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

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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Novelizing the City

Bleak House, Vanity Fair, and the Hybridizing Challenge

HOGARTH’S DREAM of a comprehensively mapped city that would allow access to its darkest and most criminalized corner continued to remain potent in Bleak House—a novel that appeared more than a hundred years after the publication of Industry and Idleness. Thus Bleak House makes a powerful ideological investment in Inspector Bucket as an agent of surveillance capable always of penetrating into London’s most obscure corners, of bringing these within the domain of visibility and, thereby, of sustaining always a panorama-like picture of the city in his mind. Thus, Bucket’s activities may be thought of as carrying forward that fantasy of control whose unfolding across a range of visual forms has been documented in the last chapter.

Dickens’s sympathetic portrayal of Bucket, and, by implication, his allegiance to modern and efficient forms of surveillance capable of penetrating the nooks and crannies of the metropolis, of registering all its transactions, and of tracking the movements of those who inhabit it, has been extensively discussed by critics like D. A. Miller and Deborah Epstein Nord.¹ What has not been discussed as often is the extent to which Bleak House is constituted by the second impulse that drove the representational modes discussed in chapter 3 and that was concerned not so much with surveillance as with the city’s disconcerting contradictions. Bleak House works at many levels with the juxtapositional possibilities made available by Hogarth’s prints, the city sketches, as well as the panorama and the stereoscope. For example,
the broadsheets of Hogarth’s picture series may mutate in Dickens’s novel to newspapers or reprints of fashionable portraits, but, as print commodities whose circulation is impossible to regulate, they continue to precipitate unthinkable connections between dramatically disparate parts of the city. Indeed, the urban aesthetic—that “child of the giant city” capable of registering “the intersections of its myriad relationships,” as Baudelaire might have described it—helped to constitute some of the basic features of *Bleak House* as a novel: its arrangement of time and space as well as its modes of characterization and of plotting.

We can begin to unfold the effects of urban aesthetic on *Bleak House* by comparing the differing ways in which Dickens and Thackeray treat a relatively minor urban figure: the ubiquitous street urchin. In *Vanity Fair* street urchins merely fill the background in scenes that happen to be set in the streets: they cannot, in any sense, be said to have a place in the plot connections that the novel makes. For instance, the “damp urchins” (260) who hang about the chapel door during George Osborne’s wedding help make up the gloomy atmosphere in which Thackeray envelops the apparently happy event, but they disappear forever from the novel immediately after they have served this purely local function.

Like *Vanity Fair*, *Bleak House*, too, contains a description of the church and its surrounding scenes, but here the street urchin Jo, far from fading discreetly into the background, becomes the focal point of an emblematic street scene that aims, above all, at holding together the contradictions of a stratified landscape in a tense, disconcerting juxtaposition:

> And there he sits, munching and gnawing, and looking up at the great Cross on the summit of St. Paul’s Cathedral, glittering above a red and violet-tinted cloud of smoke. From the boy’s face one might suppose the sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city; so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach. There he sits . . . the crowd floating by him in two streams—everything moving on to some purpose and to one end. (255)

This passage sustains its destabilizing project by not only drawing upon but also setting itself off against various visual modes of representing the city. One might, for example, read in Dickens’s tensely juxtapositional “sketch” a polemic against the numerous “topographies” or “views” of St. Paul’s, which artists like Boys or Nash produced in the first half of the nineteenth century and which, with their emphasis on “order and firm composition”
and their propensity to blank out the confusion, crowdedness, and the squalor of the adjoining streets, would be very much in consonance with the general climate of the 1850s. This decade, as several historians have shown, was characterized by rising standards of living and massive street clearance drives that tended to push the poor to the realm of the “residuum” or “the sunken Sixth,” morally and even biologically demarcated from those capable of participating in the processes of progress. Such a polemic would obviously draw a great deal on William Hogarth’s ability to register the radical social disparities of the cityscape. In fact, in a review of Cruikshank’s _The Drunkard’s Children_ (1848), Dickens explicitly comments on Hogarth’s ability in _Gin Lane_ (1751) (fig. 9) to juxtapose the densely detailed landscape of urban poverty where the drunken mother is situated against “the prominent and handsome church” that coldly surveys the squalor “under the shadow of its tower.”

As is well known, Dickens’s overt purpose in the review was to set off Cruikshank’s didactic approach to drunkenness against the social complexity that Hogarth brought to bear on the subject. But Dickens’s comment seems also to gesture toward his own juxtapositional method of charting the city and toward the debt this method owed to Hogarth’s work. More specifically, the scene which brings together, in a recognizably Hogarthian configuration, the dome of St. Paul’s and the figure of a boy who is poor, homeless, and utterly primitive already contains within the synchronic mode of its articulation the germ of a plot that would wrench the action of _Bleak House_ from the social spaces within which a novel like _Vanity Fair_ moves. Furthermore, the scene forces Dickens’s predominantly middle-class readers to take cognizance of “the residuum” and of the contiguity and connectedness of this unspeakable realm to that which they inhabited.

The basic framework for such a mode of novelistic organization had already existed in the panorama—a form that, as we’ve seen, was capable of tracking sequentially the random diversity of the city, but also of bringing together disparate urban details in significant juxtapositions. Thus, in a letter already quoted, Dickens had drawn attention to the panorama’s capacity to register in a single, unbroken sequence the bewildering diversity of the cityscape. In a separate piece, moreover, Dickens also discussed a second discursive possibility suggested by the experience of viewing a panorama. He concluded a remarkable review of _Banvard’s Geographical Panorama of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers_ with a paragraph that has significant implications for understanding the urban aesthetic that he was developing: “It would be well to have a panorama three miles long of England. There
FIGURE 9. William Hogarth, *Gin Lane* (1751)
might be places in it worth looking at, a little closer than we see them now, and worth thinking of a little more profoundly. It would be hopeful, too, to see some things in England as part and parcel of a moving panorama.”

In this passage Dickens gestures toward the expressive possibilities that the panorama and (implicitly) even the stereoscope held for the novel. What Dickens proposes is the possibility of novelizing the moving panorama’s capacity to generate relationships between geographically dispersed and socially disparate objects, scenes, or people. However, the panoramic mode Dickens has in mind also approximates the stereoscope’s propensity to disregard optical integrity of scenes by focusing sharply on certain details while leaving others in the shade. Thus, Dickens imagines a way of writing the city that is capable (like the panorama) of ranging across the length and breadth of an internally fractured metropolis and also of bypassing the laws of objective geography and of bringing into stereoscopic focus those dispersed locations that were “worth thinking of a little more profoundly.”

One way to uncover Dickens’s “panoramic” way of seeing more clearly is by turning back to *Vanity Fair*—a novel whose spatial orientation is best embodied in the sharply focused scenes that Becky catches so often in her telescope or her opera glass. More specifically, the telescope with which Becky picks out the figure of Briggs in a fashionable spa and, even more, the opera glass which characters in *Vanity Fair* often use to spy on each other offer views that are sharply detailed but enclosed, unrelated to anything in the larger world outside the social milieu in which they are embedded. Indeed, Thackeray preserves both his vividly realistic detailing as well as the homogeneity of his social groupings even when he moves characters like George Osborne and William Dobbin across the vastly stratified landscapes of different nations and even continents.

In contrast, consider the sixteenth chapter of *Bleak House* which begins in Chesney Wold, that exclusive seat of the Dedlocks that will not allow the slightest breath of vulgarity to contaminate its hallowed portals. Dickens’s narrative (impelled, clearly, by an organizational possibility first articulated in the panorama) then sweeps across Lincolnshire, pauses briefly at the Dedlock residence at London, and then takes the reader to the heart of outcast London, that pestilential terrain unmarked on the map of progress, where ruined shelters “have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards” (206). The intensity of the language suggests that a passage such as this is not meant as an entertaining example of metropolitan variety or even as the sort of social exposure with which Mayhew had amazed his readers. Rather, the unbroken passage of Dickens’s narrative from Chesney Wold through Tom-all-Alone’s may be grasped as the
unfolding of a trajectory within the urban aesthetic that aims at disrupting, on the one hand, the comfortable assimilation of social contradictions within the set formats of urban entertainment and, on the other, the social isolation of what one contemporary called the novel’s “legitimate province”; the network of socially contiguous spaces inhabited by the middle and the upper classes.

Moreover, the panoramic sequence that unfurls through this chapter of *Bleak House* also draws on the resources of the stereoscope to focus on dramatically disparate scenes and characters spread across three-dimensional space. For example, during this sequence, the narrator moves from the unlettered Jo to the book-lined, first-floor apartment of that master of legal procedure, Mr. Tulkinghorn, and from there directs our, but not his, eyes to the figure of Lady Dedlock disguised as a servant as she walks across the street below. Thus, Dickens’s unanchored narrative deploys the stereoscope’s ability to manipulate perspective and depth and a spatial freedom available only to language, to move not only back and forth but also up and down, to intrude into upper-floor interiors or, on the contrary, to sharply focus on a chosen subject in the street below.

As part of a developing urban aesthetic, however, the details that make up the Dickensian cityscape—a street urchin emerging out of the heart of outcast London, a lady disguised as a servant looking for the paupers’ graveyard, a lawyer’s chamber overlooking the street where the lady walks—are not random impressions of detached observers, entertaining themselves on a spree through London. On the contrary, they both approximate the arbitrary assemblages of the city and become, at the same time, the nodal points that will generate the lines of action whose intersections will constitute the montage progression of the Dedlock plot.

Unlike Thackeray, in whose precisely mapped interiors people are brought together only by social or kinship ties, Dickens draws on a range of popular forms—from the city sketches to the stereoscope—to constitute the city in what Raymond Williams calls its “double condition”: on the one hand, as a bewildering collage of contrasting scenes and people and, on the other, as something that promotes inescapable connections between its dispersed inhabitants. Yet since the linkages that Dickens makes in the vast, unwieldy, and radically stratified world of *Bleak House* tend to destroy rather than maintain the “wholeness” or “organicity” of the world as it is constructed in the realistic novel, the more educated traditions of novel criticism, especially as they were articulated in the Victorian quarterly press, quite often responded merely to the fragmentedness of Dickens’s novels. One significant image that the quarterly press used to describe the dispersed
quality of Dickens’s novels was that of the newspaper. As Walter Bagehot put it:

Mr. Dickens’s genius is specially suited for the delineation of city life. London is like a newspaper. Everything is there, and everything is disconnected. There is every kind of person in some houses; but there is no more connection between the houses than between the neighbors in lists of “birth, marriages and deaths.” As we change from the broad leader to the squalid police report, we pass a corner, we are in a changed world. This is advantageous to Mr. Dickens’s genius. His memory is full of instances of old buildings and curious people and he does not care to piece them together. On the contrary, each scene, to his mind, is a separate scene—each street a separate street.¹¹

At one level, Bagehot’s threefold comparison between London, the newspaper, and the Dickensian text seems entirely apt. As what Richard Terdiman calls “the first culturally anti-organicist mode of modern discursive construction,” newspapers “trained their readers in the appreciation of detached, independent, reified, decontextualised articles.”¹² Indeed, like the city sketches, which may be said to represent graphically what the newspapers embodied formally, the newspaper articulated the sense of randomness of the urban experience that Dickens was to incorporate within his novelistic aesthetic.

Yet if the newspaper bears its contradictions on its face “in a clashing, conflicted disposition of its discursive surface,”¹³ it is also the ultimate example of the standardized, mechanically produced cultural product. It bears not even the memory of an “aura.” It cannot, in any sense, be said to belong to an individual or to a fixed place. On the contrary, its existence is predicated on its circulation, its accessibility to anyone who can read or acquire a copy. Unlike a novel, the newspaper does not even have to be read through but offers the reader the option of choosing, from within a standardized layout, what she or he requires. For these reasons, the newspaper not only approximates the random, unconnected sights of the city but also emerges as one of its great systems of communication—the means by which information about sordid slums reach the mansions of the rich and the powerful and by which business relations are struck between the most unconnected of individuals.

It would seem, therefore, that Bagehot is sensitive to only one side of the metaphor that he uses to describe Dickens’s fiction. With its array of seemingly unconnected characters and places, Bleak House does bring to mind
the random juxtapositions of newspaper columns. But the critical snobbery that makes Bagehot pick the metaphor of the newspaper—merely so that its fragmentedness can be set off against the “wholeness” of the higher forms of writing—blinds him to the role that newspapers actually play in a novel like *Bleak House*. In fact, newspapers are ubiquitous in the world of *Bleak House*, read as much by Lady Dedlock as by that wizened product of inner London, Chickweed. It is a newspaper report of the death and burial of Hawdon that enables Lady Dedlock to locate Jo and, thereafter, the terrible place where her former lover lies buried and in this way to open up, for the first time, the unimaginable connection between Chesney Wold and the paupers’ graveyard. Again, an enquiry that Smallweed had made in the papers regarding the whereabouts of Hawdon elicits a response not only from George but also from Tulkinghorn and provides the latter with the final piece of evidence to establish Lady Dedlock’s relationship with the recently dead, opium-eating pauper.

In *Bleak House*, newspapers are not the only means that help to establish contacts between people unconnected by social or familial ties. It may be possible for the individual inhabitant to disappear within the vastness of the metropolis and lead a nameless existence as Nemo literally does, but the masses of registration—the records of the Chancery, Post Office directories, even entries in the registers of the moneylender or the law stationer—both yield unexpected clues about the whereabouts of unknown persons and facilitate contacts between strangers. Jarndyce, for example, is inundated with begging letters from individuals and charitable organizations who have procured his address from the Post Office directory. More significantly, the Lady Dedlock plot, whose movement depends on information carried in newspapers, is set into motion when Tulkinghorn locates, from an entry in Snagsby’s register, the whereabouts of a mysterious man whose handwriting had startled the normally imperturbable Lady Dedlock.

In the world of *Bleak House*, therefore, the newspaper as well as the proliferating system of registrations emerges as the underlying, almost unnoticed vehicles that both record and promote meetings between people who are unrelated by social or familial ties but who are brought together by the innumerable impersonal transactions that the city spawns every day. Therefore, Bagehot’s (derisive) newspaper metaphor might be defined as expressive not only of the dispersed quality of the city but also of its capacity to forge unexpected connections and, indeed, of a trajectory within the urban aesthetic that will register and bring within the scope of its plot connections the turbulent unregulated life that lies beyond the familial and social relationships within which the middle-class novel usually works.
One way to respond to the newspaper as a complex rather than a simple metaphor for the city and for the whole urban aesthetic that it spawned is by examining the role that newspapers play in the sort of novel that might have served as Bagehot’s yardstick when he spoke of the fragmentedness of Dickens’s fiction. As it turns out, a work like *Vanity Fair* is just as full of newspapers as *Bleak House*, but one way in which the former novel is able to preserve its internally integrated social world is by dissociating its newspapers from the social unevenness of the city. Thus, the *Morning Post*, which is a representative newspaper in *Vanity Fair*, circulates more or less within the social domain of the elite carrying, for instance, the news about Becky’s invitation to Gaunt House to a jealous Mrs. Crawley and reinforcing the novel’s projection of a closely knit social milieu in which everyone knows each other. A rare example of a newspaper in *Vanity Fair* that does seem to perform the sort of dispersive function that Bagehot associated with it is the *Times* and, more specifically, its last page, which carries announcements of public auctions. Moreover, as something that redistributes “the library, furniture, plate, and choice cellar of wines” (150) of a single household across various unconnected locations, the auction itself may be seen as one of the very few centrifugal tropes in *Vanity Fair*. Yet, like the newspaper, the auction in *Vanity Fair* never functions as a means of forging connections between people separated by the wide social disparities of the city. Thus, the auction at the Sedley household does not relocate Amelia’s piano to some remote, unexpected corner of the metropolis and in this way bring this new domain into the ambit of the novel’s plot connections. Instead, Amelia’s piano is bought by the utterly familiar Dobbin and then relayed back to her humbler home at Brompton.

The different ways in which Thackeray and Dickens treat the newspaper (and related tropes such as systems of registration or the auction) symptomize differing responses to a larger problem at the center of the urban aesthetic: the tension that always existed within the experience of urbanization between the known world of the home and the chaotic, unpredictable streets. More specifically, the auction as it is used in *Vanity Fair* may be said to incorporate within the internal economy of the novel the function that Walter Benjamin’s arcades performed at the level of architecture: both extend the threshold of the interior into the streets to such an extent that the streets themselves become interiorized.¹⁴

Interiors in *Bleak House*, on the other hand, do not seek to colonize the outside, and although the novel does follow *Industry and Idleness* in constituting certain domestic spaces such as Bleak House itself as the idealized “other” of a chaotic outer world, it also exposes other interiors to
the disorderly traffic of the streets. Cook’s Court, for example, consists of a row of houses with shop fronts that extend into the open streets. However, in contrast to the arcades, where the attempt is to interiorize exteriors, the relationship between the open Cook’s Court and its adjoining houses is interactive and conflictual. Mrs. Snagsby’s shrill voice spills into Cook’s Court all the time, but what she has to say is very much part of her domestic affairs. At the same time Snagsby’s law stationery shop, which extends his home into the street, attracts a bewildering array of customers and, in this way, exposes the inner living quarters to the socially unpredictable encounters of the world outside. For Mrs. Snagsby, Jo’s sudden emergence from the street into the midst of a tea party that she is hosting for the Reverend Chadband and his wife signifies more than a stray intrusion. When she hears Jo’s account of his strange encounter with a lady who apparently wanders about in the streets looking for the paupers’ graveyard, and when she observes her husband’s sympathetic attitude to Jo, she begins to entertain dark suspicions about Jo’s paternity.

Mrs. Snagsby’s suspicion is, of course, entirely unfounded, but it does anticipate, in its absurd way, the other unthinkable liaison in the novel and, even more importantly, the breaching of the domestic threshold that this will involve. That breach is, of course, inseparable from Lady Dedlock’s sexuality, and I will try to show soon how Dickens works with techniques that developed in city sketches to find in Lady Dedlock’s sexual transgression the means of holding together in her figure the marks of those dramatic social disparities that make up a city. But before moving to Lady Dedlock, it is necessary to discuss a related set of problems pertaining to Thackeray’s representation of Becky’s body and her sexuality.

In comparison to Dickens, Thackeray’s handling of the problem of sexuality is paradoxically both more and less expressive. Becky’s situation—the air of uncertainty that surrounds her social (and, in the early parts of the novel, even marital) status, the nature of her intelligence, and her ambitions—makes possible a far freer articulation of a woman’s sexuality than Victorian novels usually allow for, but it also confines Becky’s unanchored sexuality within the network of interiors that make up the novel’s characteristic social spaces. Despite the relatively homogenous social parameters within which Thackeray unfolds Becky’s career, however, the representation of Becky’s sexuality turns out to be radically split: characterized, on the one hand, by the unrestrained and fascinated articulation of its enabling aspects as Becky, freed from the constraints of conventional domesticity, goes about finding her way with great skill through the system of signs by which social superiority is asserted and power wielded in the world of Vanity Fair and,
on the other, by the determination to expose this sexuality to the retributive backlash of a patriarchal domestic morality. Moreover, as with the protagonist of *Bleak House*, the effects of Thackeray’s split representation of Becky’s sexuality are marked above all on her body. Thus, unlike Amelia’s domesticated body, which bears no signs of her sex except those that can be contained within the有机性 of domestic reproduction, Becky’s body is stared at, publicly discussed, reified into a sex object. Squills, for example, describes her entirely in terms of her anatomy: “Green eyes, fair skin, pretty figure, famous frontal development” (177). What makes Thackeray’s delineation of Becky’s body truly paradigmatic of the social dynamics that underlie the novel, however, is that the moralized trajectory of representation coexists with a fascinated exploration of the socially empowering aspects of Becky’s sexuality. At this level Becky’s body, far from being a passive object of male fantasies, is shown to be something that is deployed, with brilliant effect, by a gendered intelligence so developed that its maneuvers in the social arena are often compared to those of Napoleon in war. The important scene in which Becky entertains Lord Steyne provides a good example of the effectiveness with which Becky is able to deploy her body in her attempts to gain a position in high society:

The great Lord Steyne was standing by the fire sipping coffee. . . . There was a score of sconces, of gilt and bronze and porcelain. They lighted up Rebecca’s figure to admiration, as she sate on a sofa covered with a pattern of gaudy flowers. She was in a pink dress and looked as fresh as a rose; her dazzling white arms and shoulders were half covered with a thin hazy scarf through which they sparkled; her hair hung in curls around her neck; one of her little feet peeped out from the fresh crisp folds of silk—the prettiest little foot in the prettiest little sandal in the finest silk stocking in the world. (177)

In contrast to Lady Dedlock, who (as I will show) is freed by her relationship with Hawdon from the specificity of her environment and even of a distinctive individuality, Becky’s body is constituted by an internally consistent system of signs that not only projects a sharply individualized sexuality but also registers the whole process by which the signs of class are acquired and redeployed. It is precisely because Becky’s body is implicated inextricably in the system of signs that may be said both to energize and to demarcate the limits of social behavior in *Vanity Fair* that it becomes impossible for Thackeray to use the social ambiguity that distinguishes Becky’s position from that of every other character in *Vanity Fair* to stretch her figure beyond
the social spaces described in the novel—to loosen it in such a way that it becomes capable of registering simultaneously the signs of the contradictory social worlds of her childhood and her adulthood. In fact, in contrast to the methods of Dickens (and of urban forms such as the city sketches), which often draw their energies from the play of diverse or contradictory social surfaces, Thackeray’s characters develop not horizontally but vertically in space. This striving for depth rather than breadth points to a second critical element in Thackeray’s characterization: the extremely productive way in which it uses time.

Time, in *Vanity Fair*, is the element that most clearly embodies Thackeray’s movement away from magazine writing toward realistic characterization: it may be thought of as an invisible hinterland that gives depth to character, as the all-important element whose apparent invisibility disguises its indispensability in any articulation of a changing inner life. This inner significance of time becomes visible in *Vanity Fair*, above all, during the moments of crisis, for instance, when after deciding finally to disinherit his son, old Osborne retires to his study that is now thick with the details of his past, and, in a representative moment, turns to his escritoire:

In the large shining mahogany escritoire Mr. Osborne had a drawer especially devoted to his son’s affairs and papers. Here he kept all the documents relating to him ever since he had been a boy; here were his prize copy books and drawing books, all bearing George’s hand, and that of the master, here were his first letters in large round-hand sending his love to papa and mama, and conveying his petition for a cake . . . They were all marked and docketed, and tied with red tape . . . his letters from the West Indies—his agent’s letters, and the newspapers containing his commissions: here was a whip he had when a boy, and in a paper a locket containing his hair, which his mother used to wear. (216)

Clearly the critical element in Osborne’s crisis is time, not only because time here loses its discreet everyday quality, becomes self-conscious as it were, makes visible its own passage, but also because by doing this, it humanizes old Osborne, exposes his rigid, selfish personality to the inescapable pain of memory, and thus gives to it an unexpected emotional depth.

In the main plot of *Bleak House*, on the other hand, time does not move in its everyday, “realistic” pace: it does not emerge as the element in which individuals and personal relationships gradually develop; as the major if almost unnoticed feature in the making of the plot. Instead, the arrangement of time in the main plot of *Bleak House* is characterized not by its conti-
nuity but by its breaks: it is organized as a series of “crises,” in Bakhtin’s sense of the term—points where a “radical change, an unexpected turn of fate takes place, where decisions are made, where the forbidden line is over stepped.” An example of this kind of use of time is the moment that sets into motion the Lady Dedlock plot. As Lady Dedlock reclines in her usual languid manner near a fire in the drawing room of Chesney Wold, her face is suddenly animated by her recognition of the handwriting in a legal paper that Tulkinghorn carries. She strives to suppress her agitation but, despite her tremendous will power, fails and is taken ill. The handwriting that Lady Dedlock recognizes is that of her former lover who is now an opium-eating pauper. The surfacing of Lady Dedlock’s past thus introduces a sharp break in the languid pace of her everyday life, brings her to a turning point, and threatens to expose her to a radically new space. Put another way, the mass of time that constitutes Lady Dedlock’s past is important not because it sustains her subjective evolution, but because it enables Dickens to stretch her image across the “great gulfs” of the metropolis. Thus, the “crisis” in the Lady Dedlock plot is a pivotal point in a compositional method that is energized by the shocks of the street rather than the psychological and social complexities developing through the interactions of a group of socially homogeneous people and that has as its end the distinct individualization of characters.

Until quite recently, few critics even recognized that the urban mode of characterization that produced Lady Dedlock could have its distinctive expressive logic. Instead, the privileged status given to the psychologically authentic character—which spontaneously unfolded its “humanity,” “its natural sense and natural feelings”—enabled critics to reduce Dickens’s “figures” to a “community of eccentrics.” Alex Woloch’s recent work has, however, complicated the liberal humanist propensity to predicate the literary success of novels on their ability to indefinitely sustain characters in and for themselves—“character in its inward and outward workings, in its involuntary self-betrayals and subtle self-sophistications,” as George Henry Lewes puts it.

Alex Woloch’s seminal The One vs. the Many shows that the potential limitlessness of a character’s unfolding self is, in novels, limited by its insertion within “the definitively circumscribed form of a narrative.” This means that the unfolding of even the most psychologically complex character must come up against, and be continuously moderated by, the demands made by the plot as well as by other characters. The great value of Woloch’s work, for this book, lies in its recognition that in the “chaotic urban field” of Dickens’s novels, “other characters” can expand into a crowd. Thus,
Woloch argues that individuality in a novel like *Bleak House* is threatened always by the “sheer fact of urban multiplicity.” The “tens of thousands of people” who “lose their footholds” and stumble on the tracks of “other foot passengers,” to follow Woloch in quoting from the famous first paragraph of *Bleak House*, have little chance of emerging as sharply delineated, freely developing individuals. This erosion of individuality corresponds, in Woloch’s account, to the way Dickens organizes light in his novels and, by implication, to what he allows his readers to see. For example, in the London of *Bleak House* where the fog never lifts, things “are continuously presented as half visible,” and what “incompletely seeing” produces is, in Woloch’s brilliant phrase, “obscure or eccentric sights.” Unlike Henry James, thus, Woloch uses the term “eccentric” to describe not the lack of inner lives in Dickens’s figures but rather the (peculiarly modern) experience of fragmentation that is attendant on their urban existence.

Woloch is right in relating Dickens’s characterization to the city and, more specifically, in focusing on the city’s fragmenting visual field “from which human beings themselves emerge only partially.” What he does not consider is the city’s propensity to promote unexpected intersections, and the effects that this might have on an urban mode of characterization. For George Cruikshank, on the other hand, the urban mode’s freedom from the internal consistency demanded by realistic characterization made it capable not only of registering the fragmenting effects of the city but also of bringing together, within the figure, the city’s dramatic discontinuities. In a passage full of the most interesting resonances, Cruikshank digs out from inner London an image that, in its grotesque incongruities, would approximate the realistic critic’s ultimate nightmare—“a pug nosed Apollo or a Jupiter in Great Coat.”

There was, in the neighborhood in which I resided, a low public house . . . It was frequented by coal-heavers only; and it stood in Wilderness Lane . . . To this house of inelegant resort . . . which I regularly passed . . . my attention was especially attracted by the sounds of a fiddle, together with other indications of festivity; when glancing towards the tap room, I could clearly discern a small bust of Shakespeare placed over the chimney piece, with a short pipe stuck in its mouth. This was not clothing the palpable and the familiar with golden exhalations from the dawn, but it was reducing the immortal beauty of Apollo himself to a level with the commonplace and the vulgar. Yet there was something not to be quarreled with in the association of ideas to which the object led. It struck me to be the perfection of the human picturesque; it was a palpable meeting of the Sublime and the
Ridiculous; the world of Intellect and Poetry seemed thrown open to the meanest capacity; extremes had met; the highest and lowest had united in harmonious fellowship . . . it was impossible not to recognize the fitness of the pipe. It was only the pipe that would have become the mouth of the poet, in that extraordinary scene, and without it, he himself would have wanted majesty and the right to be present.\textsuperscript{24}

In this description of a low-life scene from the giant metropolis, the coal heavers show little respect for the integrity of Shakespeare’s image: they add to it new and incongruous features, vulgarize it, and transform it into an object whose significance lies not in its replication of a real-life figure but in its ability to hold together the dramatic incongruities of the city. Put another way, anything in the bust of Shakespeare that might convey a sense of flesh and blood individuality—a facial expression, a look in the eye that might communicate some facet of inner life, or even a distinctive physical profile—is either consciously blanked out or distorted. But what Shakespeare’s image loses in terms of psychological depth, it gains semantically by the unrestrained play of surfaces that its freedom from any commitment to life-like replication makes possible.

As with Cruikshank, the diverse, contradictory impulses of the city—its “magic-lantern”-like quality—were vitally important to Dickens’s art of characterization, something without which, as he wrote from the relative quiet of Laussane, his “figures were disposed to stagnate.”\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, an unknown correspondent of Hotton went so far as to claim:

The grand object of Mr. Dickens, as a novelist, has been not so much to depict human life as human life in London, and this he has done after a manner he learned from “The Life in London” of Mr. Pierce Egan. If you remember that once famous book, you will call to mind that he takes his heroes—the everlasting Tom and Jerry—now to a fencing saloon, now to a dancing house, now to a chophouse, now to spunging-house. The idea is not to evolve the characters of Tom and Jerry but to introduce them in new scene after scene. And so you find with Dickens. He invents new characters, but he never invents them without at the same time inventing new situations and surroundings of London life.\textsuperscript{26}

Hotton’s correspondent is right in noting that in the urban aesthetic that the Dickensian novel helped to develop, space is often privileged over time, and that the object seems to be to take the reader through “scene after scene” rather than offering her or him an internal view of a character’s evolution.
What he does not comment on, however, are the expressive strategies—
noted in the previous chapter—by which Egan managed to superimpose
on his figures the contradictory marks of the socially diverse spaces across
which they move. These strategies are developed and deployed in several
socially significant ways in Dickens’s characterization of Lady Dedlock.

Like the bust of Shakespeare, Lady Dedlock’s figure is not enclosed
within what Bakhtin would call an “individual, closed sphere.” She devel-
ops not so much vertically within herself as horizontally in space. She is
physically freed, in a far more radical sense, than Becky from the framework
of “relationships of family . . . of social status and social class,” which are,
as Bakhtin argues, the “stable, all determining basis of plot connections”
in the middle-class domestic novel,27 precisely so that her body can hold
together, in a relationship of tense simultaneity, the contradictory marks of
the social extremities through which it is stretched. Thus, if Becky’s unan-
chored sexuality becomes the paradoxical means of focusing on her body
the signs by which social status is acquired and asserted, the effect of Lady
Dedlock’s liaison with Hawdon is to shatter the integrity of her social exis-
tence. Significantly, a key element in Dickens’s delineation of Lady Dedlock
is the transforming device of the disguise. It is this device that enables Dick-
ens, for example, to superimpose on her figure two sets of contrasting sig-
nifiers, such as a diamond ring under the sleeve of a servant’s dress. In this
way Lady Dedlock’s frequent disguises split her body in a way that would
never be possible in the more realistic modes of characterization: they prod
the reader into seeing Lady Dedlock as both servant and lady, both lady
and brick maker’s wife, and they lead inexorably to the climactic emblem in
the Lady Dedlock plot, in which Lady Dedlock’s corpse, dressed in Jenny’s
clothes and with one arm around a bar in the gate of the paupers’ grave-
yard, suggests powerfully how expressive modes generated in the popular
forms of the city are used to break down the integrity not only of the indi-
vidual subject but also of any conception of “civilization” that seeks to sus-
tain itself by shutting itself off from the harsh realities that lie beyond it.

This chapter has been concerned so far with the relationship between
certain ways of representing London that developed in popular forms such
as the city sketches and a mode of characterization that seeks not to project
but to shatter the physical, social, and psychological integrity of its subject.
But the fracturing of Lady Dedlock’s social identity also opens up for analy-
sis a larger set of questions. These relate to the ways in which *Bleak House*
engages with various extrafictional discourses, such as the highbrow literary
criticism that appeared in the Victorian quarterlies or the reports of sanitary
reformers such as John Simon and especially with their response to the many
discursive, but also material, crossings across social spheres that became inevitable once dramatically divergent social groups began to inhabit and write about the metropolis. I will show that all these discourses regularly deployed the metaphor of disease or infection while negotiating the sort of crossings described above but will also focus on the changing connotations of the disease metaphor as it moved from the Victorian quarterlies to a novel like _Bleak House_. This will bring to the surface, once again, the tension that has been the starting point of this book: on the one hand, the threat that the discursive churning induced by the uncontrollable circulation of mass-produced print commodities posed to the more educated theories of novel writing and, on the other hand, the emergence out of this churning of paradigms that aimed at breaching precisely those social and cultural boundaries with which the higher traditions of novel writing sought to preserve their internal integrity.

As it happens, _Bleak House_ contains a scene that seems to self-consciously connect the fracturing of Lady Dedlock’s image within the novel to the larger process of fragmentation and reactivation that was a basic feature of the popular print market of the early nineteenth century. This scene occurs in chapter 7, when Guppy, clerk at Kenge and Carboy, finds his way into the splendid drawing room at Chesney Wold and is immediately struck by Lady Dedlock’s portrait:

“Blest!” says Guppy, staring in a kind of dismay at his friend, “if I can ever have seen her. Yet I know her! Has the picture been engraved, miss?”

“The picture has never been engraved. Sir Leicester has always refused permission.” (92)

It is the uncanny likeness that Lady Dedlock’s portrait bears to Esther that catches Guppy’s attention, but Guppy is, in fact, right in his conjecture about Lady Dedlock’s portrait having been engraved. Sir Leicester may strive to preserve the unrepeatable uniqueness, the “aura” of the Lady Dedlock portrait that adorns the drawing room at Chesney Wold, but the techniques of reproducing artworks such as Lady Dedlock’s portrait and the existence of large markets for such reproduced prints, in fact, prove to be too strong for Sir Leicester’s prohibition. They wrench Lady Dedlock’s image from its unique existence at Chesney Wold, reproduce it in innumerable copies, modify it at various levels according to the tastes of consumers, and relocate it in the most unexpected of places. Thus, Tony Jobling’s “Galaxy of British Beauty, representing ladies of title and fashion in every variety of smirk that art, combined with capital, is capable of producing” (267), includes a
somewhat down-market version of Lady Dedlock’s portrait. Clearly the free circulation of Lady Dedlock’s image results in what Benjamin describes as a “tremendous shattering of tradition”; it breaks down an important barrier that separates Chesney Wold from Tony Jobling’s modest room and, in this way, encourages the intermingling of expressive resources and ways of seeing bred in widely separated social spheres. Such a process would, obviously, be very dangerous for any culturally exclusive theory of art. Thus, Sir Leicester’s anxiety about his lady’s portrait is paradigmatic of a larger process in the world outside. It gestures, on the one hand, toward conditions that facilitated not only the multiplication of works of high art but also the circulation of more ordinary images, motifs, and ideas through an array of socially disparate genres and media and, on the other hand, toward the consolidation, in the pages of the Victorian quarterlies, of a discourse whose fear and loathing of such cultural intermingling is expressed above all in the metaphor of contamination or infection.

One example of the sustained use of the infection metaphor to express elite cultural anxieties can be found in reviews of the “sensation” novels carried by journals like Temple Bar and the Edinburgh Review through the 1860s. The reviewers were offended not only by the sensational and immoral subjects of “sensation” novels, but also by the acceptance these novels had gained among the middle-class reading public. As a reviewer in the Temple Bar wrote despairingly, after tearing apart what she or he saw as a particularly repugnant example of a sensation plot: “But . . . we have not been speaking of a serial story of ‘Reynolds’s Miscellany’ or the ‘London Journal,’ but of a novel ‘large numbers’ of which, it was advertised upon its appearance, would be ‘taken by circulating libraries, where well appointed carriages do most congregate.’” The quarterly press responded to this cultural threat by comparing the development of mass literary culture—to which the “sensation” novel was the latest and most dangerous manifestation—to the progress of an epidemic. The “original germ, the primitive monad” from which the “sensation” novel had grown was the cheap novel catering to the half-educated masses. The immorality, sensationalism, and titillation inseparable from these novels had spread “virus”—like in all directions—“from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shilling volume” or, to use more direct terms, from “the hovel to the mansion.” The cultural infection emanating from the lower depths had, thus, succeeded in bringing about an unthinkable union between the reading habits of the “kitchen” and the “drawing room.”

The major anxieties that underpin the reviews—contamination, the effects of sensational fiction produced for the half-educated masses, the changing
relationship between “hovels” and respectable drawing rooms—reappear in Inquiry Commission reports on the sanitary conditions of London slums that were released through the 1830s and '40s. For example, Simon’s first *Annual Report* of October 1849 shared with the literary reviews a middle-class horror of life in the lower depths as well as an anxiety about the “moral” contagion that came out of the slums. However, far from joining the literary critics in their effort to sustain an autonomous cultural sphere for the middle class, Simon’s whole attempt was to shock the respectable with his horrific accounts of disease-bearing slums that lay in their immediate neighborhood. The sanitary reports did not follow the reviews in constituting the cheap, low-life novels as the virus-like vectors of cultural contamination. On the contrary, some observers at least argued that the sensational urban mysteries—which exemplified, according to *Temple Bar*, the low and contaminating literary entertainment—shared John Simon’s commitment to circulating knowledge about the atrocious sanitary conditions that prevailed in London’s slums. Looking for precedents from literature that would convey a sense of the “fearful interest of [the] unvarnished disclosures” that Simon’s first *Report* was about to make, the *Times* could point only to “the vivid horrors of those fictitious chronicles, *The Mysteries of Paris* and *The Revelations of London.*” The *Times* follows the literary reviews in focusing on the sensational nature of the fiction produced by authors like Eugene Sue. But rather than being a sign of aesthetic degeneration, this sensationalism becomes, for the *Times*, a means of social exposure, corresponding to the equally dramatic “revelations” made by doctors, sanitary officers, and journalists about the existence, in the heart of the world's metropolis, of a primitive disease-bearing “tribe” or “race.”

It is possible now to respond, on the one hand, to the differing ways in which the literary critics and sanitary reformers related to mass-produced sensational urban novels and, on the other, to the changes that this difference produced in the way they treated the idea of infection. For the *Times* the best-selling authors of urban mysteries were important, above all, because they had made visible parts of London that did not exist in the map of the middle classes. It is to the dynamics produced by social difference that both the literary critics and sanitary reformers linked the idea of infection. Thus, in the highbrow literary reviews, infection had worked as a metaphor of intrusion, expressing the inevitably contaminating effect that the literature of the “hovel” or the “kitchen” would have on what was read in “drawing rooms.” However, moving from the problem of taste to that of sanitary reform, the “vivid horrors” described in the works such as *The Revelations of London* become not potential threats to the aesthetic
integrity of the middle-class novel but rather a mode of representation that the sanitary reformers could emulate in their attempt to draw attention to the urgency of reform. This partnership between the sanitary reports and the best-selling urban novels is reinforced even more by the way doctors treated the relationship between urban disparities and infectious disease. For sanitary reformers such as Dr. Ferrier, infection was not an intrusion from the lower depths but the retribution that a society had to suffer for neglecting the poor. Thus, Ferrier argued that although the poor were the first and worst victims of contagion, it was “hardly possible to prevent communication of the disease to the rich” and that the infection reached “the most opulent” by “secret avenues” and “severely revenge[d] the neglect, or insensibility [by the rich] to the wretchedness surrounding them.”

Ferrier’s warning was echoed by several nineteenth-century doctors and journalists. Cholera, the Times wrote, “is the best of all sanitary reformers, it overlooks no mistake and pardons no oversight.” Similarly Dr. Sutherland declared that cholera was not “a respecter of classes.” This representation of infectious disease as something that moved from “those haunts of beggary where it is rife, into the most still and secluded retreat of refinement,” is, in fact, literally enacted in the plot of Bleak House.

Bleak House embodies some of the ways that the discourse of sanitary reform supplemented and intermeshed with the syncretic urban novel to shatter that fantasy of an exclusive cultural sphere that is encoded both in the Victorian quarterly’s nightmare of cultural contamination and Sir Leicester’s determination to protect the “aura” of his wife’s portrait. Thus, at one level, Bleak House performs precisely the function that the Victorian quarterlies would associate with spreading infection or contamination: it draws on the expressive resources of the “lower” forms such as the city sketches to produce what from the perspective of highbrow literary criticism would be a sensational, urban plot. On the other hand, like Simon’s Report of 1848, Bleak House was written in the aftermath of the cholera epidemic, and its treatment of infectious disease was, as Lauren Goodlad has shown, a self-conscious response to the “the manifest failures of the Public Health Act.”

The intersection of these two strands, so critical to the making of the novel, is marked in one of the best-known passages in the novel:

There is not a drop of Tom’s corrupted blood, but propagates infection or contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream . . . of a Norman house, and his grace shall not be able to say Nay to the alliance. There is not an atom of Tom’s slime, not a cubic inch of pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about
him . . . but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to
the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. (573)

This passage has been extensively commented upon, especially in analyses
that document the close and sympathetic relation that *Bleak House* shared
with the sanitary reform movement. It is significant, however, that the pas-
sage articulates powerfully the case both for sanitary reform and for the
urban aesthetic. The idea at its heart is, of course, literally realized within
the narrative when Esther is stricken ill by an infection that Jo contracts at
Tom-all-Alone's. But the tension synchronically articulated in the quoted
passage also unfolds diachronically in the main plot of *Bleak House*, and it
drives Lady Dedlock to the paupers' graveyard. The location that Dickens
chooses for Lady Dedlock's death connects her, as well as the urban plot
that she sets into motion, in very specific ways to the discourse of sanitary
reform:

> With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of
a court gives access to an iron gate—where every reeking villainy of life in
action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close
on life—here they lower our dear brother down a foot or two: here, to sow
him in corruption to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many
a sick bedside: a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilization and
barbarianism walked this boastful island together. (148)

As several critics have pointed out, Dickens’s description of the paupers’
graveyard drew a great deal from several sanitary reports exposing the hor-
rors of “city internments.” This intertwining of the discourse of sanitary
reform and the figure of Lady Dedlock once again draws attention to the
resonant image with which Dickens ends the story of her life. Marked by
the social extremes of an internally fractured metropolis, embodying the
expressive possibilities thrown up by the sort of discursive intermingling
that the quarterly press found so repugnant, the figure of Lady Dedlock—
lying presumably amidst “excrementious matter” and horribly close to the
corpses that have been “stuffed or impracted”—demonstrates finally the
ways in which sensational popular fiction supplemented the work of san-
tary reformers.

In the final analysis, then, the connotative shifts in the infection metaphor
could be related to differences in the ways in which discourses responded to
the problem of *contact* between the disparate social groups who are brought
together in the giant metropolis. *Bleak House* is full of such contacts: it
strives constantly to bring together the contradictions of the city in disconcerting juxtapositions, and its whole urban aesthetic is predicated on incorporating within the economy of the novel form the expressive resources of such “low” modes as the city sketch. In other words, Dickens sees interactions between the socially and culturally diverse individuals and groups who inhabit the city as both inevitable and generative, and if, in *Bleak House*, disease emerges as a negative manifestation of such interaction it is because, as Dickens insists repeatedly, the metropolitan administration neglects sanitary reform. In the literary reviews, on the other hand, the idea of infection is a metaphor to express an elitist revulsion at what one contemporary described as the snapping of “old sanitaire cordons . . . under pressure of the multitudes”[41]—that is, a means of discrediting precisely the sort of cultural interaction that produced a novel like *Bleak House*. *Bleak House* not only dramatizes, at the level of its content, the untenable nature of the elitist nostalgia for an exclusive cultural sphere but its modes of articulation also demonstrate the multiple expressive possibilities that such popular forms as radical journalism and the city sketches opened up for the novel form as a whole.