s observing position—which in *Vanity Fair* had been acquired by self-conscious authorial diligence—becomes so naturalized in *War and Peace* that it is not even noticed. It is, nevertheless, the essential precondition for Tolstoy’s “spontaneous,” apparently unmediated unfolding of, for example, a dinner party at the aristocratic Anna Pavlovna’s home in *War and Peace*:

Anna Pavlovna’s drawing room was gradually filling. The cream of Petersburg arrived, people differing widely in age and character but alike in that they all belonged to the same class of society. Prince Vasili’s daughter, the beautiful Helene, came to take her father to the ambassador’s party. She was wearing a ball dress and her maid of honour’s badge. Then there was the youthful little Princess Bolkonsky, known as *la femme la plus séduisante de Petersbourgh* . . . Prince Vassily’s son Prince Hippolyte arrived with Mortemart, whom he introduced. The Abbe Morio and many others also came.

Tolstoy’s language here is not, of course, merely a transparency. Beneath its apparently spontaneous uncovering of reality is the surreptitious orchestration of connotations by which the reader’s mind is directed to a level of
signification beyond what the passage literally reveals. Thus, to give a particularly relevant example, the spontaneous way in which the author breaks into French suggests that the sophisticated men and women who troop into Anna Pavlovna’s drawing room are completely at home in that language. Moreover, this detail feeds into a larger theme in the novel as a whole: the Frenchified elite’s cultural alienation from the Russian-speaking masses. Interestingly, however, the French words appear as part of the natural flow of sentences—simply as details that seem to blend discreetly with innumerable other details that work together to simulate, discursively, a glittering, aristocratic drawing room.

In a comparable piece in the Political Register, Cobbett, too, denounces the elite’s use of a language that is incomprehensible to ordinary people—a position with which Tolstoy would almost certainly sympathize. However, in the very process of incorporating a Latin phrase within his text, Cobbett reveals his distance from the world of the elite of which Tolstoy’s realistic prose offers an insider’s view:

If this be the meaning of “Uti Possidetis,” why not give that meaning in our own language at once? Do those who make use of such phrases, which the stupidest wretch on earth might learn as well as they, in a few hours; nay which a parrot would learn, which a high-dutch bird-catcher would teach a bull-finch or a tom-tit, in the space of a month; and do they think, in good earnest, that this relic of the mummery of monkery, this playing off upon us of a few galipot words, will make us believe that they are learned?

For Cobbett, writing from the point of view of those marginalized in a culture where “civilisation was largely a linguistic concept,” “Uti Possidetis” cannot be allowed to lose itself among other words in the sentence. On the contrary, ripped out of the semantic system to which it originally belonged, it is displayed as an alien element in the everyday language in which Cobbett and his audience speak to each other. It is held up for public examination, mocked, exposed as a sham whose lack of substance is disguised under its incomprehensibility.

Cobbett’s insight about language as a marker of educational or social status produced certain expressive strategies that proved crucial to the radical aesthetic that was developing in the Dickensian novel. More surprising, though, is the use Thackeray, too, makes of sharp Cobbett-like juxtapositions between two linguistic registers to mark internal differences within what would appear to be a homogeneous social domain:
Mr. Crawley said a long grace and Sir Pitt said Amen, and the great silver dish-covers were removed.

“What have we for dinner, Betsy?” said the Baronet.

“Mutton broth, I believe, Sir Pitt,” answered Lady Crawley.

“Mouton aux navets,” added the Butler gravely . . . “and the soup is potage de mouton a l’ecossaise . . .”

“Mutton’s mutton,” said the Baronet, “and a devilish good thing. What ship was it, Horrocks, and when did you kill?”

“One of the black-faced Scotch, Sir Pitt; we killed on Thursday . . .”

“Will you have some potage, Miss ah—Miss Blunt?” said Mr. Crawley.

“Capital Scotch broth, my dear,” said Sir Pitt, “though they call it by a French name.”

“I believe it is the custom, sir, in decent society,” said Mr. Crawley haughtily, “to call the dish as I have called it . . .” (68)

This representation of a conversation between a baronet and his upwardly mobile son is inseparable from the protean social identity that Thackeray consistently adopts in *Vanity Fair* and that enables him, in this instance, to move between the inner domain of a minor landed family and the sensibilities of his predominantly middle-class readers. Thus, the stylized debate that Thackeray generates on the language appropriate for a dinner table conversation immediately opens up a certain critical distance between him and his characters. This distance, indeed, not only helps to synchronize Thackeray’s own perspective with that of his predominantly middle-class readers but also pushes the mode of his description in the direction of satire. However, although cast as a series of sharp, satiric exchanges, the conversation between father and son is embedded in an environment which, in the density and specificity of its detailing, unfolds as a realistic representation of the world of the minor aristocracy. As an integral part of this world, the older Crawley cannot, in any sense, share Cobbett’s outsider’s position even though he may follow Cobbett in confronting his son’s Frenchified English. For this reason, the older Pitt’s intervention cannot be part of a radical demystificatory project oriented toward exposing how refined speech functions as a means of social domination. Rather than working as an instrument by which Thackeray might satirize the conversation that circulates in high society, Pitt’s unrefined speech (together with his crude, often decadent habits) sustain the provincial strand within what Thackeray delineates as a single but amazingly varied family.

Dickens’s approach to the language of upper classes is different. Specifically, Dickens follows the radical writers in representing the language of the
elite as the materialization of a dominating semiotic rather than using it as a medium that will register the differences in accents or inflections in ways that different characters speak. But *Little Dorrit* also draws on the expressive possibilities available to the novel form to register the excluding effects of upper-class language, at the affective rather than exclusively at the political or social levels. Thus, the radical skepticism about gentlemanly language continues to unfurl powerfully in *Little Dorrit* and its effects are clearly visible when, for example, Mrs. General begins instructing Amy about the linguistic adjustments she needs to make in order to converse successfully in high society. Mrs. General insists that Amy must call Mr. Dorrit “papa” instead of “father”—“Father is rather vulgar, my dear. The word Papa, besides, gives a very pretty form to the lips” (359). As a professional instructor in gentlemanly etiquette, Mrs. General teaches Amy how to activate the metalinguistic function of words as “signs of wealth intended to be evaluated and appreciated.” However, by doing this she also drains a crucial word in Amy’s vocabulary of a whole history of love, suffering, self-sacrifice, and heroic resourcefulness in which it is saturated and, in this way, confirms the radical criticism of upper-class language as something that was based on form rather than content, on “sound,” as Cobbett put it, instead of “sense.”

Dickens’s propensity to abstract the word “papa” from the naturalizing context of a drawing room conversation and to hold up to the light of day its hidden metalinguistic function as a sign of class is symptomatic of a larger representational strategy. Thus, within the system of which Mrs. General is the center, not only the word but virtually everything else—dress, posture, demeanor, the body itself—are, to quote Bourdieu again, deployed as part of “an expressive style, which being perceived and appreciated with reference to the universe of . . . practically competing styles, takes on a social value and a symbolic efficacy” [italics in original.] Mrs. General’s white gloves have an expressive function, over and above their utilitarian one: they are brought into play to signify her disapproval of anything that is not “perfectly proper, placid and pleasant” and, in this sense, her good breeding (530). Similarly Mrs. Merdle instructs her husband of the social advantages of a “degage” posture, while she herself allows her person to be radically reduced so that it might function more efficiently as a one-dimensional social signifier. Her imposing presence in “Society” is predicated on her ability to make her bejeweled bosom represent her entire existence. This part of Mrs. Merdle’s anatomy, Dickens tells us:

was not a bosom to repose upon, but it was a capital bosom to hang jewels upon. Mr. Merdle wanted something to hang jewels upon, and he bought
it for the purpose. Storr and Mortimer might have married on the same speculation.

Like all his speculations, it was sound and successful. The jewels showed to the richest advantage. The bosom moving in Society with the jewels displayed upon it, attracted general admiration . . . (293)

This chapter has been concerned so far with showing how, in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens draws on radical strategies and presents both the conventions of parliamentary debating as well as the nuanced social languages of the elite not as they really are but rather as modes of domination that can be met only with the counterassault of parodic or satiric rewriting. However, Dickens’s representation of Mrs. Merdle as a “bosom moving in Society with the jewels displayed upon it,” rather than as a well-rounded, physically proportionate figure, points to another set of techniques that may have passed into his novels from the radical journalistic tradition. These techniques are most clearly exemplified in the visual caricatures of King George IV and his ministers with which George Cruikshank transformed the ways in which common people might relate to the highest state dignitaries. In what precise ways did the techniques of radical caricature influence the fiction of Dickens?

Here again, the doubleness of Thackeray’s relationship with graphic satire serves to highlight the much more direct way in which this visual strand within “radical expression” energized the Dickensian aesthetic. Thackeray was a practicing cartoonist and he helped, as we’ve seen, to carry techniques of representation developed by older radical caricaturists into the pages of *Punch*. Yet, although cartoons do circulate in the world of Thackeray’s fiction, these are integrated into a social universe that has nothing in common with the milieu that produced radical caricature. Thus, the young Clive in *The Newcomes* certainly does not see himself as furthering some radical demystificatory project when he produces a caricature of the “huge red-haired Scotch student, Mr. Sandy M’Collop.” Rather, like Pen’s book reviews or even his oratory, Clive’s caricature is constituted as yet another social resource—something that helps to enhance his social prestige as he finds his way through the rivalries and alliances incessantly generated within the peer group that he inhabits:

Clive was pronounced an “out and outer,” “a swell and no mistake,” and complimented, with scarce no dissentient voice . . . Besides, he drew very well,—there could be no doubt about that. Caricatures of the students, of course, were passing constantly among them, and in revenge for one which
a huge red-haired Scotch student, Mr. Sandy M’Collop had made of John James, Clive perpetrated a picture of Sandy which set the whole room in a roar. (vol. 2, 183)

Similarly, in *Vanity Fair,* Becky’s performed caricatures of Miss Crawley’s guests function as powerful signifiers within the self-enclosed discursive sphere that registers as news or gossip the affairs of the elite and, in this way, incessantly calibrates the exact position of individual members in an always changing hierarchy:

When the parties were over, and the carriages had rolled away, the insatiable Miss Crawley would say, “Come to my dressing room, Becky, and let us abuse the company,”—which, between them, the pair of friends did perfectly. Old Sir Huddleston wheezed a great deal at the dinner; Sir Giles Wapshot had a particularly noisy manner of imbibing his soup, and her ladyship a wink of the left eye; all of which Becky caricatured to admiration, as well as the particulars of the night’s conversation—the politics, the war, the quarter sessions, the famous run with the H.H., and those heavy and dreary themes about which country gentlemen converse. As for the Misses Wapshot’s toilettes and Lady Fuddlestone’s famous yellow hat, Miss Sharp tore them to tatters, to the infinite amusement of her audience. (94)

We could say, thus, that rather than *producing* characters, such as “The Dandy of Sixty” in Hone’s *The Political House* or Thackeray’s own “Ludovicous Rex,” the art of caricature is constituted in Thackeray’s fiction as a special talent that certain characters possess and deploy, often very skillfully, in appropriate social situations. In this sense, the caricatures and cartoons that circulate in *The Newcomes* or *Vanity Fair* function as details that, together with innumerable other details, sustain the nuanced realism with which Thackeray delineates his characters as well as the world they inhabit. It is not surprising, then, that Thackeray seems to self-consciously distance his novel writing from the methods employed by the radical caricaturists. Thus, the clue he offers in *The Newcomes* to his own approach to characterization is a mode of line drawing very different from that practiced by the caricaturist:

And now let the artist, if he has succeeded in drawing Clive to his liking, cut a fresh pencil, and give us a likeness of Ethel. She is seventeen years old; rather taller than the majority of women; of a countenance somewhat grave and haughty, but on occasion brightening with humour or beaming
with kindliness and affection. Too quick to detect affectation or insincerity in others, too impatient of dullness or pomposity, she is more sarcastic now than she became when after years of suffering had softened her nature. Truth looks out of her bright eyes, and rises up armed, and flashes scorn or denial, perhaps too readily, when she encounters flattery, or meanness, or imposture. (252)

Clearly, Thackeray’s unfolding of Ethel’s character will not have much in common with a form of line drawing that works with distortions, exaggerations, or allegorical improvisations. Rather, the sketch that Thackeray proposes to his imaginary artist strives not only to achieve an exact physical “likeness” of its subject but also to make this subject’s features expressive of a complex, mobile, always changing inner life.

Thackeray’s sympathy for his imaginary artist’s mode of sketching reveals something about the way in which he was likely to handle that primary object of radical caricature: the public character. Thus, in contrast to what happens in “Ludovicous Rex,” the dislike that energizes Thackeray’s delineation of the younger Pitt in Vanity Fair is never allowed to push the baronet’s figure into the direction of caricature. More specifically, in his depiction of the baronet, Thackeray never severs the relationship between what Alex Woloch has incisively described as “thought and social being,” between “character as social being” and “character as inner quality.”

Thus, Thackeray never uses the distortions or emblematic improvisations of graphic satire to reduce Pitt to an abstraction for snobbishness. Pitt’s snobbishness does, of course, operate powerfully as a marker of his aristocratic status, but it is also inextricable from what is presented as his inner life, developed carefully in relation to a dense network of referential systems that weave together as a seamless whole the details of his (mediocre) diplomatic career, his reading habits, his acquaintances among Whig politicians, and the crumbling landscape of his paternal estate. Thackeray’s ability to produce highly individualized characters out of a set of precise and socially identifiable details prompted many contemporaries to set off against his characterization, Dickens’s “satiric, comic portraiture” that could never be said to come “within the strict bounds of the real.”

The Victorian critical establishment’s propensity to privilege Thackeray’s characters over those of Dickens was based on a conviction that may be said to lie at the heart of the bourgeois liberal imagination: that novels should always aspire to produce “the free standing individual, defined through his or her interior consciousness.” However, the untrammeled unfolding of the individual subject privileged by the liberal imagination found itself impeded
by that other great phenomenon of the nineteenth century: democracy. As Alex Woloch puts it:

[The realist novel] also registers the competing pull of inequality and democracy within the nineteenth century bourgeois imagination. In my reading of the realist aesthetic, a dialectical literary form is generated out of the relationship between inequality and democracy. The realist novel is infused with the sense that any character is a potential hero, but simultaneously enchanted with the free standing individual, defined through his or her interior consciousness. In the paradigmatic character-structure of the realist novel, any character *can* be a protagonist, but only one character is; just as increasing political equality, and a maturing logic of human rights, develop amid acute economic and social stratification. On the one hand, the asymmetric structure of realistic characterization—which rounds out one or several characters while flattening, and distorting, a manifold assortment of characters—reflects the actual structure of inequitable distribution. On the other hand, the *claims* of minor characters on the reader’s attention—and the resultant tension between characters and their function—are generated by the democratic impulse that forms a horizon of nineteenth century politics.25

The importance of Woloch’s intervention is that it moves the problem of characterization away from the individual abilities of the author and reconstitutes it in relation not only to history but also to the internal exigencies of the text. It seems to me, however, that Woloch does not take far enough the implications of his own insights into the ways in which democracy might affect characterization and especially the novel’s representation of those who, like Pitt Crawley, wield power. This shortfall is the more surprising since power relations are absolutely central to Woloch’s account of characterization: minor characters, he argues, are often flattened—deprived of their inner lives—not because of some artistic failure on the part of their authors, but because they are pushed into this position by the demands of the main characters. Even weak Dickensian protagonists such as Pip help to perpetuate this process. Pip’s expansive life as a gentleman is prepared for by the diminishing of other lives. The commands that Pip’s tailor keeps hurling at his assistant even as he obsequiously services the now-rich Pip are suggestive, Woloch argues, of “the protagonist’s social elevation . . . and Trabb’s boy’s social subordination.” On the other hand, as Woloch himself demonstrates, the democratic impulse that forms the horizon of nineteenth-century politics also disables the smooth assimilation of Trabb’s boy into the service
economy from which he might self-effacingly help to sustain Pip’s career as a gentleman. Thus, Trabb’s boy “escapes” Pip’s domination and behaves like several other minor characters in Dickens’s fiction who emerge as “symbolic elaborations of or psychological foils for the protagonist’s interiority and as competing centers of interest and agency that radically contextualize the protagonist.”

It seems to me, however, that the “agency” that Woloch associates with Trabb’s boy extends well beyond drawing attention to the inequitable distribution of authorial energy that reduces him to an instrument in the full development of the hero’s character. Instead of suffering the erasure reserved for minor characters, when the gentlemanly Pip adopts a serene and unconscious attitude toward him, Trabb’s boy hits back with a devastating caricature of Pip:

Suddenly the knees of Trabb’s boy smote together, his hair uprose, his cap fell off, he trembled violently in every limb, staggered out into the road, and crying to the populace “Hold me! I’m so frightened!” feigned to be in such a paroxysm of terror and contrition, occasioned by the dignity of my appearance.

What accounts for the massive excess of energy that enables Trabb’s boy to overturn the very mode in which the liberal humanist tradition of characterization casts the figure of its protagonist? The answer has to be that the very marginal position into which Trabb’s boy is pushed has a generative potential that Woloch does not sufficiently account for. More specifically, Trabb’s boy is pushed into that experience of exclusion that provoked the satiric distortions of the radical caricaturists in their representations of politicians, society ladies, or dandies. Thus, this moving caricature of Pip works with such external signs as facial expressions or gestures or dress, not with the aim of producing a psychologically complex, sharply individualized subject, but rather of activating within the object of its representation a set of features that would immediately be recognized by large groups of people as those by which social superiority is attained and asserted.

We could say, therefore, that Trabb’s boy’s representation of Pip suggests alternatives to conceptualizing Dickens’s grotesque public figures either as failed attempts at realistic characterization or as minor characters flattened by the pressure of the protagonist’s expansive unfolding. More specifically, the caricaturized image of Pip that Trabb’s boy produces, using a set of satiric verbal tags and exaggerated gestures, points to the usefulness of connecting Dickens’s caricaturization to radical visual satire rather than to any
properly literary tradition of novel writing. Thus, in the following portrait of Tite Barnacle in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens seems quite self-consciously to absorb and rearticulate within the expressive system of the novel that combination of emblematic satire and the more recent art of political caricaturization that Cruikshank, for example, had effected in his well-known cartoon of Lord Eldon’s square face flanked by two hanging bags that signified both his judge’s wig and his (presumably ill-gotten) wealth:

He wound and wound folds of white cravat around his neck, as he wound and wound folds of tape and paper round the neck of the country. His wristbands and collar were oppressive, his voice and manner were oppressive. He had a large watch chain and a bunch of seals, a coat buttoned up to inconvenience, a waistcoat buttoned up to inconvenience, an unwrinkled pair of trousers and a stiff pair of boots. He was altogether splendid, massive, overpowering, and impracticable. (152)

Clearly there is no attempt here to naturalize the character of Tite Barnacle, to delineate, from a position of proximity, the details of the environment he inhabits or the inner workings of his consciousness. Rather, the portrait of Tite Barnacle embodies the *response* of the excluded and is, in this sense, constituted as a counterdiscourse to the realistic insider’s representation: it refuses to enter into the naturalizing context in which Tite Barnacle might actually have lived—into his humanity—but, on the contrary, treats him as an abstraction, an emblem for an aristocracy-dominated bureaucracy that chokes its public dealings with masses of procedure that, at the same time, it dignifies. Following Cruikshank and Hone, Dickens finds in the “grotesque stylisation of traditional caricature,” to quote Terdiman again, the “mechanism that might preserve within the space of their representation the difference from its social object” (italics in the original).

In an essay devoted largely to the English caricaturists, Baudelaire argued that the prints of Rowlandson, Cruikshank, and Seymour communicated not only with their distortions, exaggeration, and violence but also with their profusion of allusive and allegorical detail. This allegorical strand within radical visual satire often targeted those emblems and insignia that sanctified the operations of the state but could also operate as markers of social distinction.

As it happens, Thackeray’s fiction itself demonstrates very effectively the seamless ways in which crests and emblems intertwine with the world of the aristocracy and naturalize the aristocracy’s claim to social superiority. In *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*, these easily recognizable signs of status help to
make visible the world through which they circulate: they appear on letterheads, cutlery, and the breast pockets of gentlemen; they publicize grief and bedeck resplendent family coaches. Ever the ironist, Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* may make fun of the “pair of French epaulets, a Cross of the Legion of Honour, and the hilt of a sword” (311) that she presents to Mrs. Crawley in an attempt to reconcile her to her estranged nephew Rawdon Crawley, but Becky’s very gesture suggests just how inextricably ceremonial insignia are woven into the texture of the aristocracy’s everyday life. In Thackeray’s mature fiction, in fact, emblems work with other details—of dress, accents, postures, gestures, reading habits, interior decoration, and circulating gossip—as part of a signifying system to both produce and socially circumscribe that stable, internally consistent, realistically delineated world of the elite that so many characters in *Vanity Fair* inhabit.

However, as Thackeray himself knew, emblems and seals did not necessarily have to be incorporated within the expressive economy of realism and deployed, in all their integrity, as part of those densely detailed and internally consistent scenes so characteristic of his novel writing. Thus, in “The History of the Next French Revolution” (1844)—a squib that he contributed to *Punch*—Thackeray follows the lead of his enemy Douglas Jerrold and extends, within the domain of language, the techniques that developed in popular visual political caricature: he ejects the emblem from the processes of the real world and, through a series of associations unsustainable within the expressive system of realism, generates discursive improvisations that shatter the connotations of dignity and power inseparable from the ceremonial symbols of the state. For example, a soldier in “The History of the Next French Revolution” attempts to persuade the king to give him a bottle of wine instead of the Legion of Honour, while the king himself makes a tidy sum speculating on red ribbon, which has risen 200 percent in the market because of the number of ceremonial crosses he has been distributing. The difference in the way Thackeray worked with emblems as he moved from his magazine writing to his novels raises a larger set of questions. Did the techniques of popular graphic caricature have a future within the expressive system of the novel despite Thackeray’s propensity to discard them when it came to what he considered the serious business of novel writing? What implications would the political orientation of graphic satire have on the novel’s subject and specifically on its relationship with public issues? In what exact ways would the counteremblematic, expressive strategies effect the novel’s representation of persons and processes associated with power? I need to turn to *Bleak House* in order to engage more fully with these questions.
Ever since it was first published in 1851, *Bleak House* has provoked discussions on whether the novel as a form was equipped to engage with the great administrative structures of the state. The mid-Victorian quarterly press generally argued that the art of novel writing was inseparable from the everyday lives of the middle and upper classes and that writers who focused on the law or the bureaucracy were destroying the novel’s status as a form of art. A more recent body of criticism, however, has demonstrated how resources internal to the novel form have enabled it to engage in unique ways with a society’s great public institutions. D. A. Miller’s seminal *The Novel and the Police*, for example, uncovers a properly historical negotiation whereby *Bleak House* metatextually pits its own internal procedures of uncovering the truth against, on the one hand, those of a moribund and self-serving Chancery that never redeems its promise of judgment and, on the other, those of an emergent Detective Police “whose shallow solution[s], merely gratifies our appetite for closure.” Miller’s account, thus, combines a more sophisticated sense of the internal dynamics of the novel form than was available to the nineteenth-century reviewers, with a historical understanding that inserts Dickens’s novel within nineteenth-century England’s history of administrative reform. What Miller does not sufficiently historicize are the expressive resources that go into Dickens’s attack on the Court of Chancery. In fact, Dickens’s representation of Chancery proceedings is underpinned by techniques that developed in the radical graphic caricature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the displaced afterlife of these counteremblematic techniques in the Dickensian novel equipped it with an expressive dimension that could not have been generated by either the novel’s universal, structural features (such as its capacity to effect a closure) or by the realistic orchestration of details to constitute the ebb and flow of everyday life.

In Dickens’s delineation of Chancery proceedings, emblems are never allowed to blend discreetly among the other details of the real but are, on the contrary, wrenched out of their naturalizing context, projected self-consciously as the consecrated iconography by which the Court of Chancery seeks to legitimize its arbitrary processes. Emerging out of one of England’s sacrosanct traditional institutions, the legal process is shown, in *Bleak House*, to be “dignified,” in Walter Bagehot’s sense of the term. That is, the legal process is produced and received within “the institutional conditions” which authorizes its unfolding as “ritual discourse”—with its ceremonial etiquette, its specialized vocabulary, and, above all, its traditionally sanctified symbolism. Conducted in “great state and gravity,” displaying the mace and seals, the javelin men and the white wands, and presided over by
the august Lord Chancellor who wears “a full bottomed wig” and a robe “trimmed with beautiful gold lace,” Chancery proceedings are, to use Conversation Kenge’s word, “imposing.”

Dickens’s focus on ceremonial emblems as the dominant signifiers in his representational strategy points to a historicized sense of how an institution like the Court of Chancery deployed power. At the broadest level, Dickens’s criticism is driven by the conviction—shared by radicals as different as Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Paine—that the institutional functioning of the state should be made rational and visible. At this level the discursive attack against the conduct of the Chancery would be directed against the sanctifying metaphors it deployed in order to obfuscate visibility and continue its corrupt and self-serving practices. However, Dickens’s satire on Chancery proceedings is also implicated in a tension that always underlay the radical demystificatory project: between the suspicion about the mystifying functions of icons, on the one hand and, on the other, the propensity, especially within the more popular strands of radical journalism, to work constantly with figures, analogies, and metaphors. Indeed, Dickens’s own method is embedded not so much in the austere, rational skepticism of Paine that is so often directed against metaphors as in the irreverent play with seals, crests, and blazons that drove the counterimagistic assaults of Cruikshank, Hone, or Jerrold.

As someone whose work intersected at many points with the counter-emblematic political caricature of both Cruickshank and Jerrold, Dickens always knew how to appropriate for a destabilizing counterimage the constituent details, the figurative and emblematic elements by which the symbols of power communicated. It was not until *Bleak House*, however, that he managed fully to novelize the subversive capacities of emblematic and juxtapositional representation and to deploy these as a sustained strategy against the orchestration of consecrated symbolism that sanctified Chancery procedures. More specifically, in contrast to *Vanity Fair* or *Pendennis*, in which, as Thackeray said, a coat had to be a “coat, and a poker a poker and . . . nothing else according to my ethics,” and in which an emblem would remain immutably a sign of power or of wealth, Dickens’s basic representational strategy is to seize upon a ceremonial emblem or motif associated with Chancery practice, wrench it out of its context, and recombine it with ideas or motifs that suggest the primitive shapelessness or the gothic cruelty of the dark ages. Moreover, unlike pictorial satire, which can operate only with images and within a framed space, *Bleak House* unfurls the juxtapositional aesthetics of graphic satire across the vaster and more complex discursive domain that the novel form made available. For example, Miss
Flite’s unstable mind emerges in *Bleak House* as one plane where the consecrated emblems of Chancery transform themselves spontaneously into medieval instruments of torture. Miss Flite speaks of the Mace and Seal at the Chancellor’s table in hushed, reverential tones, but her experience of Chancery also compels her to think of these emblems as “Cold glittering devils!” that “draw people on, my dear . . . Draw peace out of them . . . Sense out of them” (457). The expressive system of the novel, however, also allows Dickens to move away from Flite’s individual consciousness and to inscribe his counteremblematic improvisations on the objective world outside. Thus, the barbaric practices that Dickens associates with the Chancery find an emblematic victim in the “street of perishing blind houses with their eyes stoned out”: the mark, as Jarndyce tells Esther, of “the Great Seal” (100).

The expressive energies of graphic satire that enjoy a vigorous, if displaced, existence in *Bleak House* sustain the novel’s discursive destabilization of Chancery in other ways as well. Specifically, *Bleak House* achieves some of its strongest effects by drawing upon the greater freedom that had become available to the techniques of graphic satire as these moved from the visual to the linguistic domain. Unlike pictorial satire, linguistic representations, as we’ve already seen, did not need to pick on the emblem’s visible details in order to work its metonymic transformations. Indeed, *Bleak House* often follows Jerrold’s “The Order of the Poverty” in generating discursive improvisations around not the visible features of an icon but, more generally, the cluster of ideas that the icon consecrates. For example, *Bleak House* seizes upon and degrades the idea of antiquity that is conferred on the Chancery by its consecrating symbols. The opening paragraph of the novel pushes the Chancery’s claims to antiquity into an antediluvian past and then associates it with the lethargic, purposeless activities of prehistoric creatures unfit to survive in modern times. Appearing barely a few months after the Great Exhibition and juxtaposed against that symbol of Britain’s progress, the opening paragraph of *Bleak House* sensationally shows the Chancery neighborhood encrusted in as much mud “as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet wide or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill” (15). Furthermore, in one of the earliest descriptions of Chancery proceedings, Dickens seizes upon the “horse-hair and goat-hair” used in the lawyers’ wigs and, by only slightly shifting the connotations of these words, is able to transform the lawyers into half-human, half-animal figures who are so integral to the emblematic arts and who are shown, in *Bleak House*, to be “mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents,
groping knee deep in technicalities, running their goat-hair and horse-hair warded heads against walls of words” (16).

The strongest example of the ways in which Dickens novelizes the expressive possibilities of graphic satire, however, is in the emblematic mirroring of the Lord Chancellor and the Court of Chancery in the sordid figure of Krook and his rag and bottle store. In his remarkable picture of Krook’s shop, Dickens brings together the ceremonial symbols of the court—the lawyer’s robes, the scales of justice—only to subject them to radical demystification:

A little way within the shop-door, lay heaps of old cracked parchment scrolls, and discoloured and dog’s-eared law papers. I could have fancied that all the rusty keys, of which there must have been hundreds huddled together as old iron, had once belonged to doors of rooms or strong chests in lawyers’ offices. The litter of rags tumbled partly into and partly out of a one-legged wooden scale, hanging without any counter-poise from a beam, might have been the counsellors’ bands and gowns torn up. One had only to fancy, as Richard whispered to Ada and me while we all stood looking in, that the yonder bones in a corner, piled together and picked very clean, were the bones of clients, to make the picture complete. (59)

This passage could, at one level, be thought of as a straightforward transposition into language of some satiric, anti-Chancery print. Inserted within the expressive system of the novel, however, this satirical picture of the Lord Chancellor does not remain confined within the synchronic frame in which it is originally cast. Rather, Dickens’s counteremblematic picture of the Lord Chancellor’s domain develops as a metaphor. Thus, Dickens breaks through both the synchronic frame of the print as well as the limits of what contemporary critics would call “probability” when, in the climactic moment of his counterimagistic assault on the ceremonial processes of the law, Krook is discovered dead—burnt to cinders by Spontaneous Combustion. Krook’s death by Spontaneous Combustion presumably prefigures, metaphorically, the self-induced explosion that awaits the Court of Chancery. From my point of view, however, the more interesting feature of Krook’s strange death is the nauseating liquid that flows out of his body. As an image for unpurged accumulations of what Conversation Kenge calls “the very great system of a very great country” (786), the “thick yellow liquor which is offensive to the touch and sight and more to the smell” (417) suggests how one of the most widely used techniques of radical graphic satire—its capacity to make the most sacrosanct institutions and personages
generate images that provide the basis of their own degradation—survives and continues to develop, through many displacements, in Dickens’s later fiction.

This chapter has argued that the deeper effects of Dickens’s radical inheritance are to be found not so much in the content of his criticism of Chancery practices as in his deployment of certain radical techniques to demystify the symbols by which arbitrary and oppressive Chancery procedures are sanctified. That is, it has been concerned with the ways in which radical techniques enter into and extend the internal expressive repertoire of the novel form. However, did Dickens’s appropriation of the expressive resources of graphic satire—a mode that the Westminster Review associated with disseminating “opinion” and promoting “discussion”—enable his fiction to intervene in debates over public affairs?

One way in which to address this question is by revisiting the extended sequence around Krook’s death and focusing not only on the brilliantly inventive manner in which Krook is made to die but also on the use that Dickens makes of this death to directly address his readers. One could then argue that the “generic memory” of “radical expression” that is carried into the Dickensian novel not only influenced the latter’s representational strategies but also “carnivalized” its structure. More specifically, “the stylistic aura” of the radical discourse enabled a novel like Bleak House to bring about, at any point of its evolution, what Julia Kristeva calls a “splitting of the mode of enunciation,” in which the authorial voice “divides and faces in two directions”—inwards, toward the world of the novel, but also, and more significantly, outwards, toward the real world inhabited by a socially aware audience who might be mobilized as a pressure group against the state’s malfunctioning institutions. In these circumstances it is not surprising that immediately after Krook’s death by Spontaneous Combustion, that is, immediately after the most obviously fictional event in Bleak House, Dickens can effortlessly discard his role as storyteller for that of public speaker addressing the queen herself on behalf of the people:

The Lord Chancellor of that Court, true to his title in his last act, has died the death of all Lord Chancellors in all Courts, and of all authorities in all places under all names soever, where false pretences are made and where injustice is done. Call the death by any name your Highness will, or say it might have been prevented how you will, it is the same death eternally—inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself, and that only—Spontaneous Combustion, and none other of all the deaths that can be died. (418–19)
The presence of an extranovelistic mobilizing impulse encoded within the very structure of *Bleak House* raises several questions about the relationship that has been crucial to this chapter: that between the work of the radical publicists and of Dickens. Might Dickens’s readiness to open, within his novel, a nonfictional discursive space from which he may address the general public be regarded as a politically displaced continuation of a process that William Hone, for example, began when he successfully transformed his 1817 trial for blasphemy into a forum for building public opinion against censorship? What is suggested by the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the mid-Victorian critical establishment’s conviction that Dickens had abandoned the claims of the literary by transforming the novel from a “form of art” to a forum for political debates and, on the other, the enormous respect and effectiveness with which radical writers used literature and literary devices for their political writing? Is there a line of continuity between the kind of anxiety that the radical press aroused in the political establishment of the 1820s and the changes that mark the quarterly press’s reception of Dickens after he published *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*? In what remains of this chapter, I will engage with these questions to bring to a conclusion the argument about whether Dickens drew on the language of radicalism to not only produce a new novelistic aesthetic but also to politicize the public sphere within which the novel operated.

Did the radical publicists anticipate Dickens in finding ways of mobilizing public opinion from within well-established public forms whose internal protocols did not necessarily sanction such mobilization? In her pioneering work on Dickens and radical culture, Sally Ledger demonstrates that Cobbett, Hone, and others frequently turned “the courtroom into a locus for cultural and political debate.” However, this politicization that the radical journalists effected in legal procedures is, in Ledger’s opinion, reflected in the content of Dickens’s work and more specifically, in the frequency with which court scenes occur in Dickens’s fiction:

The persistence of the Fenning case in the popular cultural memory throughout and beyond the first half of the nineteenth century is strongly suggestive of the importance of the courtroom as a locus of cultural and political debate in the period. Dickens’s novels and journalism are peppered with trial scenes: highlights include the hilarity of the Breach of Promise suit in *The Pickwick Papers*, Oliver Twist’s poignant appearance before a magistrate, Jack Dawkin’s comic bravado as his sentence is passed, the bullying judgement passed on Barnaby Rudge by a “gentleman” country magistrate, the extended Chancery suit in *Bleak House*, and
the high melodrama of the four trials of Charles Darnay in *The Tale of Two Cities*.42

The connections that Ledger makes between the radical engagement with the law court and certain trial scenes in Dickens’s novels are invaluable because they highlight the contribution of one more extraliterary discourse in the making of the Dickensian novel. What Ledger does not consider, however, is that a distinguishing structural feature of the Dickensian novel—its ability not only to split the mode of enunciation and address issues internal to its fictional world but also to discuss and take positions on events unfolding in the real world that its readers inhabit—may itself owe something to the radical journalists’ propensity to turn trials into opportunities for public mobilization.

William Hone’s 1817 trial exemplifies how radical publicists often managed to work from within the protocols of court procedure and, despite the resistance of the judge and the jury, to turn the court into a platform for propaganda. Hone’s trial was an inherently political event in a way that the publication of a Dickens novel could never be. Unlike Dickens, who was never threatened by the state machinery, Hone found himself up against the harsh procensorship Chief Justice Lord Ellenborough and a jury that was predisposed to convict him. Hone also demonstrated, however, perhaps for the first time, how an established public form (in his case, a trial) could be made to turn outwards and draw in a far larger group of people than allowed for by the internal protocols of that form. In his self-defense against the charge of blasphemy, Hone drew on his knowledge of English literature and on his own skill with language to present a case that was so well researched and entertaining that it transformed the crowd, present throughout his three-day trial, into a pressure group against the much larger political issue of censorship. The impact that Hone made on the attending crowd can be gauged from the extremely strict measures that the judge and the jury took to control the crowd’s behavior. Lord Ellenborough instructed the sheriffs to apprehend anyone in the crowd who showed appreciation of Hone’s arguments by laughing at his jokes, and the Attorney General cited the laughter of the crowd as evidence of how radical publicists were “perverting” the unlettered masses by turning the law court into a platform for propaganda.43

Some three and a half decades later, journals like the *Westminster* and *Quarterly Reviews* would express very similar anxieties in relation to what Dickens was doing to the novel. These journals did, of course, recognize that the radical publicists and Dickens were addressing very different con-
constituencies and that the political impact made by the former was incomparably stronger than what the Dickensian novel could achieve. However, the quarterly journals returned frequently to that precise feature in the Dickensian novel which most closely approximated Hone’s ability to reach a popular audience even while remaining within the procedures of his trial. More specifically, the quarterly press invested a great deal in trying to understand the exact conditions that had enabled Dickens’s emergence as a novelist who could provide fictional entertainment to isolated, individual readers and, at the same time, mold these readers into a semipolitical community brought together by their disaffection with the malfunctioning public institutions. Accordingly, reviewers focused not on subversive trial scenes that may have appeared in this or that Dickens novel, but on the aesthetic legitimacy of using the novel as a means of mobilizing public opinion.

As it happens, Hone’s trial also brings into sharp focus the fraught relationship between the political and the literary—a relationship that continued to be discussed through the 1850s and ’60s but was understood in very different ways by the radical writers and the literary establishment.

Hone, Cobbett, and many others considered literature and literary devices as strong allies of the radical project. Hone, for example, very effectively invoked examples from English literature while defending himself from the charge of blasphemy by arguing that some of England’s most revered writers had preceded him in parodying the scriptures. Moreover, in a maneuver that seems to gesture paradoxically toward a basic discursive strategy of radical mobilization itself, Hone argued that parody was a popular medium of communication “which the common people had been accustomed to for centuries,” and that its aim was not so much to mock the work parodied as to help the widespread dissemination of ideas. Put another way, Hone’s defense—based, as Ben Wilson has suggested, on a “general discussion about the use of literature”⁴⁴—not only suggests the alliance that several radical writers sought to forge with canonical English literature but also acknowledges the contribution made by literary devices in sustaining the popularity of the language of radicalism. This contribution is evident in the great popular appeal of Hone’s own parodies, of the fantastic black dwarf in Wooler’s journalism, and of Cobbett’s self-consciously deployed rhetorical effects.

The allegories and parodies, the heightened rhetoric, and the metaphoric transformations that marked so much of radical writing elicited two intertwining responses in the elite press that remained active all the way up to the 1860s. On the one hand, this press dissociated radical writing from anything resembling literary value and, in this way, portrayed radical writing's
exaggerations and distortions as indicative merely of its unreliability. The *Quarterly Review*, for example, had described Hone as a “poor illiterate creature,” despite the knowledge of English literature he had demonstrated through the course of his trial. However, this mode of discrediting could not neutralize the deeper anxiety with which the *Quarterly Review* responded to the expressive power that enabled radical publicists to attract huge readerships. In the following extract from an article that he contributed to the *Quarterly Review*, Robert Southey clearly refuses to grant aesthetic value to radical writing but finds it impossible to get away from the expressive power that had enabled a Cobbett or a Hone to raise a whole new popular readership: “The weekly epistles of the apostles of sedition are read aloud in tap-rooms and pot houses to believing auditors, listening greedily when they are told that their rulers fatten upon the gains extracted from their blood and sinews; and they are cheated, oppressed and plundered.”

45

The mid-Victorian quarterly press never attacked Dickens in the kind of language that Southey uses to describe the plebeian milieu in which radical expression flourished. This press, moreover, was aware, as we’ve seen, of differences at the level of context, content, and modes of dissemination that separated Dickens from the radical writers. Nevertheless, the *Westminster* or *Saturday Review*’s response to Dickens’s fiction continued to be characterized by an anxiety about the relationship that it articulated between the popular, the literary, and the political.

We can track the ways in which the mid-Victorian quarterly press configured the relationship between popular entertainment, literature, and politics by focusing on an important shift in its response to Dickens after he published *Bleak House*. As journals that addressed themselves self-consciously to the educated and the cultivated, the mid-Victorian reviews, unlike the radical writers, always preserved the distinction between the properly literary and the merely popular. Dickens’s popularity, therefore, was never a reason for them to confer literary merit upon his work. After the initial shock that the lower realms of journalism could throw up a talent as prodigious as Boz, however, the reviewers seem to be benignly tolerant of a writer who could never, of course, attain the stature of a full-fledged serious novelist, but whose comic genius was universally entertaining and who was always careful not to give offense to any decent reader.46 This universal appeal is what the term “popular” connoted when it was used in association with Dickens’s early works. As one commentator wrote, “Indeed the great characteristic of Dickens’s early popularity was this, that it was confined to no class, but extended to all classes, rich and poor, noble and plebeian. The Queen on the throne read him and so did Hodge at the plow.”
Edwin Whipple, who offered this explanation of the young Dickens's popularity from the hindsight of 1877, went on to articulate an argument—deeply entrenched in the highbrow press—that Dickens’s universal appeal began to fragment after the publication of *Bleak House* because his “educated readers” who had enjoyed his “humour and pathos” began to get irritated by his intrusions into “matters relating to social and economical science with which he was imperfectly acquainted.” In the post-*Bleak House* years, therefore, the word “popular,” when used in association with Dickens in the quarterlies, began to acquire different connotations. In an influential piece, first published in the *National Review*, Bagehot argued that Dickens’s great popularity was based on his hold over the indiscriminating masses that cared only for their “own multifarious, industrial, fig selling world.” Bagehot thought of Dickens’s lowbrow readers not as a politically active group, but as passive consumers of literary entertainment. Moreover, Bagehot understood that, unlike Hone or Cobbett who wrote to rouse masses of people against a state that was both vulnerable and oppressive, Dickens wrote well within the bounds of what the far more self-confident state of the 1850s considered acceptable. Still, in an age when the novel was emerging as a major form of entertainment and when leisure itself was, in Peter Bailey’s words, “a new, relatively uncharted area in the lifespace” of the urban masses, the reading habits of large groups of people were bound to have some political significance. It was its changing sociology that made the novel, and especially the Dickensian popular novel, such a potentially harmful public influence for a man like James Fitzjames Stephen who might otherwise never have condescended to write about as lowbrow a novelist as “Boz.” Writing in 1855, Stephen argued that while the popularity of outdoor sports and even of the theatre and of spectacles had declined, “the habit of reading novels [had] become universal.” This meant for Stephen that a “very considerable” number of “young people” took from novels “nearly all their notions of life.” Stephen thought, therefore, that Dickens was behaving completely irresponsibly when he sent to his innumerable readers the message that “their Legislature is a stupid and inefficient debating club, their courts of law foul haunts of chicanery, pedantry and fraud, and their system of administration an odious compound of stupidity and corruption.” Unlike Cobbett or Hone who found in canonical literature the resources as well as the justification for the kind of writing that Stephen criticizes, Stephen relegates Dickens’s political satire to the realm of low entertainment. It is in the very process of his aesthetic denunciation, however, that Stephen betrays anxieties that are very similar to those articulated by Southey some three and a half decades ago.
Who, it may be asked, takes Mr. Dickens seriously? Is it not as foolish to estimate his melodramatic and sentimental stock-in-trade seriously as it would be to undertake the refutation of the jokes of the clown in a Christmas pantomime? No doubt this would be true enough if the world were composed entirely or principally of men of sense and cultivation. To such persons Mr. Dickens is nothing more than any other public performer—enjoying an extravagantly high reputation. . . . But the vast majority of mankind, unfortunately, think little, and cultivate themselves still less . . . and to these classes such writers as Dickens are something more than amusement.  

Stephen’s tone may be dismissive, but his words implicitly acknowledge the many ways in which the work of the radical journalists had transformed the public realm of letters so assiduously cultivated by the journals for which Stephen wrote and by their eighteenth-century predecessors. On the one hand, Stephen finds it impossible to wish away the masses that the radical publicists had steadily drawn into public debates on the most significant social and political issues of nineteenth-century England. On the other hand, the expressive strategies of the radical journalists, which Southey associated with the lowest forms of entertainment but which Hone saw as his inheritance from such writers as Sterne or Swift, were beginning to enter and (from Stephen’s point of view) contaminate the nineteenth-century’s dominant literary form: the novel itself. Significantly, Stephen invokes that pivotal figure in the radical journalistic tradition, William Cobbett, as the person most responsible for diffusing the bourgeois public sphere and making possible the emergence of Dickens as the central writer in a vastly expanded world of letters. Stephen argued that as the writer who first demonstrated that it was possible to bypass sustained formal education, to write entirely “by the light of nature,” and to convey opinions about public matters in the most emphatic language to a large, often subliterate audience, Cobbett began a process that Dickens would internalize for the novel.

Though no two persons could resemble each other less in terms of character, the position of Mr. Dickens with respect to fiction is precisely analogous to that of Cobbett with respect of political discussion. The object of the arguments of the one was to drive his opinion into the dullest understanding—the object of the narrative of the other is to paint a picture that will catch the eye of the most ignorant and the least attentive observer. Mr. Dickens’s writings are the apotheosis of what has been called newspaper English. He makes points everywhere . . .
Hone had habitually drawn on English literature—on the status of parody within its canonical texts or on the speech habits of one of Laurence Sterne’s characters\textsuperscript{53}—to engage with the most contested political issues of his time. The resources of literature had, therefore, been a major and enabling factor in his political writing. For Stephen, on the other hand, the intersection between the topical and the literary is a contaminating process by which “newspaper English” threatened to radically compromise the aesthetic quality of the novel.

One of Stephen’s responses to this threat was to develop, in the authoritative pages of the reviews, the audience-oriented subjectivity of the ideal bourgeois novel as the criterion of literary legitimacy.\textsuperscript{54} Moreover, the major point in Stephen’s criticism—that instead of realistically delineating the ebb and flow of everyday life Dickens habitually used the novel to “ventilate opinion” and to ply his “melodramatic and sentimental stock-in-trade”—was shared by some of the most influential critics of the nineteenth century. The significant thing, however, is that even Stephen (and the very powerful literary and political interests that he represented) could not arrest the process that has been outlined through this chapter: that despite many displacements—from its roots in a radical artisanal community to one strand among many within literary commodities consumed by a large, socially diverse audience; from the revolutionary political climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the stability and prosperity of the mid-Victorian era—the “language of radicalism” not only survived in the Dickensian novel but also influenced its form, giving it a new public dimension and enabling Dickens to take on as a novelist, the role of what the Westminster Review half admiringly and half grudgingly described as that of “a recognised public instructor.”\textsuperscript{55}