COUNTER-DIDACTIC VICTORIANS:
THE PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION IN THE NOVEL

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Counter-Didactic Victorians

"A political novel would not suit." "Notices to Correspondents," London Quarterly Review 1851

The Problem of the Industrial Novel

The ideal place to begin answering the main question of this chapter (and this dissertation) is the industrial novel, arguably the most political genre of Victorian fiction between 1840 and 1866. Studies of the industrial novel are repeatedly confronted with a conceptual problem: these novels tend to begin with socially charged situations, serious debates about working-conditions, and middle-class protagonists who represent class so simply that an allegorical interpretation is all but demanded of the literary critic. The more the novels progress, however, the less clear their social meaning becomes -- class-conflict turns secondary to middle-class love plots, social debates become more and more scarce, and the protagonists become less and less identifiable with a clear and consistent social position. In other words, the most political genre of fiction in this period ends up being far from clearly political. Why?

Scholars have offered two central solutions to this problem. The Marxist solution, spearheaded by Raymond Williams, discusses the change as the fearful reaction of a bourgeois subconscious incapable of fully addressing social problems because of its dread of the working
classes. Thus, Williams argues, “[r]ecognition of evil [in industrial novels] was balanced by fear of becoming involved. Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal” (109).

John Lucas calls this structural shift a bourgeois "retreat from the abyss," and Ruth Yeazell, too, analyzes a key structural feature of the genre, the substitution of "a politically dangerous man for a sexually unaggressive woman," as the "refuge" these novels take to escape the "deep anxiety about the growing division between the classes" which characterizes them (Lucas 141, Yeazell 127). P.J. Keating's extraordinary study of *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* goes further than this, broadening this type of analysis to all Victorian fiction representing the working classes:

...this process of avoidance of main issues is not peculiar only to minor, or indeed very minor novelists, but applies to most English working-class fiction written before the eighties. It is not so much a matter of degrees of talent, as a refusal or inability to break away from the literary and social conventions governing the role that a working man can be allowed to play in a novel. (46)

While such accounts can be (and often are) traced to a well-known Victorian fear of revolutionary social change, they are remarkably unsympathetic to their subject matter, and therefore are limited in the sensitivity of their analysis: seeing these novelists as cowards does not lend itself well to an understanding of the ways in which the rift between political engagement and domestic plots might have been itself deeply ingrained in Victorian views of the relationship between the two. This is in some ways the point of departure for Catherine Gallagher's scholarly masterpiece *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, which offers a solution that has been largely augmented by Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction*, and then taken to an absurd logical extreme by Josephine M. Guy's *The Victorian Social-Problem Novel*.¹ The formal contradiction, argues Gallagher throughout,

¹ The differences between Gallagher and Bodenheimer are negligible, and the studies complement each other
between social and private themes in industrial fiction, is the result of, and comment on, the paradoxes of Victorian ideologies, particularly in their attitude towards the relationship between the two spheres. "These novels, indeed, often display a structural tension created by the simultaneous impulses to associate and dissociate the public and private realms of experience" (114). Having this more sympathetic attitude towards the ideologies underlying these novels allows Gallagher to show how the personal solutions that end them, far from being an escape from public ones, are a necessary consequence of ideologies that intrinsically separate the personal from the social in order to unite them. This restores a sense of the deep link between the ethical and the political that Victorian culture clearly registered, and while the Marxist school does not really ignore social analysis of the personal, its political commitments to institutional changes do not allow such an analysis to turn into a probing of the ideological complexity such a link entails. Gallagher and Bodenheimer, then, have shown as well as any critic can, how the most political genre's seeming formal shift away from politics is less of a shift than a deeper exploration of the complexities of its political raison d'etre.

Among the two solutions, then, the second one seems more attentive to Victorian intellectual history, and on the whole more convincing, while the Marxist account is more socially coherent and offers a more consistent view of middle-class values. There is, however, a third solution, one that is offered in passing by critics of both camps, but hardly ever elaborated on or explored in depth. This solution is one based on the critics' aesthetic sensibilities to the formal problems these political novels tend to run into, the general consensus that the entire genre is somehow artistically flawed. As a result of the perceived artistic failure of these novels,

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2 Thus, Raymond Williams analyses the marriage between Margaret Hale and Thornton as "a unification of the practical energy of the northern manufacturer with the developed sensibility of the southern girl," and nearly every Marxist account of industrial fiction involves a reading of the marriages in these novels as a metonymy for uniting social classes (92).
the critic will often assert an incompatibility between the formal or aesthetic demands of the novel and its political demands. Thus Keating writes, rather imperiously for a critic who is far from committed to his own point:

Any attempt to show how the working classes are portrayed in Victorian fiction must return again and again to the apparent difficulties experienced by novelists in trying to establish a balance between commitment to a class viewpoint and artistic form. (5)

But his own study hardly returns to this balance, at least not explicitly. Catherine Gallagher’s analysis of Disraeli, similarly, ends on a staggering note of dissonance between the novel form and politics:

What this industrial novel [Sybil] displays, then, is the exclusion of politics from the novel, even in the work of a writer who was above all a political man and who believed that politics, like literature, provided the best hope of reconciling facts and values. Disraeli cannot, finally, create a mode of representation for his desired politics. Politics and Literature tend to exclude rather than complement each other... (218)

Other critics may easily be cited, but the story is largely the same: critics assert a difficulty in reconciling political and literary aims as a characteristic of these novels' themes and forms, even to the point of claiming a relationship of mutual exclusivity between the two, only to proceed with their analysis as if the claims were never made. 3

This dissertation will take this parenthetical claim as the basis for its argument, and not just for the industrial novel, but for the Victorian novel as a whole. More specifically, I intend to show Victorian novelists and critics, far from seeing the novel as the perfect tool for espousing

3 A couple more examples should establish the practice. Igor Webb opens his analysis of industrial fiction (though he defines the genre differently, and treats texts often not considered part of it) with the promising claim that "The formal problem that Austen, Bronte and Dickens face is the difficulty of assimilating the profoundly disruptive social and political developments of their time into the novel of manners" (10). Fast forward to Webb's analysis, and the "problem" turns into a "parallel," thus in effect dissipating as a problem: "[t]hese questions of theme and ideology are intimately bound with a parallel aesthetic question: how will a fictional character be "justified," be shown to have become such and such a person?" (47-8) Guy comes even closer than this, when she claims that melodrama complicates the politics of realism of industrial novels for literary reasons, because "realistic description, or the enumeration of factual details, could not provide materials for plots" (118). But she immediately dismisses this as the "obvious" and "prosaic" solution, proceeding instead to offer a political reading of melodrama, not even acknowledging the conflict between the two explanations (119).
any and all political views, often viewed the form as an obstacle to political engagement, and political engagement as an obstacle to the form. Where my argument differs from the parenthetical remarks of these critical magnets is its reliance on historically verifiable literary taste, and subsequently its less broad and extreme scope. That is, rather than argue for a transhistorical, transideological "tension between ideology and literary forms" (Gallagher xiii), I intend to show that the period's novelistic taste had placed enormous pressures on novelists to dissociate their form from political and ethical causes. The result of this pressure is that Victorian novelists consistently disavow an educational stance as soon as their fiction approaches it. It is such a compromise, I would suggest, that turned so many industrial novelists from their social themes to personal scenes of domesticity that they would have been perceived as more novelistic.

This, however, requires a revision of the common oversimplified view of Victorian taste, as purely moralizing and didactic, both ethically and politically. Thus, Patrick Brantlinger's canonical book on industrial fiction, The Spirit of Reform, opens with a statement which he deems uncontroversial, partly because it is one which Victorian writers themselves never tire of repeating: that literature is or can be an instrument of social amelioration, at the same time that it is shaped by social events. (1) And more recently, Amanda Claybaugh has extended such a view to the Anglo-American realist tradition, claiming that Nineteenth-century novelists were united in their conviction that purposes were what novels did and should have, even if they sometimes disagreed about what these purposes should be. As a consequence, they thought of novels not as self-contained aesthetic objects but rather as active interventions into social and political life. (36)

In these views there is hardly a perceived tension at all between the literary and the political in Victorian fiction. On the contrary, Brantlinger goes so far as to claim that "Victorian fiction
aspires to the condition of bluebooks," and Claybaugh goes further to claim that "the status of the novel and of the novelists were secured by the prestige of reform," and that novelists adopted social purposes partly to cement their success as writers (Brantlinger 28, Claybaugh 51).

Many more esteemed scholars of the period may be cited to the effect that novelists and their audiences wanted texts to be politically and morally didactic, but as Brantlinger points out, this is hardly in contention. To the extent that these claims are true, they must be read against anithetical remarks made by the same writers the consensus depends on. Indeed, the two most comprehensive studies of Victorian reviews and commentary on the novel, Richard Stang’s *Theory of the Novel in England* and Kenneth Graham’s *English Criticism of the Novel*, both record extensively what Stang aptly calls “the campaign against didacticism,” but both accounts summarily dismiss this as a technical and subordinate objection to direct modes of didactic fiction(70). While their body of evidence is indispensable to my research, their analysis of it ultimately ends by reinforcing the consensus rather than challenging it. This dissertation is premised on the challenge.

“I Know Nothing of Political Economy”

4 The most devastating example, for me, is Altick's comment on Victorian taste in *Victorian People and Ideas*, a classical background text for students of the period. That one of the most astute and learned book historians could ignore the myriad of reviews we will immediately survey is a testament both to their paradoxical nature and to how deeply entrenched our stereotypes of Victorian taste are. Thus, Altick writes, quite falsely for the novel: “Subtlety and indirection were not highly valued in Victorian art, because they delayed and confused rather than assisted the beholder's response. Victorians...wanted to be addressed directly, on a single unambiguous level of communication. Seeking edification rather than aesthetic pleasure, they expected, and got, an art that aimed for unmistakable over-all effect. Although modern criticism has detected a wealth of subtleties in the work of some major Victorian novelists...there is little evidence that contemporary critics or ordinary readers noticed them” (*Victorian People and Ideas* 278)

The critical consensus about Victorian taste thus remains incomplete, and misleadingly so, but it is also quite understandable. Indeed, our countering thesis exists, paradoxically, in a relationship of mutual causality with the didactic consensus. That is, frequently a desire for didacticism and morality in fiction led reviewers and novelists to dissociate fiction from both. To begin to have a sense of the dialectical relationship between the didactic and counter-didactic impulses of Victorian views of the novel, let us take a few key canonical novelists whom criticism tends to associate with political engagement, and see how some of their statements indicate a problematic relationship between fiction and social purpose. The following quotes from George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, and Elizabeth Gaskell, all suggest that turning fiction into an instrument of social change was hardly so straightforward a proposition for Victorians as political readings tend to assume:

I thought you understood that I have grave reasons for not speaking on certain public topics. No request from the best friend in the world—even from my own husband—ought to induce me to speak when I judge it my duty to be silent. If I had taken a contrary decision, I should not have remained silent till now. My function is that of the aesthetic, not the doctrinal teacher—the rousing of the nobler emotions, which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures, concerning which the artistic mind, however strongly moved by social sympathy, is often not the best judge. (Letters, III, 237-8)

In writing Phineas Finn, and also some other novels which followed it, I was conscious that I could not make a tale pleasing chiefly, or perhaps in any part, by politics. If I wrote politics for my own sake, I must put in love and intrigue, social incidents, with perhaps a dash of sports, for the sake of my readers. In this way I think that I made my political hero interesting. (Autobiography, chapter 17)

The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people.... whatever public effort can do in the way of legislation, or private effort in the way of merciful deeds, or helpless love in the way of "widow's mites," should be done, and that speedily.... I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully; and if my accounts agree or clash with any system, the agreement or
disagreement is unintentional. (Preface to Mary Barton)

Even here, then, in the direct acknowledgment of tensions between literary and political or didactic practice (and these categories are not quite interchangeable themselves, but we will return to this shortly), we see Brantlinger and Claybaugh's point: George Eliot does not view herself as a political teacher, but as an aesthetic teacher she hopes to broaden her readers' sympathy enough to make them more amenable to "desiring the social good." Trollope did not feel political themes made for a good novel, but he clearly wanted politics "for [his] own sake," and reading his contradictory remarks on the subject suggests that he had as much desire for the practice of politicizing fiction as he had aversion to it. Gaskell's quote is perhaps the most conflicted of all, as most of her preface suggests a strong social commitment at the heart of her writing, and the disclaimer distancing herself from any identifiable political stance strikes one as so incongruous that it can easily be dismissed as disingenuous. If we put it in the context of Eliot's quote, we could even say that it is paradoxically Gaskell's ethical didacticism that leads her away from associating herself with a political didacticism. Like Eliot, Gaskell’s interest in arousing sympathy could logically lead to a dissociation from a political discourse she knew was inherently divisive. If literary criticism largely ignores such counter-didactic moments, then, to argue for an overall social purpose underlying Victorian fiction, its account is far from false; rather, it is incomplete.

What it is missing is precisely what this chapter aims to provide - a greater exposure to the pervasiveness of the Victorian distaste for didactic fiction. Moreover, this dissertation will show how that distaste, far from appearing as a subordinate, marginal counter-narrative in

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Much more will be said in the Trollope chapter, but for now let us merely note that in The Autobiography alone one finds Trollope comfortably asserting that he had used his favorite characters, Plantagenet Palliser and his wife Glencora, "for the expression of [his] political or social convictions," only to condemn the similar practice in Bulwer-Lytton's writing: "I cannot say of Bulwer as I have of the other novelists whom I have named that he lived with his characters. He lived with his work, with the doctrines which at the time he wished to preach, thinking always of the effects which he wished to produce; but I do not think he ever knew his own personages,—and therefore neither do we know them" (Ch.10 , 13)
Victorian assessments of the novel, was at the heart of its central cultural frames of mind, to borrow Houghton's useful term. What the field is missing, in other words, is an understanding of how the very critics and authors we most associate with moral and political didacticism were the ones seeking to limit the novel's ethical and political function. Not a re-shaping of the cultural frameworks themselves (of anti-intellectualism, evangelicalism, utilitarianism, etc..), then, but rather a reshaping of the complexity of their relationship to literary taste.

**Counter-Didactic taste? Problems of Definition**

One of the great difficulties in engaging this strand of taste is that the malleability of its array of arguments requires a certain looseness of definition. While no definition can perfectly account for the diverse concerns expressed by this Victorian attitude to fiction, we can broadly define "counter-didactic taste" as a dislike for, or disapproval of, a novel being used for ethical or political purposes. Yet, even in the short time we have spent with this counter-didactic taste we have seen that its aversion to political didacticism can rely on an ethical didacticism: the writer wants to improve her reader's moral attitudes, and trying to assert a political stance will interfere with such improvement. Why, then, do I conflate the two?

There are two main reasons: first, the conflation is crucial to Victorian taste, and writers often treat the repulsive effects of moralizing and politicizing fiction as one and the same. As we have seen, this is one of the explanations critics have suggested for the industrial novels, the ways in which ethical solutions are interchangeable with political ones. It stands to reason, then, that Victorian reviewers often attacked the novel "of purpose" without specifying, or indeed having, a clear distinction between ethical and political purposes. The second explanation is that even for those reviewers who do make the case that the novelist ought to be didactic ethically, but not politically, the distinction hardly holds throughout their criticism, and they do not hold
ethically didactic fiction in any higher esteem than the politically didactic, despite the importance of the distinction to their own writing. Thus, George Eliot, in the most famous of Victorian reviews, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists":

The most pitiable of all silly novels by lady novelists are what we may call the oracular species—novels intended to expound the writer’s religious, philosophical, or moral theories.

To which the dissociation from political didacticism above seems the natural complement.

Similarly, Thackeray's 1845 attack on political novels begins with the conflation of the two spheres, echoing the critical truism that

If we want instruction, we prefer to take it from fact rather than from fiction. We like to hear sermons from his reverence... I am sure you are very hearty and honest, but as these questions you propound here comprehend the whole scheme of politics and morals...I am, I confess, not prepared at the present moment to enter into them. ("Lever's St. Patrick's Eve" 122)

Then he proceeds to differentiate the two, in the very same paragraph, limiting the novelist to the ethical sphere at the expense of the political:

I would much rather hear you on your own ground -- amusing by means of amiable fiction, and instructing by kindly satire, being careful to avoid the discussion of abstract principles, beyond those of the common ethical science which forms a branch of all poets and novelists' business -- but, above all, eschewing questions of politics and political economy, as too deep....

This is eerily similar to Gaskell's disclaimer 3 years later, and it is important to note that this does give more space to the novelist to treat ethical questions than political ones. But Thackeray does not stop there, and for the rest of the essay the attack is on "moral tales of..,moral writers... who have adopted the didactic tone," which are then referred to as novels of "sentimental politics," and the rest of the essay utterly abandons its own initial distinction, treating "religious," "political" and "moral" as interchangeable modes of didacticism.

There is a general assumption, then, in Victorian reviews and fiction, that these terms so
intuitively distinct to us, all involve the common problem of didacticism, that not only are the
genres of “political”, “moral” and “religious” novels themselves interchangeable, but they are all
inseparable from the yet more opaque category of the “novel of purpose.” But this is far from
concluding our problems of definition, for the attacks on didacticism and moral fiction derive
great power and cultural currency, paradoxically, from moral and didactic concerns. This is why
“Counter-Didactic” might be especially appropriate, as it implies both a case against didacticism
and a countering didacticism, thus bearing didactic logic of the offense of didacticism. The term
is thus the only one I could think of to capture the multiplicity of disclaimers against didacticism
coming from the most didactic of sources.

The very best example of the paradoxical link between didacticism and its polar opposite
is Harriet Martineau's preface to the most didactically titled of English fictions, Illustrations of
Political Economy. Note how Martineau situates a defense of her didactic practice in an attack on
didactic fiction:

   We trust we shall not be expected to countenance the practice of making use of narrative
as a trap to catch idle readers, and make them learn something they are afraid of. We
despise the practice, and feel ourselves insulted whenever a book of the trap kind is put
into our hands. It is many years since we grew sick of works that pretend to be stories,
and turn out to be catechisms which we had much rather become acquainted with in its
undisguised form. The reason why we choose this form of narrative is, that we really
think it the best in which political economy can be taught...

The logic of this argument is dizzying. The general attitude implied by the royal “we” is that
education should be given in more direct and genuine forms, and that didactic fiction, by virtue
of being fiction, is immorally “trapping” its readers in a position of uncritical acceptance of
truths that are disguised, and therefore immoral. Yet the very next sentence proposes that this is
precisely what Martineau intends to do in her fiction. Martineau tries to ease this tension by
claiming that her preface’s open declaration of her didactic motivation will exculpate her from
the moral objection she herself raises, but the message to socially committed novelists is a rather polarizing one: either write with a clear and explicit message, or do not write to educate at all. More importantly for our purposes, this moral grounding of counter-didacticism, as confusing as it might appear at first, shows that a case for counter-didactic taste need not entail, or even imply, a radical revision of our moralizing understanding of Victorians. Martineau is moralizing – and she’s moralizing against moralizing fiction.

Things get more confusing, still, when we consider C.W. Russell’s attack on religious novels in the Catholic *Dublin Magazine*. Thus, in an 1853 article demanding a *stricter* ethical standard for fictional representation we find the following disclaimer, a commonplace of religious periodicals of the time:

> We are far from seeking hereby to imply that every real good novel must be, in the technical sense of the word, a religious novel. On the contrary, we think it all but impossible to produce a work of this class, which, with general readers at least, will not be likely to defeat its own object....Religious teaching directly conveyed under the guise of fiction, is almost invariably tiresome, and, indeed, repulsive. The authoress of *Amy Herbert*, is perhaps the only writer whose religious tales we could name, as exempt from the character of absolute prosiness, and even worse. ("Novel Morality" 90)

At first glance, this is merely the qualification Graham and Stang record: Russell objects to the novel's overt teaching, which is "*invariably tiresome,*" in nearly all cases guilty of the "utter prosiness" we can easily associate with a preachy novel. Looking more closely, however, we see Martineau’s opposite line of objection mixed in as well, as Russel’s attack is oxymoronically on "direct teaching *under the guise* of fiction.” Combined, then, with the moral critique of the underhanded educational smuggling of didactic fiction is a literary aversion to its technical failings as *too direct*. Put more simply, religious fiction for Russell is both *too direct* and dishonestly disguised. Ironically, then, this *is* a form of the moral taste one has been taught to expect from Victorian reviews, the critic's moral concerns (embodied in “repulsive,” and “even
worse”) overlapping neatly with his literary ones (with “prosiness,” and tedium). But the moral element unexpectedly leads away from the argument that novels ought to be religious texts, rather than towards it.

And the contradictions do not stop there, for Russell's counter-didactic critique of religious fiction is partly motivated by the didactic impulse underlying most of the essay. Thus, one of the main arguments against didactic fiction is that it "defeats its own purpose," that it actually produces the opposite effect to the one intended. In other words, it is Russell's very desire to see more religious feeling induced by fiction that leads him to denounce a genre that, both by overtly teaching and by dishonestly pretending to be mere fiction, distances "general readers, at least," from religion. If such logical elasticity renders this aspect of Victorian taste less rigorously definable, it also exemplifies its pervasiveness. When preachers and political economists condemn didactic fiction, and when their reasoning is so versatile and self-contradictory, we can no longer dismiss this phenomenon of Victorian culture as a marginal undercurrent of literary taste confining itself to “certain modes of didacticism” (Graham 85). Rather, as we have seen, and are about to explain, it resonated with all the major frames of mind we deeply associate with Victorianism.

Priests, novelists we associate with distinct social causes, even a political economist like Martineau, all seeing the novel form as one deeply conflicted with moral and social engagement. Even if we allow for the moral logic attached to many of these reviews, these are strange realities to be reckoned with. Why, after all, would a desire for more didacticism result in disclaimers against it? Why did political and moral fiction become associated with dishonesty? More broadly still, how did the utilitarian age of reform come to have such widespread problems with novels of purpose? And how is an emphasis on novelistic pleasure to be reconciled with our traditional
understanding of "unamused" Victorian Evangelicals? As a didactic novelist would say, do read on.

**Why the Victorians? The Usual Suspects**

**The Uselessness of Useful Fiction**

The Utilitarian spirit, writes Richard Altick in his comprehensive study of *The English Common Reader*, had a natural "prejudice against the use of books for what [were] considered frivolous purposes." Literature was excluded by Bentham because "it had no practical utility," and when Victorian Utilitarians did allow for it, they required that it remain useful, "judged above all in terms of its didactic power, its moral usefulness" (135-6). And yet, one would be hard-pressed to find a Victorian review embracing didacticism or usefulness unambiguously. Why?

In large part, because Altick’s account assumes didactic fiction was useful, whereas most Victorians found the genre precisely lacking in utility. That is, the measuring stick is what we would expect, but these novels come out surprisingly short by the very standards that should extoll them. On the contrary, most utilitarian reviews argue that the genre rather defeats its own purposes, so that ironically purposefully useful novels are rejected because of their uselessness. Thus, the industrialist and social critic William Rathbone Greg begins in the vein Altick would expect, writing, in 1853: "hundreds of readers who would sleep over a sermon, or drone over an essay... will be startled into reflection, or won to emulation... by the delineations they meet with in a tale which they opened only for the amusement of an hour" (381). But then, it is that very standard which leads him to add:

> The story may not (and never should) have been written with a definite didactic aim; there may be little moralizing and no formal exhortation, --the less of either the better; yet the reader may find a chord struck which needed only striking to vibrate to the end of life, but to which the key-note had never yet been found...
Similarly, Archdeacon Whatley, writing for the family magazine *Golden Hours* in 1873, after disqualifying fiction from the realm of intentional arguments, elaborates:

> But when, on the other hand, a moral which had evidently *not been intended* is deduced from a fiction, then...the author, though he has not exactly proved a point, has nevertheless borne a testimony to it *stronger because it is unintentional*....
>
> Moreover, the intention of our author (to inculcate a moral), must, if made evident, *defeat its own object*; whereas if we take care of the rules to be observed in the composition of a fiction, the moral will, to a certain extent, take care of itself, and *insinuate itself far more persuasively into the mind, than if it authoritatively demanded entrance there*. (179)

The same problem recurs when the religious *Prospective Review* requires the novelist not to "usurp the function of the preacher" because "the indirect teachings of example come home to the heart with far greater power," only to condemn in the same paragraph Bulwer-Lytton for his characters' "embodying certain moral ideas" (90). That review continues with the familiar note of purposeful obscurity: "the moral tone should be felt through a work of fiction...never *obtruding itself into notice*..." The very standard by which didacticism is urged, then, is the standard by which didactic fiction is rejected.

**The Wealth of Novels**

There is a more subtle way, however, in which the utilitarian frame of mind led to counter-didacticism. If we learn anything from Dickens’ Gradgrind, it is that utilitarianism likes to evaluate everything according to the principles of political economy. Put Gradgrindingly, while the novel as literary or educational experience might have had to be subordinated to didactic uses, the novel reviewed as an economic activity had to be protected from just such influences to preserve its relative advantages as a trade. Thus, wherever we see the rhetoric of economics permeate the reviews, limitations on the novel’s extra-literary pursuits quickly follow:  

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7 Raymond Williams makes the same point with regards to literature and the industrial revolution: "[during the industrial revolution] the production of art was coming to be regarded as one of a number of specialized kinds of production, subject to much the same conditions as the general production" (*Culture and Society* 32). While the
The business of the novel is to evolve its results, whatever they may be, from its natural plot, and by the help of the characters.... But in these novels with a purpose, the purpose is everything, while the fable and characterization are secondary considerations... ("A Triad of Novels" 575)

We have implied that a novel ceases to be a novel when it aims at philosophical teaching. It is not the vehicle for conveying knowledge. Its business is to amuse, and give us that insight into human affairs which is obtained by the observation of character. ("Modern Novelists: Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton" 482)

If a man uses a story for the purpose of stringing together maxims or reflections, then let him say so.... The first and chief business of the novel, however, is to give us authentic descriptions...and we cannot have the face of the picture disfigured by prominent aphorisms. ("The Uses of Fiction" 185)

It is crucial to note that these are not absolute limitations on the novel’s didactic functions.

Again, I am not arguing here for an Art-for-Art’s sake movement, nor even for Kantian aesthetics of purposeful purposelessness. Even in these quotes, “giving us insight into human affairs” could very well be a sphere for didacticism, as can “authentic descriptions.” What we do have, however, is an economic logic for limiting the novel to a rather narrow sphere often deemed in tension with other, more educational forms of discourse. Be the literary vocation of the novel what it may, the novel as a business has little business teaching.

Indeed, even critics one does not immediately associate with utilitarianism come to use its framework for articulating their critique of didactic fiction. Before his essay turns to use the terms “moral, political, religious,” and “didactic” interchangeably, Thackeray’s attack mentioned above singles out political discourse as beyond the novelist’s field of expertise:

I would much rather hear you on your own ground -- amusing by means of amiable fiction, and instructing by kindly satire, being careful to avoid the discussion of abstract principles, beyond those of the common ethical science which forms a branch of all poets and novelists’ business -- but, above all, eschewing questions of politics and political economy, as too deep.... (122)

argument here is identical to Williams', for Williams the point is tangential, and barely receives elaboration, which this section hopes to offer.
The reader ought not be too distracted by Thackeray allowing his own mode of instruction, "kindly satire," to the novelist, for so much else is proscribed by the notion of "all poets and novelists’ business," that Thackeray’s utilitarian model does much more to limit instruction than to promote it. Nor is it new for us to see didacticism folded into the counter-didactic mode. What is crucial, rather, is that Thackeray ironically uses the very logic of political economy to exclude the novelist from speaking of politics and political economy.

Even G.H. Lewes, who begins his critique of didacticism with the tone of the aesthete ("another novel with an earnest purpose. How long is our patience to be abused by these insults to our understanding and good taste?") makes use of the logic of political economy when he comes to explain the nature of the offense:

Writers [of such novels] know full well that not one man in a million would give a straw for their opinions whatsoever. The public does not care one iota for their thoughts: it only seeks to be amused in the old-fashioned way. It demands that every one adhere to his specialty and be true to his colours. For history; it looks for the man of patient research; for philosophy, to the profound thinker... for amusement, to the witty but good-natured satirist. A novel should be something of a satire, but have nothing in common with a sermon... ("The Mildmayes" 18)

The novelist's "specialty" suggests more explicitly that the economic principle of division of labor has been turned into an official standard of taste, with the novelist confined, like a factory hand or a skilled craftsman, to just those jobs that he is specialized in. If this seems a stretch, one need only read the 1830 Edinburgh Review, to see the analogy become explicit:

We will not deplore that it should be impossible to extract from [the silver-fork novels] any addition to intellectual philosophy. Every sensible person will look elsewhere for solid information. He turns to the novel for amusement, and hates to be cheated by a homily in disguise. Division of labour is a principle scarcely less commendable in literature than in manufactures; and the attempt to combine many objects, is often productive of a failure in all. ("Women as they are" 444)

We can now see Trollope's Autobiography, with its consistent novelist-as-cobbler theme, as a canonical example of this market-oriented view of the novel, and unsurprisingly Trollope too
emphasizes the pleasing function of the novelist as it relates to the novel's commercial status.\(^8\)

Granted, this is not what we normally have in mind when we talk about the autonomy of art from political and ethical commitment; even the word "taste" seems displaced when the logic is that of efficient manufacturing. But the age of the machine desired literary autonomy for mechanical reasons, and the resulting limits for novelists worked as an obstacle to didacticism no less vigorously than the lofty treatises of the decadents.

**The Importance of Being Earnest**

We have already seen that the most contradictory objection to didactic fiction is on the question of directness. Utility-oriented critics came to a consensus that indirect teaching is more productive than direct teaching. Be the critic on whatever side they may, practically no one was looking for long moralizing tracts in their novels. But then again, indirectness always risk dishonesty, as you are not actually saying what you mean to say, not teaching by teaching, as it were. From the perspective of Victorian earnestness, one can imagine the Victorian reaction to the ethical dangers of manipulating literary form. Indeed, it is now easy to understand why novels of purpose were associated with dishonesty – that dishonesty was practically required of them by the first set of critics. What is curious, however, is that Martineau’s overtly didactic reaction to such insidious didacticism was a rare response for the earnest camp. In the majority of cases, instead of arguing that more direct teaching of political-moral truths would circumvent the effects of the indirectly didactic novelist, reviewers and novelists assume that didactic forms already work *indirectly*, and that therefore they should be eliminated. In other words, while one camp wanted to hide the novelist's message in order to convey it more forcefully, the other saw

\(^8\) Two primary examples would be his discussion of Dickens' commercial success, which he reluctantly sees as the incontestable arbiter of literary quality ("the primary object of the novelist is to please, and this man's novels have been found more pleasant than those of any other writer" - ch. 13), and the analysis of serialization, a "mode of production [which] forces upon the author the conviction that he should not allow himself to be tedious in any single part" (Ch. 8).
such hiding as a pernicious trait of didactic genres, and sought therefore to eliminate didacticism not because of its directness but rather because of its covertness and subsequent dishonesty. This is the perfect example of the insurmountable flexibility of Victorian counter-didacticism: one set of critics wanted indirect teaching, the other resented just this kind of teaching for its vicariousness, but both ended up attacking social fiction, or novels of purpose more generally, for their didacticism.

A few examples should clarify how this strange dynamic works. G.P.R. James, a now-forgotten powerhouse of Victorian fiction, explains in his 1845 novel *Beauchamp* the inclusion, alas, of a political conversation:

[The social situation] led to some political discussion too; but let it be remarked, *that this is not a political novel, that most wearisome and useless of all the illegitimate offsprings* of literature, and therefore if I give a few sentences of their conversation, *it is not to insinuate sneakingly* my own opinions, but merely to display my characters more fully (102).

If "wearisome and useless" implies the utilitarian disdain for the technical failure of direct teaching in novels, the ethical resentment of "illegitimate offspring" shows that the problem for James is not with the directness of political fiction but rather with its indirectness, its "sneaky insinuations" -- the very word Archdeacon Whatley and Trollope used for their preferred method of novelistic instruction-- of political views via dialogue.

In the same year *Beauchamp* was published, Thackeray came out with his attack on political and religious fiction. Here, too, the problem is, among other things, with the dishonesty of implicit didacticism. The rise in "sentimental politics" of recent fiction, Thackeray argues, "can tend...to little good. You cannot have a question *fairly debated* in this way. You can't allow an author to invent incidents, motives, and characters, in order that he may attack them subsequently." Here the problem of political fiction is no longer the result of weak novelists
preaching tediously at their readers, but rather with sophisticated ones unfairly using the full range of their craft to indirectly advance their views. The fact that the article is filled with admiration for the "great wit and [literary] merit" of these political writers only exacerbates the ethical problem, as Thackeray partly shares the utilitarian camp's faith in the political powers of indirectly didactic fiction, and resents it all the more for having that power ("Lever's St. Patrick's Eve" 123).

If for Thackeray there is at least a benign motivation on the part of the novelist inventing stories to advance political aims, for Edward Dowden political fiction is nothing short of poisonous:

We know those novels-of-purpose at a glance; we are indignant with the man who would entice us into listening to his homily under pretence of amusing us; we see the sulphur in that treacle, pah! (759)

Sulphur, no less, is the teaching aspect of works pretending to be fiction. That the charge here is against the indirectness and deceptiveness of the novel-of-purpose is clear; what is more implicit is the sense of the power that those insidiously didactic novels have. Though the critic sees through the novelist's evil plan, the harm of accidentally eating the sulphurous treacle is too great for us to take the note of confidence literally. If the utilitarian critic is concerned with the ineffectiveness of the directly political novel, the earnest critic is all but terrified of the hidden power of its bewitching twin.

This debate should allow us to have a more sympathetic view of earnestness than its association with Victorian prudishness would suggest. Thus, while earnestness (and its semantic sisters, sincerity, integrity, etc...) is frequently imagined as one of the period's advanced mechanisms of oppression, in the context of counter-didactic taste it tends to offer a welcome counter-balance to the various forms of literary (self-) deception required by public opinion and
utilitarian literary critics. In a world where novels can (and should) teach us things without us ever knowing it, indeed without so much as a hint of what they are, it is genuinely important to be earnest.

*Kant's Ancient Humbugs*

Much of the problem, then, had to do with the question of directness; but a cultural consensus needs more than an obsession with efficiency and morality to have such a hold on a period’s collective imagination. For a great many literary critics, the third leg of the stool of counter-didacticism was a distaste for pure intellectualism. Put less abstractly, political and moral novels were attacked for their association with branches of abstract thought. Thus, Walter Houghton's fantastic *Victorian Frame of Mind* offers one of the leading causes for counter-didacticism, in what he terms Victorian "Anti-intellectualism." As I cannot possibly improve on his description, I quote at length:

A PRACTICAL BENT of mind, deep respect for facts, pragmatic skill in the adaptation of means to ends, a ready appeal to common sense-- and therefore, negatively, an indifference to abstract speculation and imaginative perception-- have always been characteristic of the English people. What distinguishes the Victorians is that conditions of life in their period tended to increase this bias, and thus to make anti-intellectualism a conspicuous attitude of the time. This is not to forget that many of the Victorians were intellectuals or that the age of Mill and Darwin made significant contributions to thought. *It is to claim only that middle- and upper-class society was permeated by a scornful or frightened view of the intellectual life, both speculative and artistic, and the liberal education that fosters it.* (110)

If aversion to philosophical ("speculative") thought, to abstraction, to intellectual life, permeate the Victorian period, how much more so in the case of the critical evaluations of the novel, a form often praised as its pleasant alternative. The most entertaining example of this temperament is Charles Dickens' fictional book-backs. In a perfect parody of bookishness, Dickens ordered his
private library to be furnished with 10 volumes of *Kant's Ancient Humbugs*, 6 volumes of *History of The Middling Ages*, 5 volumes of *King Henry the Eighth's Evidences of Christianity*, 4 volumes of *Growler's Gruffiology*, 2 of *The Carpenter's Bench of Bishops*, and a handful of somewhat doubtful scientific treatises, including *Lady Godiva on the Horse*, *Captain Parry's Virtues of Cold Tar*, *On the Use of Mercury by Ancient Poets*, and, inevitably, *Downeaster's Complete Calculator*. Philosophy, theology, history, science -- all branches of abstract thought are an object of derision rather than of study, dubiously sourced and heartily to be avoided. From here to Dickens' editorializing of Collins' overly "dissective" style the distance is rather short.

Indeed, a great deal of the attacks on authorial intrusions is due to their intellectualism. To continue with entertaining examples, George Meredith's *Sandra Belloni*, in a half-jocular half-desperate act of defiance against the dominant taste, brings in a narrating figure called "The Philosopher," whose cerebral lucubrations the narrator finds both necessary and shameful. After a prolonged parenthetical speech by The Philosopher, equally cumbersome in its diction and its syntax, the narrator explains:

> Now this is good teaching: it is indeed my Philosopher's object—his purpose—to work out this distinction; and all I wish is that it were good for my market...but all attestation favours the critical dictum, *that a novel is to give us copious sugar and no cane*. I, myself, as a reader, consider concomitant cane an adulteration of the qualities of sugar. My Philosopher's error is to deem the sugar, *born of the cane, inseparable from it*...Such is the construction of my story, however, that to entirely deny the Philosopher the privilege he stipulated for when with his assistance I conceived it, would render our performance unintelligible to that acute and honourable minority which consents to be thwacked with *aphorisms and sentences and a fantastic delivery of the verities*... (Ch' 31)

If it weren't for other aesthetic statements by Meredith, it would be hard not to treat the entire scene as a parody of the philosophizing novelist, who cannot help but smack his readers with
aphorisms and dubious verities. But despite Meredith being at least partially invested in those verities, he cannot help but curtail and mock them and their narrator throughout the novel. The critical dictum, and the anti-intellectual spirit underlying it, deem all such philosophizing "cane" rather than sugar, and if the "acute and honourable" would require a different level of discourse (though they barely consent to it), their minority position leaves that demand largely unmet.

The critical dictum was strong, and not without its own sense of humor. "If there will be signs and symptoms...whereby you may ward off the too near approach of a philosopher; you must rouse your faculties to double precautions if you would avoid the swarm of young men and old men...writing novels" writes Margaret Oliphant, in what begins as a fairly common attack on the over-population of novel-writing. But then, these are specific kinds of novelists, those you cannot escape as you would a philosopher:

the stout gentleman in the insurance office...the young priest whom you heard yesterday...have you not heard of the religious novel and the political novel, the tale on the sanitary question, and the story in illustration of university reform, given to the world by these friends of yours?" ("Mr. Thackeray and his Novels" 87)

Similarly, Bentley's Miscellany, in 1852, complains:

all the characters talk and seem to cry out: "author! Author!" .... The man who could endure their society for half an hour would enjoy the perusal of Kant's philosophy in the zoological gardens amongst the macaws... ("New Novels of the Season" 126)

And two years later, the same magazine moves from criticizing a painfully transcendental novel to praising a more English one: "Nanette and her Lovers! Thank Heaven, we here returned to sublunary earth, and leave metaphysics for actual humanity" ("Short Notes on a few recent Novels" 100). The Spectator, for its part, praises in 1861 the forgotten Two Cosmos because, unlike the "conventional novels of the day" which are about love, art, and "politics and social science," it "makes no display of any theory or philosophy of human nature" but rather is based

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9 For those other texts, see Stang, 34-6.
in "untheoretical knowledge...acquired like that of the masters in fiction..by living among various classes...." ("New Novels" 42). Two years later, the journal broadens this contrast of life and abstraction to the novel form, claiming that "our modern fiction gained greatly from this [scientific] tendency to paint faithfully, without theory or that arriere pensee called 'poetical justice'..." ("Mrs' Henry Woods' New Novel" 2828). Much of the contrast between pleasure and instruction stems from this aversion to intellectual instruction. As Fraser's puts it as early as 1848:

To amuse and moralize, to weave a tale and develop a theory, to paint the passions, and at the same time to lay the foundations of a new philosophy, are undertakings altogether incompatible. ("Recent Novels" 33)

The problem for political fiction was that it, too, was grouped with the philosophizing branches of knowledge. Thus, William Henry Smith recommends the young novelist to start with drama before he moves to fiction, since

At two and twenty... the head is preoccupied with some engrossing idea, which so besets the man, that he can see nothing clearly in the world around him. At this age he has a philosophy, a metaphysical system, which he really believes in (a species of delusion the first to quit us).... This is supportable, or may be disguised in poetry; it becomes intolerable in prose. ("The Novel and the Drama" 679)

but then, the transition between philosophy and politics is, again, telling: "do not give us a philosophical novel....those works where some theory or some dogma is expressly taught, where a vein of scholastic, or political, or ethical matter alternates with a vein of narrative and fictitious matter. I dislike the whole genus" (684-5). If it weren't for this association with theory and dogma, it is likely that at least overtly political novelists would not have qualified so many of their characters' social arguments.
Jelly Novels

But they did, and here too opposing critical camps would have led the novelists they critique to similar conclusions. Thus, while a great many critics opposed the more theoretically minded novelists, a considerable group actually praised the novel for its embodiment of intellectual subject matter. But again, counter-didactic taste is limber enough to capture both sides of the coin. A few examples should show us how "the widespread sense that the novel has an outright...philosophical function" paradoxically served to limit the novelist's educational freedom. Greg's "False Morality of Lady Novelists" offers the clearest version of this group, which as an homage to Eliot I name the Jelly-Novel camp:

There are peculiarities, again, in works of fiction which must always secure them a vast influence on all classes of societies and all sorts of minds. They are read without effort, and remembered without trouble....Histories, philosophies, political treatises, to a certain extent even first-class poetry, are solid and often tough food, which requires laborious and slow mastication. Novels are like soup or Jelly... (146)

The Prospective Review, too, revels in the novel’s processing powers:

Fiction has yet another claim to our regard as a vehicle for the transmission of opinion: the results of speculative inquiry, when presented in abstract form, wear to the ordinary mind, an aspect so severe and uninviting that we joyfully hail the imaginative faculty which invests dead principles in the living hues of experience... [fiction] becomes the chosen medium for the discussion of the vexed and difficult questions, moral, religious, social and political... the various theories adopted for their solution endeavor to obtain a hearing, by assuming an imaginative expression, and embodying themselves in a concrete form." (86)

And The Westminster Review, in "The Progress of Fiction as an Art," celebrates fiction as the democratizing form "through which the many learnt the higher thoughts of the few" because "[f]able and tale catch and rivet the attention of the untaught man, whose half awakened intellect refuses to grasp ideas conveyed in a form less tangible and dramatic" (59-60). Here, indeed, the anti-intellectual spirit views the novel as an enjoyable alternative to the dreariness of the purely
intellectual discourses. But what we have, in effect, is a mirror image of the anti-intellectual camp. Both groups find intellectual discourses at best unpleasant, at worse impossible to read. If one camp condemns political fiction for its intellection, the other does not praise it for that same intellection, but rather for transforming it, turning it into jelly or soup, embodying it in a concrete form. Both camps would readily agree -- their Dickensian labeling of the heavier discourses as indigestible suggests as much -- that the novel has no business incorporating political thought in the abstract forms natural to it. As the praise for embodiment gives the novelist some room to teach her politics, it simultaneously limits her to just that embodiment. The beauty and conceptual dangers of jelly is that it is virtually impossible to recognize the distinct elements it is made of.

A good example of the specularity of the two camps can be seen in the treatment of this question by David Masson and Arabella Shore, two prominent critics who vacillate between these seemingly opposed views. Shore begins her essay on Meredith by proclaiming that the novel has displaced poetry as “the interpreter of thought and feeling and passion, the teacher of lessons of life, the mirror of humanity” (412). Very quickly, however, Shore reveals that the novelist has not attained this high office through her intellectual prowess but rather because of the intellectual fatigue of the age: “[t]he exercise of the abstract imagination…required for the appreciation of poetry emphatically so called, is an effort which the ordinary mind is happy to dispense with“ (412). Again, the novel’s philosophical function is not to express intellectual content but to popularize and transform it into effortless reading. But Shore, unlike the previous critics of the Jelly-Novel camp, makes the limitations of such praise explicit: “the novel,” her next paragraph begins, “does not need [to] enforce truth by logic, [to] teach like a philosophical treatise, still less like a sermon.” (412)
Masson’s terms are slightly different, but the message is very similar to Shore's. Thus, he begins his discussion of recent developments in fiction by praising it for becoming "more real and determinate" through a development of its intellectual capacities (168). Yet, when he comes to consider the natural conclusion of the novel becoming a philosophical-political form, he grows hesitant:

In the interest of the Novel, considered as a vehicle for doctrine, a very considerable influx into it of both the speculative spirit and of the best results of speculation, is yet to be desired. (169)

Masson then elaborates. Like Leslie Stephen, he sees that "there is a certain incompatibility between the spirit in which an artist proceeds, and the spirit in which a teacher or dogmatist ought to proceed." What chance does the novelist have of giving pleasure, the argument continues, "if he aims also at reforming society by a strenuous inculcation of doctrine...?" (169) Still, the novelist "is also a thinker whether he chooses or not," and the intellectual weakness of novelists is equally deplorable: "...how shaky also the Political Economy and Social Sciences of a good many of our novelists-- sciences in the matter of which they must work...in framing their fictitious histories!" This seems to turn the argument on its head, so Masson clarifies: "[n]ot that what we want from novelists...is further matter of speculation" (170). The perfect synthesis of both views, the critic requires of the novelist more political thought underlying the text, less political thought in the text.

**Beautiful in Every Single Way**

But the critical attitude towards intellectual thought can be framed much more positively. Side by side with an aversion to social abstraction comes a belief in the irreducible complexity and uniqueness of the individual, her transcendence of social categories, indeed, her concrete
humanity. Thus, George Eliot, in a paragraph that can serve as the best explanation for her own transition from essays to novels:

> Probably, if we could ascertain the images called up by the terms “the people,” “the masses,” "the proletariat,” "the peasantry," by many who theorize on those bodies with eloquence, or who legislate without eloquence, we should find that they indicate almost as small an amount of concrete knowledge -- that they are as far from completely representing the complex facts summed up in a collective term, as the railway images of our non-locomotive gentleman.  

("Natural History of German Life" 121-2)

This may seem similar to the reviews above, but it follows a very different logic. For Eliot, it is not the conceptual difficulty of abstract thought that makes it intolerable, but rather its falsehood to real life. The problem, then, is epistemological, not communicative, though its prescriptive form amounts to a similar limitation on the novel. The project of the English novel, as Watt famously put it, is one of particularity, to portray humanity as "the unplanned aggregate of particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and particular places" (*Rise of the Novel* 31). Taking this hypothesis a bit further, Nancy Armstrong recently argued that "the history of the [English] novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same," and that subsequently novelists have chosen their protagonists by the degree to which they could challenge their social position, much as Eliot's "concrete knowledge" and "complex facts" challenge the theoretical categories of commonly used by essayists (*How Novels Think* 3-4).

What does this look like, in the novels themselves? Hypocrisy, that cherished theme of so many Victorian novels, serves as an ideal type of the tension between the individual's personality and the unrealistic generality of abstract ideas. Bulstrode, for all his religious zeal, is a corrupt banker driven to negligent homicide by his guilt. Stephen Morley the Chartist ends up a bourgeois newspaper owner making money off the movement's demise. Mrs. Jellyby cares so
greatly about her distant charities that she can hardly remember her own children. St. John Rivers, in a rare moment, offers us self-conscious hypocrisy, and the articulation of the contrast between individual tendencies and abstract ideals that underlies all of the above. The scene is a familiar one, with Rivers trying to convince Jane (yet again) to marry him and join his mission abroad:

I am sure you cannot long be content to pass your leisure in solitude...any more than I can be content,” he added, with emphasis, “to live here buried in morass, pent in with mountains—my nature, that God gave me, contravened; my faculties, heaven-bestowed, paralysed—made useless. You hear now how I contradict myself. I, who preached contentment with a humble lot, and justified the vocation even of hewers of wood and drawers of water in God’s service—I, His ordained minister, almost rave in my restlessness. Well, *propensities and principles must be reconciled by some means*. (Ch. 30)

The philosophy that St. John has preached -- "contentment with a humble lot" -- is hardly a narrow or extremist one. Indeed, it is hardly a philosophy at all, simply a loose, guiding principle. And yet even this indulgent demi-philosophy sits like a straight-jacket on St. John's individuality. Propensities and principles, far from being partners, are opposites which must be reconciled, and the host of novelistic hypocrites suggests that the closer you are to general principles, the farther you are from your own individuality. Fittingly, novel endings, for characters aspiring to an ideal or professing it, frequently involve public exposure, isolation, shame, and death.

The complex reality of human experience undercutting the ideal prescribed by abstract thought -- negatively, this results in hypocrisy. Positively, in characters learning that reality is far less reductive than the social categories used to describe it. As I said in the beginning, nearly every industrial novel begins with its main characters identified with a fixed ideology and a corresponding social position, and invariably develops away from such fixity. Sybil's
individualizing process shows this most explicitly, as she transforms from a person who only
thinks of two things -- the cause of the people and of the Catholic church -- to one who realizes
what all protagonists of industrial novels come to understand, that

the world was a more complicated system than she had preconceived. There was not that
strong and rude simplicity in its organization she had supposed. The characters were
more various, the motives more mixed, the classes more blended, the elements of each
more subtle and diversified, than she had imagined. The People she found was not that
pure embodiment of unity of feeling, of interest, and of purpose, which she had pictured
in her abstractions. (Book V, Ch. 1)

Note that the language is one almost of novelistic reviews: what Sybil learns is what makes
novels a critical success, as "'mixed' or 'well-rounded' characters become a reviewers' fetish" in
the period and 'indistinct [or] blurred' " are the common terms of condemnation for novelistic
characterization as well as the error of the overly-partisan Sybil (Graham 22). Sybil's
"abstractions," too, are as much of an artistic problem for Sybil as they are a conceptual problem
for its eponymous heroine.

But what this shows is, in fact, a possible way out for the novel in its struggle with
politics: novelists cannot offer an ideologically identifiable view of reality without risking
critical outrage, but they are --at least in this context -- welcome to explore the ways in which
ideologies fail to capture human experience. For the scholar making a critique of dominant
ideologies, this is a double-edged sword; all these texts thus lend themselves to such a critique,
while at the same time it becomes less clear if the critique is ideological or formal. To take but
one prominent example, is laissez faire economics problematic for North and South
ideologically? Yes, because the text clearly registers a move away from it, but at the same time
literary taste demanded such a move regardless, and the fact that it is a formal feature of the
genre makes one suspect a formal necessity, rather than a conceptual one, underlying this
critique. In the context of counter-didacticism, it will naturally be more challenging to assess a novel’s politics when the novelist faced strong literary pressures to mute recognizable forms of political engagement.

In brief summary, we have now seen how utilitarian concerns, Victorian earnestness, a prejudice against intellectual thought and an epistemological appreciation for individuation, all played a role in limiting the novelist's political options. We have said previously that any explanation of a widespread consensus in so heterogeneous a society requires many distinct, and often contradictory, causes. Having accounted for the more intuitive elements of the culture leading to counter-didacticism, it is time to face the greater conceptual challenge: how did the Evangelical element of Victorianism, with its clear emphasis on moral improvement and spiritual usefulness, lead to such a disgust with fiction of purpose?

The Unusual Suspects

Sinful Pleasures

The Kevin Spacey of this dissertation must be by preachers attacking religious novels wholesale while writing for journals whose funding depended on the church. Here, too, we have encountered mitigating circumstances: the ethical charges of insincerity and deceitfulness that religious fiction faced from its own press are clearly consistent with the Evangelical\textsuperscript{10} temperament. There is also some room for an anti-intellectual disgust, especially among Broad Church Anglicans, with theological debate as a distraction from the universal truths of the Gospel. But when religious reviewers, independently of their particular denomination, attack

\textsuperscript{10} Evangelical is a bit misleading as a term, here used interchangeably with "religious" because it is the most influential form of religion in Victorian England (according to Altick, Houghton and Bradley) and because its doctrines of sin are the most "cleanly" expressed, but were shared, albeit in milder forms, by most Christian denominations.
moralizing fiction for its tediousness, or its lack of artistry, such explanations clearly do not suffice. The answer, I argue, lies with the doctrine of sin.

Copied below is "The Spiritual Barometer: Or a Scale of the progress of Grace and of Sin," a text published repeatedly (with minor variations) in Britain from 1800 to 1848, as a tool for discerning your place on the path of salvation, or, more likely, damnation. Note the dubious location of the novel and the drama in the barometer, a few short steps from "fornication" and "endless perdition." ¹¹

¹¹ And this is a rather positive version of the Barometer for novels. The edition quoted in The English Common Reader puts the Novel at -40, at the same level as "skepticism" and only 10 degrees better than "adultery; parties of pleasure on the Lord's day" (114).
A SPIRITUAL BAROMETER.

Or a Scale of the progress of Grace and of Sin.

70 Glory.
   Dismission from the body.
   Desiring to depart and be with Christ.
   Sanctification, or holiness of heart and life.
60 Patience in tribulation.
   Glorying in the cross.
   Ardent love to the souls of men.
   Zeal to do good.
   Following hard after God.
50 Deadness to the world.
   Love of God shed abroad in the heart.
   Frequent approaches to the Lord's table.
40 Meeting for prayer and experience.
   Delight in the people of God.
   Looking to Jesus—Justifying faith.
30 Love of God's house and worship established.
   Vain company wholly dropped.
20 Evangelical light increased.
   Daily perusal of the Bible with prayer.
   Frequent attendance on the means of grace.
10 Retirement for prayer and meditation.
   Concern for the soul.
   Alarm. Conviction.

0 INDIFFERENCE.
   Family worship only on Sunday evenings.
   Secret prayer frequently omitted.
10 Family religion wholly declined.
   Levity in conversation.
   Fornication, however expensive, adopted.
20 Luxurious entertainments.
   Free association with carnal company.
   Love of novels and romances.
30 Theatre, gaming houses, balls.
   Frequent parties of pleasure.
   House of God forsaken.
40 Much wine, spirits, &c.
   Fornication, deistical company prized.
   Secret prayer wholly neglected.
50 Parties of pleasure on the Lord's day.
   Masquerades, drunkenness, adultery.
60 Profaneness, lewd songs, infidelity.
   Scorning at religion, persecuting the pious.
   A miserable death.
70 Endless perdition.

N. B. The reader must pursue this scale upward or downward from the middle, until he perceives the degree at which he now stands.
These being the constituents of sin, we can see that the doctrine depends on a divorce between ethics and worldly pleasures: the more ethical you are, the less physical pleasures (with the exception of the more ethereal "delight" in fellow Christians, itself only a medium level of moral well-being) you are likely to experience. If you are nearly damned, you enjoy novels, masquerades, parties of pleasure on the Lord's day, and an extraordinary amount of sex. If you are destined to be saved, you have experienced concern for your soul, conviction of your sinfulness, deadness to the world, patience in tribulation (likely caused by all the former), and finally, a dismissal from your own body. To experience pleasure of any but the most pious kind, you have to go against your own system of ethics. 12 To enjoy lighter literature, in particular, would seem to require some form of immorality, both from the reader and the work.

But it is just this separation of the pleasing from the ethical, and particularly of the religiously ethical, that is at the root of counter-didacticism. The irony of intellectual history is that no one is better suited to advocate that the pleasure art gives has nothing to do with its morality, or rather is inversely correlated to it, than the religious reviewer. It is no coincidence that the Decadent movement's bumper-stickers, "all art is immoral" and "all art is quite useless," are sentiments the Evangelical movement at its most puritanical had prescribed to its disciples with equal zeal. Art for Art's sake is but the mirror-image of The Spiritual Barometer.

This is not to say that the Decadents were closeted Evangelicals, though Raymond Williams has brilliantly shown the continuity of the movement's writings with 19th century (frequently religious) views of aesthetics, and several of its prominent figures converted to Christianity later in life. 13 It is simply to point out that they shared a conception of art as

12 For more entertaining examples of the evangelical sense that "enjoying something was good enough reason to stop doing it," see Bradley 28-9.
13 See Culture and Society, 166-172. Those figures include Oscar Wilde, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Aubrey Beardsley.
independent from, and often hostile to, Christian morality. For the more puritanical thinkers, this was sufficient cause for banning it. For the Decadents, its defiance of a narrow otherworldly ethics was a central feature of art's greatness. Religious reviewers, as the tension between the adjective and the noun would imply, tended to alternate between the two, their doctrine of sin frequently leading them to evaluate the ethics of fiction in opposition to its aesthetic pleasure, but their literary proclivities not allowing them to merely use the opposition to discredit the novel. Hence, the repeated requests that the novel adhere to stricter morality, when the critic is dealing with its ethics, followed by disclaimers, when the novel is evaluated as literature.

It may seem overly sophisticated to claim that the doctrine of original sin has led to the counter-didactic taste of religious reviewers, but reading them in detail should show the immediacy of the logical connection for the moral critic. Thus, Leslie Stephen's first defense of the place of morality in fiction begins with the concession that the primary purpose of the artist is to give pleasure, and the primary purpose of the preacher to suppress vice. Therefore the two often come into conflict. There is nothing surprising about this. ("Art and Morality" 91)

We can see that the 19th century spiritual barometer is underlying this incompatibility (and its tone of inevitability), but Stephen's introduction to the subject is perhaps more telling, in that it frames the very disjuncture between art and ethics as a necessary result of Christian morality:

Now, in the first place, it is no new discovery that many things which are pleasant are wrong. The doctrine has been known and applied in practice for several thousand years. If it were not the case, there would be no necessity for any morality at all. If everybody

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14 Scholarly discussions of puritan Evangelicalism often turn to an acknowledgement of the complexity in the attitude of even the stricter Evangelicals -- say, the Ruskin family -- towards pleasure. That complexity, however, is offered as an except or modification to the Evangelical state of mind, whereas I would argue that it is perfectly consistent with it. There is, in all these horrified responses to novels, a great compliment to its artistry, without which it would not be accorded such a high level of corruption of the soul. Add to this the understanding that human nature is inevitably sinful, and you get not only a sense of the deep appreciation of literature built into its condemnation, but a naturalization of that appreciation as profoundly human in its sinfulness. For the jollier side of Evangelicalism, see The English Common Reader 115-123, and Bradley 29.
always liked doing what he ought to do, we could get on without rules at all. The primary purpose of the artist...

It is easy to think that Stephen's concessions to the counter-didactic separation of morality from art is surprising, but from the perspective of Evangelical morality, it is rather the attempt to link the worldly beauty of art with a moral state of being that is unnatural, and the essay is therefore filled with contradictions despite its deep-seated desire to reconcile the two. If Stephen considered human beings inherently virtuous, or at least not so prone to sinfulness, he could imagine that the most pleasing literature would also be the most ethical one. In a fallen world, however, it was extremely difficult to argue that man would most enjoy what is most good for him.

Any Victorianist knows the profound impact the moral element in criticism has had on the English novel, depriving it of potential sexual themes, limiting its "dangerous" plots and characters, even demanding that the novelist curtail her interest in lower-class characters and their "vices." Little is it known that the very critics purging literature of its endless immoralities were also lamenting the artistic consequences of their own righteousness. To complete our picture of the Evangelical underpinnings of counter-didacticism, I give you the reception of the French novel, a form that critics frequently lambasted for its moral decrepitude while expressing envy for the literary possibilities that very immorality created.

Charles Kingsley, himself both an Anglican minister and a novelist, blesses the English novel for its moral scrupulousness in the face of French influences:

[O]ur national purity... will not tolerate even meagre attempts at licentiousness. It is both disgusting and unnatural to us. The relation of the sexes here renders

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15 For the latter, see Graham 30-1.
16 Therefore, when a book like The Other Victorians comes out, delineating the undercurrent of pornographic literature and its relationship of mutual influence with polite fiction, it naturally points to cultural hypocrisy, rather than a tension inherent in the Victorian frame of mind.
impossible, thank God! those extravagant and foul love-stories which are...very much in their place in descriptions of Parisian life. ("Recent Novels" 420)

But this is on the moral side, and since morality has little to do with artistic pleasure, the next paragraph explains that it is not just moral superiority but literary inferiority that prevents the English from writing French novels:

...our duller imaginations strive in vain to imitate those sparkling conversations, that graceful interpenetration of sentiment and action, that wonderful art in inventing plots and situations, which make French novels, with all their faults, perfect studies for the fiction-writer.

What is particularly important here is that the very cause of immorality, the licentiousness and extravagant lifestyles that breed these "foul love-stories," is also the source for the great "art of inventing plots and situations" which the English would do well to imitate. If for Kingsley the correlation is implicit, in 1851 *Fraser's Magazine* makes the logic of sin more explicit in its evaluation of French novels. Those, of course, are "vicious, extravagant, inflated, and demoralizing," among other adjectives of moral disdain, "but they are never dull" ("English Novels" 375). After a short encomium of the writing abilities of the French, the puritanical side of the essay looms larger:

We are by no means setting up this lively quality as an adequate compensation... If we are to make a choice between prosy decent books, and vicious books that are written with sprightliness and skill, we are, of course, bound to prefer the former.... But we cannot help regretting, at the same time, that our English novelists, who, for the most part, write unexceptionable morality, should not be able to make it a little more amusing. It is a pity that morality should be rendered so excessively stupid on this side of the channel, while on the other, all social vices are tricked out with irresistible attractions.

How fitting, given the spiritual barometer's correlation between virtue and death, that the French novels' sinfulness is one of irresistible liveliness. How fitting, given that all the amusements were on the unethical side of the spiritual spectrum, that novels of virtue deeply lack them. Indeed,
the sinfulness is as intrinsic to the plot-interest as the excessive morality is responsible for the artistic deficiencies of the English novel:

> It is here that the French excel us. *Their airiness of touch*, and the elasticity and fearlessness *with which they spring upon forbidden topics*, indicating enough of their illicit qualities to set the pulses and curiosity of the reader throbbing...

It is the illicitness that sets the pulses throbbing. And the Morality? It is not "always" responsible for that "monstrous dullness" of the English novel, but still...

> We are too didactic. Thinking too much of the moral, and too little of the story through which it is enforced, we suffer the end to overwhelm the means. (379-80)

This is where the criticism diverges from the Evangelical spirit that bred it. The premise is there, even the values -- no skill is compensation enough for the depravities, after all -- but the literary critic cannot, as a literary critic, fully ignore the importance of pleasure, however diabolical it is. Purging the novel of its demons is difficult when you perceive its art to largely depend on them.

> And the superior artistry of the French, as the language of "airiness" and "fearless" sin should indicate, is never far for religious criticism from that of the other supreme artist, Satan.

*The Dublin University Magazine*, after introducing the common argument (the French are the best novelists, and are using their "great power" to corrupt the world with their "perverted notions on the laws of God and man") , makes the spiritual warfare underlying this problem more explicit, with a poignant analogy between Balzac and the Fallen Angel:

> For the genius of Balzac...we have a profound admiration, mingled, clouded, and embittered with regret and indignation. Superior to all the other writers of his country, he is a leader among their errors....Alas! that he should have so often and so shamelessly employed these fair and gracious gifts of his maker in the service of vice and seduction....He has taught us himself that he was formed for better things, as the beauty of Milton's "Fallen Angel" streams through all the horror and depravity of his fall... (*French Novels and Novelists*” 351)

Satan's beauty "streaming through horror and depravity" is precisely the reason a moral aesthetic is impossible. If Satan were ugly and horrible, there would be no celestial warfare, no temptation
to flee from, no sin and no need for grace. The theology of Christianity at its most Evangelical leads not only to attacking novels for their Satanic appeal, but to simultaneously appreciating the great artistry involved in their moral decrepitude. Novels are only morally threatening insofar as they are pleasurable, and never more pleasurable than when they lead you away from the righteous path.

Evangelicalism and utilitarianism: "The fundamental paradox of English society, " famously argues Elie Halevy, "is precisely the partial juncture and combination of these two forces theoretically so hostile" (591). Counter-didacticism is quite possibly the most surprising of their collaborative efforts.

What is to be done?

Far from being marginal and purely technical, then, counter-didacticism was, for all its paradoxes and contradictions, the dominating and invincible standard of taste for the novel. With such a mass of contradictory criticism facing any novelist turning his novel to a social cause (or even seeming to), how were novelists to write political fiction without risking the wrath of their reviewers and fellow novelists? Ultimately, they could not. The rationale was too versatile, too pervasive, too vaguely limned to be fully avoided, and you can find a critique of didacticism for practically any canonical novelist. After all, how could novelists prove that they were not writing “with a purpose?” It was impossible, but novelists did their best to distance themselves from such attacks by thematizing counter-didacticism themselves, in their fiction and in their prefaces.

The following example should illustrate Dickens' thematization -- one of many in the Victorian novel -- of the problems of didacticism. The scene is a painfully educational moment in Pip's early childhood, and the phrasing of Pip's repulsion is nearly identical to the pains expressed by Dickens at The Woman in White. Much more significantly, it is eerily similar to
some of the criticism Dickens himself had to endure. *Great Expectations*, Chapter 4:

They seemed to think the opportunity lost, if they failed to point the conversation at me, every now and then, and *stick the point into me*. I might have been an unfortunate little bull in a Spanish arena, I got so smartingly touched up by *these moral goads*.

It began the moment we sat down to dinner. Mr. Wopsle said grace with theatrical declamation,—as it now appears to me, something like a religious cross of the Ghost in *Hamlet* with Richard the Third,—and ended with the very proper aspiration that we might be truly grateful. Upon which my sister fixed me with her eye, and said, in a low reproachful voice, "Do you hear that? Be grateful."

"Especially," said Mr. Pumblechook, "be grateful, boy, to them which brought you up by hand."

Mrs. Hubble shook her head, and contemplating me with a mournful presentiment that I should come to no good, asked, "Why is it that the young are never grateful?" This moral mystery seemed too much for the company until Mr. Hubble tersely solved it by saying, "Naterally wicious." Everybody then murmured "True!" and looked at me in a particularly unpleasant and personal manner.

Note how many of the critical objections to didacticism feature here: Pip is suffering from the company's "sticking of the point" just as Dickens as a novel reader suffered from Collins' "forcing of the point," and just as many of Dickens' own reviewers objected to his narratorial intrusions. Yet more specifically, Wopsle's theatrical didacticism ("a religious cross between the ghost in *Hamlet* and Richard the Third") echoes the critical concerns with Dickens himself, who "never sinks so nearly to the level of the ordinary sensation-novelist as when he is writing 'with a purpose'"(Mansel 194-5). The group's hypocrisy -- the people commanding him to be grateful are those who do the least for Pip -- is yet another instance of the novel dissociating the individual case from abstract principles. The Calvinist idea of original sin ("naterally wicious") is given in crude dialect, divorcing *Great Expectations* in two words from any theological principles.

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17 For more of the critical association of sentimentalism and exaggeration with attacks on Dickens' didacticism, see Thackeray's essay quoted above, as well as *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 73, 84, 156, 158.
affiliation. Above all, this educational scene, like so many scenes of instruction in Dickensian novels, is "particularly unpleasant," a testament to the multitude of reviewers bewailing the fact that "Dickens does not confine himself to amusing his readers, instead of wandering out of his depth in trying to instruct them" (Simpson 333). Dickens, I would argue, is here and elsewhere deflecting criticism of his literary practice by embodying the critical principle of his reviewers.

But Dickens is arguably the shrewdest of Victorian novelists when it comes to winning an audience over. One could hardly expect other novelists to use the exact same strategy. And yet, that is precisely what they did. Here is how a host of largely canonical novelists attack the most didactic of prose forms, the sermon, from a random sample of narrative sentences from the Chadwyck-Healey online database of English fiction:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Query</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I accept the sermon, frown, sneer and laugh; perhaps you are all right: and perhaps, circumstanced like me, you would have been, like me, wrong. (Vilette)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mother's cuffs on the head I received without malice, and if the truth must be owned, had not seldom to submit to the major operation which my grandfather used to perform with a certain rod which he kept in a locked cupboard, and accompany with long wearisome sermons between each cut or two of his favorite instrument. (Denis Duval)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>She had forgiven him his sermon. (Barchester Towers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>There was no sermon. At the time of Mr. Shamble's sermon (an erratic Anglican divine, hired for the season at places of English resort, and addicted to debts, drinking, and even to roulette, it was said), Pen, chafing under the persecution which his womankind inflicted upon him, had been meditating a great act of revolt and of justice, as he had worked himself up to believe; and Warrington on his part had been thinking that a crisis in his affairs had likewise come, and that it was necessary for him to break away from a connexion which every day made more and more wretched and dear to him. (Pendennis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The subject of the chaplaincy came up at Mr Vincy's table when Lydgate was dining there, and the family connection with Mr Bulstrode did not, he observed, prevent some freedom of remark even on the part of the host himself, though his reasons against the proposed arrangement turned entirely on his objection to Mr Tyke's sermons, which were all doctrine, and his preference for Mr Farebrother, whose sermons were free from that taint. (Middlemarch)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Thus, while sermons in defense of the Roman Catholic religion were preached on every Sunday and holiday within the precincts of the royal palaces, the Church of the state, the Church of the great majority of the nation, was forbidden to explain and vindicate her own principles. (The History of England)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>She had only just picked it up, and seen with alarm that the pages were bent, when Lady Assher, Beatrice, and Captain Wybrow entered, all with that brisk and cheerful air which a sermon is often observed to produce when it is quite finished. (Scenes of Clerical Life)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mr Beecher's sermon was undeniably clever; the Salem folks pricked up their ears at the sound of it, recalling as it did that period of delightful excitement when they were hearing candidates, and felt themselves the dispensers of patronage. (Salem Chapel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>But the Christianity was to be done in the Sunday sermon, and was not part of his work. (Framley Parsonage)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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18 Not entirely random, because I ran the search program the Stanford Litlab used for its sentence project three times, and picked the most entertaining sample. The other samples, however, were also overwhelmingly negative, and the reader is invited to look up sermons, or other didactic forms, in any Victorian novel and see the hostility for themselves. Notable exceptions, though never fully exceptional, might be Adam Bede and Jane Eyre, but again, the exception is in the ambiguity towards the sermon rather than in a wholly negative attitude towards it.
Thus he was mentally conducted through the Psalms, through the first and second lessons, through the burst of fiddles and clarionets which announced the evening-hymn, and well into the sermon, before any signs of the waggon could be seen upon the London road. (The Trumpet-Major)

He felt debasement coming on him, and he longed to shake it off, to rise up in his stirrup, to mount to high places and great power, that he might get up into a mighty pulpit and preach to the world a loud sermon against Mrs. Bold. (Barchester Towers)

Indeed, there was a singular and forcible realism about the address which surprised Coquette; it was so different from the long and weary sermons on doctrine to which she had of late been accustomed. (A Daughter of Heth)

The sermon was most successful; the ladies returned with elate and animated faces, quite enthusiastic and almost forgetting in their satisfaction the terrible outrage of Lord St. Aldegonde. (Lothair)

She bade her mother send her certain gowns and smocks by old Lockwood; she sent her duty to a certain Person, if certain other persons permitted her to take such a freedom; how that as she was not able to play cards with him, she hoped he would read good books, such as Doctor Atterbury's sermons and Eikon Basilike: she was going to read good books: she thought her pretty mamma would like to know she was not crying her eyes out. (Henry Esmond)

"[T]hat brisk and cheerful air which a sermon is often observed to produce when it is quite finished" - no one is better suited to generalize the aesthetic mood of her period than George Eliot. Individually, the other sentences are meaningless - mere attacks on hypocritical clergymen and painful boring sermons, nothing we might not expect simply from a realistic portrayal of actual sermons. Combined, these sentences provide overwhelming evidence for an artistic collective unconscious distancing itself from any association with the preacherly. 11 of the 15 sentences are clearly negative, with three of the four neutral or positive sentences (7, 9, 14) coming from two marginal novelists, Margaret Oliphant – whose critical writings on the subject alone would make her an inconvenient target -- and the notoriously didactic Benjamin Disraeli (who never felt very committed to the novel form to begin with, as his statements and novels amply show). And the 11 negative sentences? The novelists all Victorianists read (with the exception of Daughter of Heth, as it takes more than a healthy dislike of the sermonic to be a canonical novelist): Bronte, Eliot, Trollope, Thackeray, Hardy. No other period in literary history can boast a canon so overwhelmingly composed of literary editors, yet another explanation for the striking resemblance and continuities between the reviews and the novels we tend to read. 19

19 Of the novelists we discuss, Bronte and Hardy were the only ones not to become editors. Bronte, however, did owe much of her success to G.H. Lewes' favorable review of Jane Eyre, as their frequently-surveyed correspondence attests. Hardy, for his part, had to deal with the reviewers on a much more immediate level, with our very own Leslie Stephen of "Art and Morality" editing Far from the Madding Crowd, a much milder version of influence than the editorial frenzies which surrounded Tess of the D'Urbervilles with its multifarious three-market publication history.
A sermon in the canonical Victorian novel is the most severe form of punishment (sentences 2,12), a sign of contempt and misunderstanding on the part of the preacher (1), a sin requiring forgiveness (3), something clearly uninteresting --given to you by a Mr. Shamble, no less-- that happens in the background while you and your enemies consider your real-life options (5,11), a speech which is preferable when given without theological purpose, by a parson who is not even interested in being part of the church (6), an offense against Realism (13). In sum, it is something very unpleasant. Dickens' strategy, then, was the common strategy of the canonical novelist for avoiding the multitudinous critical attacks on didactic fiction -- the scapegoating of the modes and characters most associated with it.

But if this limits the Victorian novelist’s didactic freedom, it also forces her to come up with creative formal alternatives. The rest of this dissertation, like the novels it follows, will vacillate between the sense of limitation and creativity, between writers disavowing their educational political stance and their use of that very disavowal to expand upon it. The dialectic that commanded fictional education just as frequently as it condemned it will guide our research, and will prove extremely productive for an understanding of these texts struggles and their literary innovation. We will see an extraordinary array of formal devices that would be highly unlikely if the novelist were not facing a veritable shooting squad with every turn towards the didactic. We will also see a much deeper discomfort with the social and moral views we tend to associate the novel with. In our account, the Victorian novel, as paradoxically as its taste, becomes both more didactic and more averse to didacticism; both more creative in its approach to the didactic project, more willing to eschew didactic association.

The first two chapters of the dissertation will deal with the most loved of socially committed novelists (probably, of all novelists in the period), Charles Dickens. In the first
chapter, we will see how Dickens built his first novel’s sensational success on Counter-didactic humor, humor mocking the style and attitude of didactic fiction. It will then explore the various ways in which the novel, like Dickens will later in his career, turns to a more somber and sermonic style itself, using the very devices Dickens rejected through the character of Sam Weller. The result, I would suggest, is a novel that educates us without appearing very educational, a novel which luxuriates in the taste of its period and uses counter-didacticism, much as critics would want, to didactic advantage.

The second Dickens chapter deals with shifts in Dickens’ language and style from the early fiction to the later fiction, giving arguably the most empirically grounded account of what the change entailed, and why it came to pass. Observing Dickens’ growing aversion to “silences” through the shift in his adjectives from the early period to the post-Copperfield epoch, I suggest a suspicion of implicit, “silent” education made Dickens’ own style less reliant on implicitness. On the positive side, the later fiction registers a far greater confidence in the power of explicit language, as phrases showing a distrust of language (like “impossible to describe” and its variants) become far less frequent. Finally, the chapter qualifies this linear picture of Dickens’ work to show the continuity of its problems with Didacticism and its choices through the consistent types of the verbose debtor and the deputy. The former’s reliance on elaborate language is part and parcel of his uselessness, and thus echoes the Victorian rejection of the sermonic mode’s lack of utility. The latter is a consistent thematization of the problem of indirectness that didacticism often invokes, as Dickens shows a discomfort with using characters as his educational deputies through plots that repeatedly expose that process’ ethical dubiousness. Taken together, the two chapters show how difficult it is to use fiction
educationally, as they trace a constant struggle with the form even in the work of arguably the greatest master of the English novel.

The third chapter turns to the embattled political genre we most associate with Victorians, the industrial novel. Focusing almost entirely on less successful novelists, I show the intense innovation of the counter-didactic mode even in writers we tend to deprecate. In particular, the chapter half-analyzes half-marvels at the counter-didactic measures of Evangelical preacher and novelist Charles Kingsley, ranging from the longest sentence I’ve read to the purest hostility towards one’s readers anyone is likely to see. I then show how useful female heroines were to a form struggling with seeming overly authoritative: women, generally considered less knowledgeable and unimposing in the period, were ironically much less of a threat to the destabilization of the system that didactic discourse usually creates. In a sense, it is a chapter lamenting the relative failure of radical literary innovation.

The dissertation then closes with a half-playful half-methodological epilogue that sketches out the significance of this issue to novels, shows and politicians post-1900. This epilogue begins by tracing a lineage of disclaimers from Kingsley, through Orwell to t.v. satirist John Oliver. It then continues in this vein to offer parallels between the response of Victorian novelists and African American novelists to didacticism in their fiction. As I show Invisible Man and Native Son’s physical aggression towards their intellectual characters, I conclude that when faced with the didactic for long enough, you come to expect violence.

The epilogue ends with Donald Trump, now the presumptive Republican nominee and one of two people to be the next president of the United States. Like Dickens, Trump has built his popular appeal on mockery of political discourse and the flexibility of fictional representation. He is, I suggest, the first self-declared novelist successfully running for president,
and the nightmare of Dickens’ fiction coming to life, a politician driven by entertainment. If this dissertation were to explain nothing but Donald Trump, the most puzzling of cultural and historical phenomena, I will have done my part.

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**Counter-Didactic Pickwickians**

‘Now mind; from this time forward,’ said Mr. Brook Dingwall, suddenly stopping at the table, and beating time upon it with his hand; ‘from this time forward, I never will, under any circumstances whatever, permit a man who writes pamphlets to enter any other room of this house but the kitchen.’

----Charles Dickens, *Sketches By Boz.*

Reading the incessant social satire and narratorial intrusions of Dickens’ most famous novels, it is easy to miss how complicated the relationship between Dickens’ narrative and didactic purposes was. Like George Eliot, Dickens claimed that the role of the novelist was to awaken his readers’ awareness to social problems without prescribing specific measures that will inevitably divide them: “the powers and purposes of Fiction,” he wrote upon finishing *Hard Times*, were “to interest and affect the general mind in behalf of anything that is clearly wrong… without obtruding any pet theory of cause and cure, and so throwing off allies as they spring up” (*Letters* 405). Like Trollope and later on Conrad, Dickens saw the value of fiction’s educational purposes in its ability to offer an implicit alternative to recognizable, direct modes of teaching, what I call its counter-didactic mode. Thus, Dickens initially rejects a *Household Words* account of the miserable “case of soldiers’ wives” because the issue is “comparatively useless and hopeless to tell in a general didactic way,” but suggests that it would be “quite another thing” if it were “written like a soldier’s wife, and presented as by a woman who had actually undergone them” (Starr 335). More concretely, the preface to the third edition of *Oliver Twist* rhetorically asks its readers to contrast the implicit lessons derived from the novel’s characters and setting with the feeble preaching of direct morality: “Have they [the characters and their haunting setting] no lesson, and do they not whisper something beyond the little-regarded warning of a moral precept?” (lv). Richard Stang succinctly

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20 Unless otherwise specified, italics are all mine. Eliot’s view is extremely close to this, though with her the divisiveness of politicizing fiction is implicit, and the explicit concern is with the inadequacy of the novelist for political thought: “My function is that of the aesthetic, not the doctrinal teacher—the rousing of the nobler emotions, which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures, concerning which the artistic mind, however strongly moved by social sympathy, is often not the best judge” (*Eliot Letters*, III, 237-8.).

21 In Trollope the contrast between the novelist’s teaching and the preacher’s is obscured by the extensive analogy *The Autobiography* draws between the two, but it is nevertheless there, and becomes most explicit in his work on
summarizes Dickens’ view by noting the “insistence throughout [Dickens’] correspondence on the need for impersonality in novel writing”– that is, letting the characters and the action speak for themselves, rather than having the narrator, or still worse, the author, intrude his own views. All of this coheres into an image of the novelist as a social educator who educates primarily through formal, implicit literary devices, limiting his politics to a broadening of his readers’ awareness of social evils without imposing any particular political position on them.

How, then, do we account for the bitter social satire, for the sermonizing passages, for the dripping moral sentences of Dickens’ fiction? How, indeed, do we reconcile the widespread attacks his fiction was under for politicizing the novel form, for overtly preaching in his novels against specific social institutions? On the whole, I would argue that while in theory such pronouncements on the role of fiction offer a smooth synthesis of the competing impulses of art and engagement, in practice the two did not lend themselves so neatly to combination. As a result, Dickens’ fictional career registers a profound ambivalence toward didacticism. In his novels, we find a set of strategies aimed at denouncing all association with didactic discourses, which I would argue create the space, dialectically, for embracing those very discourses.

This chapter will open the investigation into Dickens’ ambivalence by looking at his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, in which the need to distinguish the novel from its didactic counterparts was at its most intense. I will first show how the novel’s humor, the trademark of Dickens’ early career, both creates and benefits from a readerly antagonism towards preachiness, arguments, abstraction, and other modes associated with the didactic. I will then explore the novel’s more serious parts, its interpolated tales and its voyage into the Fleet Prison, as they simultaneously develop both didactic techniques and more nuanced methods of distancing the narrative from a committed stance.

Thackeray: “it is because the novelist amuses that he is thus influential. The sermon too often has no such effect, because it is applied with the declared intention of having it. The palpable and overt dose the child rejects; but that which is cunningly insinuated… is accepted unconsciously…. So it is with the novel” (*Thackeray* 202). Conrad, too, in the preface to *The Nigger of Narcissus*, proclaims that the artist, unlike more pedagogical persons embodied by the scientist and the thinker, “makes his appeal to our less obvious capacities,” and thereby achieves an effect that is “less loud” but “more profound,” “less distinct” and “more stirring” (Eigner and Worth 240).
The Counter-Didactic Humor of *The Pickwick Papers*

‘He wants you particklar; and no one else’l do,’ as the Devil’s private secretary said ven he fetched avay Doctor Faustus. (Ch’ 15)

----Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*.

So much of the humor, and indeed the pleasure, of *The Pickwick Papers*, stems from Dickens’ need to present his fiction as an alternative to didactic modes, even as he aspired to their function. Perhaps nothing captures the novel’s humor better than Sam Weller and his bizarre proverbs, the Wellerisms.  

It is not hard to diagnose what is funny about lines like the epigraph above: the reader expects a reliable source of wisdom when the quotation is introduced, and laughs at the incongruity between this expectation and the invariably absurd source she ends up encountering, in this case, Mephistopheles. What remain to be shown are the ways in which this style of humor, even as it is itself frequently educational, offers a parody and a critique of the didactic, and is enjoyed as such.

One of the consistent issues Victorians had with didactic fiction was its assumption of authority on issues the novelist had no “business” pontificating on, particularly social issues like class struggle and poverty. The humor of the Wellerism directly targets this assumption of authority, and in fact implicitly relies on its readers’ dislike of the more pedantic appeal to scriptural authorities a preacher might employ: if readers wanted authoritative citations from learned sources, they might still laugh at the absurdity of quoting Satan’s minions, a suicidal servant girl, a psychopathic king, etc. But Weller is much funnier to readers who dislike pedantic citations to begin with: for those readers, the joke not only offers a delightful incongruity, but a form of wish fulfillment as well.  

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22 One might even go so far as to say that the style of the proverb above made Dickens’ career. Before Sam Weller and his eponymous citations burst upon the scene of *The Pickwick Papers*, the novel sold a humble 500 monthly copies; after him, a staggering 40,000.

23 See intro, “The Wealth of Novels.”

24 As the phrase “wish fulfillment” might indicate, I am indebted here to Freud’s theory of humor, particularly its sense that “[jokes] make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way” (101). Put another way, humor allows readers to release hostilities they cannot otherwise
The wish, most broadly, is to avoid the literary experience of the didactic, and the Wellerisms offer readers that not only at the broad level of their structure, but in their content as well, which targets more specifically the techniques of didactic novelists. Thus, a major type of Wellerism lampoons the banal maxims that George Eliot immortalized as a central flaw of novelists of “the mind-and-millinery species.”

“Business first, and pleasure afterwards” becomes a statement made by a king whose business is the murder of other kings, and whose pleasure is the smothering of babies. “It’s over, and can’t be helped, and that’s one consolation,” a vaguely Calvinist maxim of contentment with one’s lot, becomes in the Wellerism a justification for murderous abuse of power: “as they always say in Turkey, wen they cuts the wrong man’s head off.” In the same vein, “it wos to be – and wos,” far from revealing a case of oblique divine intervention, becomes the self-consoling remark of a swindled old maiden “arter she’d married the footman.” Even a seemingly innocuous maxim like “there’s nothing as refreshing as sleep” metamorphoses in Weller’s hands into the suicidal musings of a servant girl about to drink an “egg-cupful of laudanum.” Thus, that all-purposed didactic device – the weighty quotation of a truth universally acknowledged – becomes in The Pickwick Papers a joke.

express or act upon, in this case with the didactic. As Malcolm Andrews’ recent study of Dickens’ humor, Dickensian Laughter, points out, there is a serious paucity of criticism dealing primarily with Dickens’ comical side, surprisingly even among Pickwick critics. Among the handful who do, three stand out: Andrews himself follows the lead of contemporary reviews to position Pickwick’s humor in relation to the traditions of humor it built on, and particularly emphasizes the good-natured aspect of Dickens’ hilarity. More relevantly for our purposes, James Kincaid’s Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter utilizes Freud’s model to explore the overt hostilities of the novel’s humor, but he focuses on the hostility towards women and sexuality, and does not treat the humor’s attitude towards didacticism at all. The only critic who does, albeit obliquely, is Northrop Frye, whose outstanding “Dickens and the Comedy of Humors” categorizes Pickwick’s humor as “the humor of pedantry” (58). The essay as a whole, however, argues similarly along Freudian- Bergsonian lines that what we mostly enjoy is Dickens’ fixated characters, particularly “the sense of our superiority to an obsessed person” (56). There is no sense in any of these studies that the targets of the humor are didactic practices, which isn’t to say that they are wrong – simply incomplete.

25 Granted, this is not the genre Eliot considers the most didactic (and therefore the most silly) in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” but the essay does introduce these novels as a mixture of “the prosy, the frothy, the pious [and] the pedantic”, and three of those adjectives would be readily associated with didactic fiction (frothy being perhaps the exception). In general, there is a strong association between the moralizing novelist and the maxim throughout Victorian attacks on didacticism, as when James Fitzjames Stephen writes: “nothing is more common than for novel writers (who seek to teach morality) than to to set out with the assumption of the truth of certain maxims of morality, and to arrange the facts of their story upon the hypothesis that every violation of those maxims entails all sorts of calamity...” (112).
Dickens doesn’t limit his attack to the arrogance or pomposity that underlies a moralizing attitude, however, but targets the falsehood of its content as well. The main problem with moralizing rhetoric, these Wellerisms show, is its tendency to oversimplify. The joke, then, is the incongruity between the general rule and the individual case. Whether business precedes or follows pleasure is entirely dependent on what one’s business and pleasures are, and is irrelevant for a homicidal king; while sleep might be refreshing, it is hardly so for a servant on the verge of poisoning herself; predestinarian platitudes, far from capturing a universal truth, are often a front for malevolent abuse of power.

Indeed, the Wellerisms’ implicit preoccupation with proving general principles wrong turns explicit when the plot of the novel itself becomes entangled with the question of how far Pickwick must adhere to his own general rules: having been unjustly fined for breach of promise of marriage, Pickwick refuses to pay the fine, preferring a prison sentence to compromising his principles. Sam’s attempt to convince him otherwise aptly sums up his humor’s attitude to generalities: “‘Horroar for the principle,’ as the money-lender said ven he wouldn’t renew the bill” (ch. 35).

Weller’s style thus criticizes both the false assumption of authority, and the reductive abstraction which characterizes the work of didactic novelists. But it also serves, ironically, the didactic purpose of “establish[ing Sam Weller] as a social critic” (Williams 95). As this is a well ploughed field of Dickens criticism, it will be sufficient to point out that the Wellerisms often depict “violent acts…[by] a person of authority and power,” and thus implicitly offer the institutional criticism we so associate with Dickens (Baer 181).

For our purposes, however, the criticism is less important than its unique technical accomplishment with regards to the problem of the didactic. Throughout this dissertation, both in reviews and in novels, didactic moments are quickly followed, or preceded, by their polar opposite: a reader will ask the novelist to teach, but also admonish him not to be didactic, or have a didactic purpose; a novelist

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26 See Intro, “Kant’s Ancient Humbugs.”
will give his character something educational to say, and then have other characters explicitly deride or be bored by that character. The Wellerisms are the best exception to this rule, in that they contain a synthesis of both modes, rather than a juxtaposition of them. That is, in the Wellerism we are not seeing a figure of authority preaching social criticism and then mocked for that criticism, nor an omniscient narrator ignored by his own narrative (as is the case of *Hard Times*). Rather, it is the figure of no authority and no claim to political affiliation, whose very style is a joke on didactic techniques, who conveys social criticism through those very jokes. To take the most explicit statement of social criticism in a Wellerism, here is Sam decrying social inequality, in correction of Pickwick’s false impression that prison life is jubilant:

I’ll tell you wot it is, sir; them as is always a-idling in public houses it don’t damage at all, and them as is always a-workin’ wen they can, it damages too much. “It’s unekal,” as my father used to say, wen his grog worn’t made half-and-half. “it’s unekal, and that’s the fault on it.” (ch. 41)

Normally, the statement “it’s unqual” would require a distancing of the novelist from the threat of social didacticism, a disclaimer of sorts. Here, however, the disclaimer is built into the Wellerism itself. First, the dialect places the reader in a position of superiority towards Weller, which disables the threat of condescension the sermonic mode tends to carry. Then, there is, as in all Wellerisms, a quasi-scriptural appeal to a higher authority whom no one would normally consider listening to, in this case Sam’s drunken working-class father commenting on his drink. Most importantly, there is a subtle alliance between the person unwittingly voicing the criticism and the object of criticism itself, which renders the exemplum delightfully inappropriate: Sam is criticizing “them as is always idlin’ in public houses” based on a comment from his father *who is idling* in a public house. Reviewers often put the novelist in an impossible dilemma by requiring both that he teaches by example and that he not let a didactic intention guide his writing. Dickens solved the dilemma here by teaching through a bad example whose intention is explicitly taken out of context.

**Dissertations, Treatises, Sermons**
Such synthesis is almost too good to be sustained. The rest of *Pickwick’s* counter-didactic humor is less immediately concerned with being educational itself, and more concerned with creating an opposition between Dickens’ fiction and recognizably pedagogical literary forms, particularly the essay and its variants. This opposition, however, does humorously prepare the reader to be educated by valorizing novelistic learning and belittling, at times violently, the abstract knowledge with which essayistic forms are associated.

The novel opens with hyperbolic praise to Mr. Pickwick for his essay “on the Theory of Tittlebats,” the baby-talk name for sticklebacks (ch. 1). The contrast between the apparent triviality of the essay and the mock-epic significance with which Dickens treats it creates in the reader a derisive distance from Pickwick’s theoretical scientific knowledge. Indeed, the humor targets Pickwick less than it does bookish learnedness and its didactic project, as the reader is ironically informed of the “inestimable benefits… to the advancement of knowledge, and the diffusion of learning” that Pickwick’s travels are to produce (ch.1). Before anything has happened in the story, then, we are thus assured that no essay will be smuggled into this novel, no intellectual knowledge advanced through it, except as a joke, to demonstrate the foolishness of such endeavors.

The joke must have been successful, as variations of it appear throughout the novel. In fact, all instances of essays in the novel are ironic demonstrations of the feebleness of the man of argumentative prose in the face of novelistic commonsense. Pickwick himself does not stop with his treatise on the theory of Tittlebats, but, upon encountering an old stone with an illegible engraving, vigorously pursues the inscription to its scholastic end. The result is an hilariously irrelevant pamphlet “containing ninety-six pages of very small print, and twenty-seven different readings of the inscription,” all of which the novel quickly dismisses by producing via the mock-villain Blotton the stone’s actual and more prosaic source of meaning, an illiterate man’s idly scribbled signature. Steven Marcus has analyzed this scene as a metaphor for Dickens’ writing itself, whose free-play with language maps onto the illiterate man’s idle doodling, but this reading is rather too broad, and misses the target of the scene, namely essays and the
“learned societies” that propagate them (Marcus 194). As if to demonstrate this point, the chapter ends with an almost terrifying proliferation of such essays, the sheer quantity of which is comically disproportionate to the triviality of the finding:

Mr. Blotton was ejected but not conquered. He also wrote a pamphlet, addressed to the seventeen learned societies, native and foreign....Hereupon, the virtuous indignation of the seventeen learned societies being roused, several fresh pamphlets appeared; ... the native learned societies translated the pamphlets of the foreign learned societies into English, the foreign learned societies translated the pamphlets of the native learned societies into all sorts of languages....

The seventeen learned societies unanimously voted the presumptuous Blotton an ignorant meddler, and forthwith set to work upon more treatises than ever.... (ch. 11)

Never were more pamphlets invoked in a single page of a novel. Still, the joke was too good to be left there, with virtually endless essays written about a non-discovery. Instead, Dickens invents yet another writer of treatises, whose foolishness repeats and accentuates the novel’s former hostilities towards the form and its compositors. The reader of Pickwick has by now come to expect that a man introduced sitting in his library “writing a philosophical treatise” will be shown a fool forthwith, and indeed the man mistakes a strong lantern for “an extraordinary and wonderful phenomenon of nature” (ch. 39). But the differences between this scene and the former are illuminating for the development of the novel’s attack on its pedagogical counterpart. Whereas the stone scene presented Pickwick’s scholasticism as potentially true, only to foil it with the more prosaic explanation, here the reader is introduced to the true cause of “these wonderful lights” well ahead of the scientist’s false speculations. From a humorous perspective, this suggests the accomplishment of the earlier joke: at first, the reader was allowed to expect a potential discovery and laugh when those expectations were thwarted; now that the reader has been taught not to expect anything from essayistic endeavors, a reversal is no longer comically surprising, and therefore the reader is left to enjoy the inadequacies of abstract reasoning as a fact of life rather than a shocking punch line.

From a conceptual perspective, the re-ordering of events suggests there is no longer any room for
the possibility of truth to be found in a “voluminous treatise of great research and deep learning” (ch. 39). The scientist may contemplate numerous possibilities (meteors, glow-worms, lightning) in his philosophical airs, but we already know there is a mundane explanation that will belie them all.

What this development in the mock-scholastic humor loses by way of surprising the reader it compensates for by increasing the comical violence towards the unfortunate essayist. Whereas the earlier episode merely concluded with verbal enmities, in this one the scientist, upon attempting to decipher the source of the mysterious light, is knocked unconscious by a “gentle tap” on the head from Sam Weller’s “clenched fist.” The direct violence signifies, and is partly the result of, a greater conflict between the narrative and the essayist: in the earlier scene, the primary episode was created by the scholar coming upon the “antiquarian discovery” promised by the title of the chapter. Here, on the other hand, the story has nothing to do with the scientist: the lantern is Mr. Pickwick’s warning signal to two young lovers that their surreptitious tryst might be discovered. The essayist is literally intruding on the plot’s most basic drives: romantic love and comic adventure. His violent ejection from the story rescues the couple from a blundering interloper, and the novel itself from the equally blundering form of the essay.

In terms of the ongoing battle between novelistic experience and essayistic abstraction, too, the gap seems to have widened beyond reconciliation: in the stone scene, Blotton the essayist was at least allowed access to the mundane truth underlying the stone’s inscription, though the absurdity of turning that truth into an essay showed the irrelevance of the form to a description of everyday life. Here, not only is the entire scientific community “delighted…beyond measure” with the false treatise, but the pummeled “light of science” is shown to be so divorced from real experience that he misinterprets Weller’s punch for an electric shock. It is as if Dickens is saying an essayist would not recognize everyday experience if it hit him over the head.

Oral argumentative forms do not fare much better in the world of Pickwick’s humor. Orations, sermons, dissertations and debates provide source material for some of the novel’s funniest moments, often indicating the folly of the preacher, much as the scenes above lampooned the essayist. But this
achieves the same effect, and therefore does not require further elaboration. More interesting for the battle against didactic alternatives are those scenes in which Dickens uses these oral forms of argumentation to treat novelistic subject matter. At Pickwick’s trial, for instance, a Mrs. Cluppins delivers herself of a “short dissertation on her own domestic affairs,” mainly treating her eight children and the expected arrival of a ninth. Clearly Mrs. Cluppins is not guilty of excessive abstraction, nor could she be accused of philosophical or scientific reasoning. The point, then, in framing her meandering anecdote as a political argument – “domestic affairs” benefiting from a pun on national domestic affairs – is not to show the weakness of political arguments per se, but rather suggest their comedic incompatibility with the novel’s more familial concerns (ch. 32). In other words, the joke both demonstrates and capitalizes on a divorce between the novel’s subject matter and the lofty concerns of argumentative prose. Like the essayist, Mrs. Cluppins is forcibly removed from the narrative, yet in her case, the hierarchy between the novel and didactic forms seems to be reversed: it is now the novelistic character who is comically incapable of the scope of a dissertation, rather than the essayistic outsider failing to comprehend novelistic experience. Yet more self-deprecatingly, when an old lady gives a “dissertation on the fashion of wearing high-heeled shoes,” the mundane reality that in the earlier scenes was too concrete for the abstract essayistic mind now becomes too trivial for a lengthy argumentative treatment (ch. 28). Thus, like a collie sorting the rams from the ewes, Pickwick’s humor drives the novel and the essay apart by barking at any character that would seek to cross the divide.

The Moral Depravity of Whist

We have now seen Pickwick’s humor erect numerous barricades between Dickens’ novel and its didactic counterparts: it assures readers that their experience will be free of authoritative discourse, the tyranny of sermonizing maxims, the abstraction of essays and the mingling of everyday experience with argumentative earnestness. But to all these an analysis of the humor must add yet another, and perhaps greater, counter-didactic accomplishment: the humor assures its readers that their novel will be free of moral judgment.
This it achieves, in true Pickwickian fashion, by showering moral judgment on objects of relative or absolute ethical neutrality. As the quintessential example of this, consider the mock-moralizing tone of the following scene, wherein a game of whist affords both narrator and characters great cause for moral indignation:

The rubber was conducted with all that gravity of deportment and sedateness of demeanour which befit the pursuit entitled 'whist'—a solemn observance, to which, as it appears to us, the title of 'game' has been very irreverently and ignominiously applied. The round-game table, on the other hand, was so boisterously merry as materially to interrupt the contemplations of Mr. Miller, who, not being quite so much absorbed as he ought to have been, contrived to commit various high crimes and misdemeanours, which excited the wrath of the fat gentleman to a very great extent, and called forth the good-humour of the old lady in a proportionate degree.

'There!' said the criminal Miller triumphantly, as he took up the odd trick at the conclusion of a hand; 'that could not have been played better, I flatter myself; impossible to have made another trick!'

'Miller ought to have trumped the diamond, oughtn't he, Sir?' said the old lady.

Mr. Pickwick nodded assent.

'Ought I, though?' said the unfortunate, with a doubtful appeal to his partner.

'You ought, Sir,' said the fat gentleman, in an awful voice.

'Very sorry,' said the crestfallen Miller.

'Much use that,' growled the fat gentleman. (ch. 6)

Again, the accomplishment of this scene is more subtle than the jovial absurdity of treating an innocuous game of cards as a moral battleground, each play an ethical decision of the utmost gravity. Far beyond a humorous incongruity, this scene is a parody of moralizing narratives, and thus implicitly a promise to the readers that Pickwick will not become one itself. The didactic narrator’s moral intrusions, which many a reader came to dread in the period’s novels, here are playfully exaggerated and displaced in the narrator’s disgust with those who “irreverently and ignominiously” call whist a game. Similarly, the tedious elevation in such fictions of everyday dialogue into moral debates is here transplanted unto the “criminal
Miller”’s ethical dilemma of whether or not he should have played the trump. With all this judgmental energy expended on whist, the reader can safely assume that there will be little left over for moral projects of a more serious – dare we say “criminal”? – nature.

**Preachers or Novelists?**

At this point, an objection to our reasoning may well be raised: thus far we have mostly shown the humor’s targets to be argumentative alternatives to the novel, the essay and its oral equivalents; now the claim is that the parody is targeting specifically novelistic practice – why? To be sure, this parody of morality, too, undercuts preachers and their chief literary forms, the sermon and the essay. But a close inspection of ethical language in the novel reveals that the humor’s target is much closer to home, and is more immediately concerned with didactic fiction writers than with institutional didacticism.

In fact, a third of the fifteen instances of the word “moral” in the novel offer a direct parody of the moralizing tale weaver. Thus, Sam Weller attempts to educate the somnolent fat boy Joe on the dangers of obesity via a “moral tale” about a fat man who taunts pick-pockets with a well-secured watch-chain until one of them “rushes head foremost straight into the old gen’l’m’n’s stomach” and steals the watch, leaving him with indigestion ever after (ch. 28). The story itself could work as a moral tale on pride or vanity, but with Weller’s moralizing conclusion (which also prefaces the tale), “take care you don’t get too fat,” it becomes a parody of one. Primarily, the parody suggests that the didactic fiction writer imposes moral conclusions unto stories that have little to do with them, as the man’s obesity clearly was not the cause of his misfortunes, nor of his future indigestion. More subtly, devoting a tale to obesity in the first place, an issue that would hardly rank as a social or moral concern for Dickens’ contemporaries, parodies the moralist’s pedantic need to turn even the most idiosyncratic of human abnormalities into a parable. Finally, the tale shows readers how dangerous moralizing is to the art of the novel by humorously pontificating on one of the novel’s chief sources of joy, namely the luxurious dining that punctuates nearly every episode of *The Pickwick Papers.*
Elsewhere, the parody seems to save the novel from its own didactic temptations: one of the novel’s inset tales, whose overall didactic preoccupations will be the subject of our next section, depicts Gabriel Grub’s moral transformation through a night of drinking and a healthy beating from righteous goblins. At the height of the story, the narrator’s moral earnestness reaches a level of abstract didacticism that seems at odds both with the milder joviality of the novel and its quondam hostility towards abstraction:

Many a time the cloud went and came, and many a lesson it taught to Gabriel Grub, who, although his shoulders smarted with pain from the frequent applications of the goblins’ feet thereunto, looked on with an interest that nothing could diminish. He saw that men who worked hard, and earned their scanty bread with lives of labour, were cheerful and happy; and that to the most ignorant, the sweet face of Nature was a never-failing source of cheerfulness and joy. He saw those who had been delicately nurtured, and tenderly brought up, cheerful under privations, and superior to suffering, that would have crushed many of a rougher grain, because they bore within their own bosoms the materials of happiness, contentment, and peace. He saw that women, the tenderest and most fragile of all God's creatures, were the oftenest superior to sorrow, adversity, and distress… (ch. 39)

From this passage alone one can see how closely tied moral abstraction is to didacticism, and how challenging both are to the novel in general, and *Pickwick* in particular. What we find in this passage is a move from the individual to the collective, from the uniquely named Gabriel Grub, undergoing the extraordinary experience of a goblin stampede, to “men who had worked hard” and the even more faceless “those who had been delicately nurtured.” Syntactically, the passage comes to increasingly rely on abstract nouns (italicized above) that remove the need for individuality altogether. In the space of just a few lines, we are faced with ten abstract nouns, five groups, and one individual whose position as the passive observer of the scene makes him effectively invisible to the reader. What is perhaps worse for a picaresque comical extravaganza like *Pickwick*, there is no room amidst these moral generalizations for any humor or irony, character development or plot twists: men who work hard will receive their reward, the ignorant
will be happy, women will transcend adversity. The narrator has given the reins of the story over to the preacher, and instantly the chaise has come to a halt.

A parody of didacticism is deeply needed at this point, and indeed, it is not long in coming. After telling us there was a great deal of doubt concerning Grub’s vision, the narrator adds a more formal “moral” to the tale, one which closely resembles Weller’s in its humorous irrelevance:

...be the matter how it may, as Gabriel Grub was afflicted with rheumatism to the end of his days, this story has at least one moral, if it teach no better one--and that is, that if a man turn sulky and drink by himself at Christmas time, he may make up his mind to be not a bit the better for it...

In many ways, this purposefully dubious moral is the antithesis of the former one: whereas the former pronounced the fate of humanity, this one addresses itself to the unusual – in Dickens’ world, almost unique^27 – man who is unhappy, and by himself, at Christmas. Whereas the former has the authority of a visionary cloud, this one begins by dismissing the vision regardless of its truth (“be the matter how it may”), and ends with a diminutive parody of the vision’s moral consequences, the reprobate’s punishment being that “he may make up his mind to be not a bit the better for it.” Of course, there are no abstract nouns here – no moral values are actually being advertised, as even the vague consequences are not the result of divine justice, but illogically of rheumatism. Any reader who found the earnest moral of the tale tedious is thus assured that the novel is at no risk of turning permanently moralizing.

All the same, Dickens enjoyed posing the risk precisely for the joy of dismissing it. No character better exemplifies that risk than Reverend Stiggins, and as such he is also the character who is most derided in the novel. His repeated tag, a “red-nosed man,” would immediately align him for early Dickens readers with the figure of the Parlour Orator, a “numerous race [of] red-faced men” who are “[w]eak-pated dolts [doing] a great deal of mischief... to their cause.

^27 Both *Sketches by Boz* (“Characters”, ch. 2) and *Pickwick Papers* (ch. 28) entail elaborate encomiums on the omnibenevolence of the season. It would take a Scrooge for a Dickensian character to be sulking at Christmas time.
however good” (Sketches by Boz, “Characters,” ch. 5). Like most Dickensian preachers, he is soon shown to be a hypocrite, as he lectures on temperance while drinking incessantly, and moralizes on Weller’s stinginess while mooching on Mrs. Weller’s humble financial resources. All this renders him the ideal candidate for the novel’s ultimate parody of didactic fiction, one that links social and moral didacticism and positions the narrative in antithesis to both:

'The fact is, my young friend,' said Mr. Stiggins solemnly, 'he [Mr. Weller] has an obdurate bosom. Oh, my young friend, who else could have resisted the pleading of sixteen of our fairest sisters, and withstood their exhortations to subscribe to our noble society for providing the infant negroes in the West Indies with flannel waistcoats and moral pocket-handkerchiefs?'

'What's a moral pocket-ankercher?' said Sam; 'I never see one o' them articles o' furniter.'

'Those which combine amusement with instruction, my young friend,' replied Mr. Stiggins, 'blending select tales with wood-cuts.' (ch. 37)

If the essayist was knocked unconscious for his troubles, this scene suggests that fictional didacticism, “tales which combine amusement with instruction,” is only worth wiping one’s nose with. Indeed, the absurdity of educational fiction is manifold here. First, it is clear that an educational tale is hardly what a slave needs. Second, sending warm coats to people laboring under Caribbean weather conditions further accentuates the aloofness of the social organization, and its moral fictions, towards the very people it purports to serve, a point Sam and his father discuss at length later in the chapter. Third, Stiggins’ phrase, “moral pocket handkerchiefs,” illustrates the didactic writer’s need to invest even the blandest of objects with moral purpose. Unfortunately for the West Indies slaves, handkerchiefs of the highest moral virtue seldom breed revolutions.

Somniferous Tales

The fatiguing adventures of the day or the somniferous influence of the clergyman's tale operated so strongly on the drowsy tendencies of Mr. Pickwick, that in less than five minutes after he had been shown to his comfortable bedroom he fell into a sound and dreamless sleep… (ch.7) As the old man concluded his tale, he advanced to a peg in one corner, and taking down his hat and coat, put them on with great deliberation; and, without saying another word, walked slowly away. As the gentleman with the Mosaic studs had fallen asleep, and the major part of the
company were deeply occupied in the humorous process of dropping melted tallow-grease into his brandy-and-water, Mr. Pickwick departed unnoticed… (ch.21)

----Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*.

But perhaps the humor doth protest too much. After all, one of the more celebrated qualities of the novel, especially as it progresses, is the “new dimension of seriousness” that its social engagement brings to an otherwise unassuming series of misadventures (Wilson 13). Indeed, an examination of the humor in relation to the less jocular portions of the novel reveals that its hostility towards earnest didacticism is not only directed outward, towards the pamphleteers and preachy novelists of the world, but inwards, towards the novel’s own moralizing and social purpose. Nowhere is the tension between the narrative’s jocular strain and its educational purposes more clear than *Pickwick’s* interpolated tales. The epigraphs of this section are representative of the narrative’s frequently somnolent reaction to these tales, a reaction that is especially surprising given the tales’ often horrifying content. In these tales characters lose their minds, murder their relatives, die of shock, and still Pickwick and the tales’ other listeners fall asleep, or lose interest. One can understand the comic aversion of the central narrative to the grave woes of these tales, but boredom is the last reaction to gothic stories one would expect. Disgust, disbelief, and aesthetic disdain for low entertainment – all are common negative reactions to thrillers from time immemorial. Boredom, on the other hand, is unique to *Pickwick*. Why?

One reason, I would argue, is that these tales are saturated with didactic discourse, and closely resemble didactic fictional genres wherein story-telling purposes are subordinated to those of moral and social critique. Ryan Heuser and Long Le-Khac have recently traced a 19th century shift in narrative technique “from abstract, evaluative language,” which predominates in
the early decades of the century, to “concrete, non-evaluative language,” which rapidly replaced it as the century progressed (45). In the case of the interpolated tales, we can see that historical trend, and its grounding in contemporary taste, in action, as the abstract and evaluative language of the tales can transform even the most violent stories into a readerly experience encoded as tedium. We have already had a glimpse of this discourse in our discussion of the two conclusions to the goblins’ tale (15-17). Turning to two tales whose educational purpose is most stark, we will see instances not only of the novel’s now-familiar artistic enmity toward didacticism, but also of its conceptual attraction to it.

**Dismal Jemmy**

The first of the interpolated tales is also the one whose moral vision is closest to that of a social institution, its plot of a clown’s spiraling alcoholism mapping neatly unto the genre of the temperance tale. Yet, even before the story has begun we have a sense of the obstacles Dickens will set in the tale’s path. First, Dickens makes the tale’s narrator, Dismal Jemmy, take no less than two drinks before the story is told. This implicitly tells readers that story-telling so depends on the joy of drinking even ones aimed at temperance require a tumbler. Then, the narrative itself is “partly… read, partly [related]” from a “dirty roll of paper,” an unseemly literary context for a horror story Jemmy had mostly experienced first hand, and therefore should have fairly good recollection of. This throws doubt on both narrator and tale, by suggesting inauthentic retrospective embellishments (ch. 3). Finally, Jemmy begins not with the story itself, but rather with the anti-climactic statement that “there is nothing of the marvelous in what [he is] going to relate… there is nothing even uncommon in it.” If novels in general, and gothic stories in particular, benefit from there being something unusual happening, in *Pickwick* the uncommon rises to an aesthetic ideal: of the 32 instances of the word “uncommon” in the novel, only one
other sentence negates the adjective like this example, and it too is by a narrator of an interpolated tale. In telling *Pickwick’s* readers that the story is common, then, Jemmy is openly stating that narrative interest has given way to a sociological interest in presenting typical case-studies rather than unique individuals.

Indeed, even Jemmy does not think the story will be interesting, as he apologetically remarks that it “does not deserve more notice than is usually bestowed on the most ordinary vicissitudes of human nature.” To readers as averse to abstraction in fiction as Victorians seem to have been, the apology is in order, for the introduction of the tale is saturated by abstract nouns (italicized):

}_Want_ and _sickness_ are too common in many stations of life to deserve more notice than is usually bestowed on the most ordinary _vicissitudes of human nature_. I have thrown these few notes together, because the subject of them was well known to me for many years. I traced his _progress_ downwards, step by step, until at last he reached that excess of _destitution_ from which he never rose again. (ch.3)

Once again, we see the problem abstraction creates for individuality and narrative interest. Despite the evident intimacy between Jemmy and the exemplary drunkard, Jemmy refers to him as the “subject of [his notes].” The abstraction also robs the story of narrative suspense. Not only has Jemmy proclaimed the events too universal to be worthy of note, but in his didactic need to spell out the moral arch of the tale – with the protagonist reaching an “excess of destitution from which he never rose again” – he has given up the story before it has even begun.

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29 Both Heuser and Le-Khac and studies of reviews (including my own) strongly suggest this, but ultimately conclusive evidence is not available: novelistic practice in a highly mercantile society clearly took into account readerly tastes, and so the drop in abstraction suggests a weakening of the taste for it, but it is not proof of it, and their independent explanations are quite as plausible. Victorian novel reviews clearly exhibit an hostility towards abstraction, but those too are not indisputable evidence of the reading population at large, which was much larger than the mere thousands of reviewers.
The tale itself offers an unintentional (at least on Jemmy’s part) aesthetic parable of the dangers of moralizing to good storytelling. Not only is the “subject” of the tale introduced without any of the external features Dickens so frequently depends on for characterization, but he is made unambiguously representative of both a social group and a moral disease, as Jemmy tells us that “like many people of his class, [he was] an habitual drunkard.” His narrative’s start is itself an explanation of Heuser and Le-Khac’s finding, as moral evaluation and abstract generalizations encumber the first sentence with no less than 6 subordinate clauses of nearly suffocating hypotaxis (italicized): 

In his better days, before he had become enfeebled by dissipation and emaciated by disease, he had been in the receipt of a good salary, which, if he had been careful and prudent, he might have continued to receive for some years—not many; because these men either die early, or by unnaturally taxing their bodily energies, lose, prematurely, those physical powers on which alone they can depend for subsistence. (3) Jemmy is here clearly less interested in telling the man’s story than in drawing moral conclusions from it. The main clause’s 14 brief words’ factual point—“in his better days he had been in the receipt of a good salary”—seems purposefully crushed by the 53 dense words of moral judgment, Jemmy not letting even a moment of moral neutrality go by without informing us, yet again, of the man’s “dissipation [and] disease.” After judging the man abstractly, Jemmy judges him more specifically, wistfully remarking that “if [the habitual drunkard] had been careful and prudent, he might have continued to receive [a salary] for some years.” But even such individuation is not general enough, so he adds yet another, more theoretical clause to ensure that the social resonance of this man’s “besetting sin” is registered: “not many [years], because these men die early…” The narrative plight of the moralizer, then, is not only that the story must be delayed indefinitely while its narrator repeatedly spells out its moral implications, but that those implications themselves require spiraling modifications of their own, in this case from a quasi-theological moral judgment, to an individual one, and back to a theoretical social one. If the
sentence (and the sentence describing it) seems incapable of ending, it is because the didactic narrator’s evaluations know no bounds. It is no wonder the Victorians reduced their novels’ participation in this mode, for passages of this sort seem to tax their readers’ energies as much as the sins they describe tax those of the drunk clown, and “men of his class.”

Perhaps Dickens had felt that at this point the moral and social stakes of the tale had been made clear. Perhaps his sympathy for the dissipated clown overrode Jemmy’s judgment of him. Perhaps the tale continuing in this vein would have caused the novel’s early sales to be even lower than they eventually were. Be the reason what it may, Jemmy’s moralizing adjectives and abstract nouns become less prevalent after this cumbersome introduction, and the story is allowed to unfold. Consequently, the tale’s educational purposes become more concrete and implicit, Jemmy letting the physical setting of poverty and the story of madness and death largely speak for themselves. Comparing the description of the clown’s madness with the passage above is like seeing the literary history of Heuser and Le-Khae in microcosm, with action verbs, colors, spatial descriptors and body parts (bolded) replacing the earlier abstractions and evaluative adjectives (still italicized):

Fill up his glass. Who was that, that dashed it from his lips? It was the same persecutor that had followed him before. He fell back upon his pillow and moaned aloud. A short period of oblivion, and he was wandering through a tedious maze of low-arched rooms--so low, sometimes, that he must creep upon his hands and knees to make his way along; it was close and dark, and every way he turned, some obstacle impeded his progress. There were insects, too, hideous crawling things, with eyes that stared upon him, and filled the very air around, glistening horribly amidst the thick darkness of the place…

We can acknowledge that, like Moretti’s reading of Self Help, this passage does not present the moralizing and concrete discourses as entirely mutually exclusive: phrases like “hideous

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30 Granted, Jemmy still uses the ethical language that most of the novel parodies – words like “repulsive, hideous, aghast, comfortless, sin, absurdity, dissipation” making here an earnest appearance almost unique to the interpolated tales – but the ratio of moralizing to “neutral” narration is largely reversed from the 4:1 of the opening of the tale.
“crawling things” and “glistening horribly” merge ethical evaluation with events so seamlessly that the very judgments seem to be more factual than evaluative. Still, the shift in Jemmy’s narrative technique places the discourses in opposition to one another: when objects appear, and characters move, abstract nouns tend to disappear, and ethical language is subordinated. As Heuser and Le-Khac point out, this “doesn’t necessarily indicate the disappearance of evaluation,” but rather its “dramatization of abstractions, qualities, and values through physical detail” (45-6). After all, we can understand the horrors of drink and poverty from this delirious scene without a narrator spelling them out.

But for Dickens, even at this early stage, such dramatization is nevertheless costly. Thus, Jemmy ends the tale with the clown’s “desperate attempt to articulate,” one assumes, the meaning of his demise. Whereas the opening of the tale both expressed and showed the narrative problem of turning characters into parables, this final scene shows the conceptual problem of allowing utterly concrete depiction to rule the narrative. In terms of plot, the man chokes to death before he can speak out. In terms of narrative technique, as body parts and action verbs (bolded) come to dominate the scene, explicit meaning becomes increasingly difficult to articulate:

He **grasped** my **shoulder** convulsively, and, **striking** his **breast** with the other **hand**, made a desperate attempt to articulate. It was unavailing; he extended his **arm** towards [his wife and son], and made another violent effort. There was a rattling noise in the **throat**--a glare of the **eye**--a short stifled groan--and he **fell** back--dead!"

Just as the clown’s ailing body makes it impossible for him to speak, narrative embodiment renders moral commentary impossible, as the tale ends on this note, without a word of evaluation from Jemmy. In a sense, this is the tension of Dickensian didacticism – say too much, and you are boring. Say too little, and you may not be clearer than a drunkard suffocating on his deathbed.
As if to make this point clear, the conspicuous absence of a moral conclusion is then
dramatized over and over. First, the narrator transitions back into the main narrative by assuring
us that he would be delighted to offer Pickwick’s insights on the story, “but for a most
unfortunate occurrence,” the arrival on the scene of earlier characters and their subplot. This
juxtaposes Pickwick and the clown, as both attempt to articulate the meaning of the story but are
not allowed to by its narrative forces. But Dickens does not let the point rest there, and instead
repeats it three times, in three different paragraphs:

We have little doubt that we should have been enabled to present [Mr. Pickwick’s
opinion of the foregoing anecdote] to our readers, but for a most unfortunate
occurrence.
Mr. Pickwick…had just made up his mind to speak—indeed, we have the authority of
Mr. Snodgrass’s notebook for stating, that he had actually opened his mouth—when
the waiter entered the room….
It has been conjectured that Mr. Pickwick was on the point of delivering some remarks
which would have enlightened the world, if not the thames, when he was thus
interrupted…

Typically, I would analyze this as the narrative reassuring readers that it has not crossed the
border into purely didactic territory. But in this case the counter-didactic disclaimers have a dual
and contradictory function: on the one hand, to do just that, to counter didacticism. On the other
hand, however, they register a frustration with the limits implicit narration places on
communication. Normally, when Pickwick is not allowed to pontificate, the narrative playfully
moves on. Here, however, such silencing is associated with the stifled groans of a dying man,
which makes the tone bleaker, and the attitude more ambiguous.

More importantly, the narrative does not move on – one would think that the disruption
would be narrated once, but the repetition gives the reader time to pause and reflect on the
consequences of thus replacing commentary with plot. Indeed, two chapters later –a lifetime for
an episodic novel like *Pickwick* – Dickens still wants Pickwick’s opinions of the tale to surface,
and be interrupted. Jemmy has another tale to relate, which gives Pickwick yet another opportunity to sound his opinions on the former one, but this time Jemmy himself interrupts:

You invited me to read that paper, the night before last, and listened attentively while I did so.' 'I did,' replied Mr. Pickwick; 'and I certainly thought--' 'I asked for no opinion,' said the dismal man, interrupting him, 'and I want none. You are travelling for amusement and instruction. Suppose I forward you a curious manuscript... (ch. 5)

At first, Jemmy’s logic seems strained here: he refuses Pickwick’s intellectual engagement with the tale because Pickwick is “travelling for amusement and instruction,” but shouldn’t the tale at least support the latter purpose? As with the earlier passages, there are two contradictory reasons for this, that depend on Jemmy’s own contradictory positions towards the didactic project. On the one hand, Jemmy’s curt tone (“I asked for no opinion, and I want none”) suggests that his shift towards embodied narration has made it impossible for him to countenance explicit opinions; not only have body parts and action verbs replaced Jemmy’s own narrative commentary, but whatever moral the reader derives from the tale must be wordless as well.

This reading assumes that the concretely didactic Jemmy who narrates the latter parts of the tale is the speaker here. If the prefatorial, explicitly moralizing Jemmy refuses Pickwick’s opinion, it is not commentary per se that is being excluded, but the likely commentary of Pickwick, himself no stranger to the vine, on a story enjoining temperance. “You are seeking amusement and instruction,” from the preachy Jemmy, implies that Pickwick has derived and can derive no instruction from the tale, and that therefore his opinions will only muddle its moral project.

Both readings are plausible, but they point to very different problems the novel has with The Stroller’s Tale. The tale’s opening paragraphs are artistically offensive to the novel, to its battle against abstraction, generality and preachiness. Its closing paragraphs are artistically much more in line with the Pickwickian narrative (setting aside the grim tone), but their ideology is
not: *Pickwick’s* episodes and characters depend on drinking far too much for the novel to comfortably accommodate a tale on temperance. It is no coincidence, then, that this is the tale that most endangers the main narrative in which it is imbedded. At the end of the tale, Pickwick is momentarily compelled to “replace on the table the glass, which, for the last few sentences... he had retained in his hand,” and the reader is threatened not only with a moral parable, but with a sober, pontificating protagonist as well. The temporary artistic danger of a boring sermon, which is present in all the interpolated tales, is nothing to this long-term threat of Pickwick himself joining the ranks of Stiggins and Mrs. Weller.

To see how seriously threatened the novel was with such a shift, we need only observe how much energy Dickens subsequently spends on distancing his narrative from the temperance movement. We have already seen Dickens damage Dismal Jemmy’s credibility by giving him an extra drink, and by repeatedly disengaging the main story from the moral conclusion of The Stroller’s Tale. But Dickens does not stop there: in the very same chapter of the tale, he offers a counter-narrative to the temperance one, this time with alcohol serving a pacifying, rather than an inflaming, purpose. In this episode, Pickwick is outraged by the duel-hungry Doctor Payne, who expresses a hypothetical desire to pull every nose in Pickwick’s company, upon more suitable circumstances. Pickwick is on the verge of violence, when alcohol restores him to good humor. It seems only fitting that the drink should be from the same batch Jemmy was told to mix:

'Hold him tight,' shouted Mr. Snodgrass; and by the united efforts of the whole company, Mr. Pickwick was forced into an arm-chair. 'Leave him alone,' said the green-coated stranger; 'brandy-and-water--jolly old gentleman--lots of pluck--swallow this--ah!--capital stuff.' Having previously tested the virtues of a bumper, which had been mixed by the dismal man, the stranger applied the glass to Mr. Pickwick's mouth; and the remainder of its contents rapidly disappeared. There was a short pause; the brandy-and-water had done its work; the amiable countenance of Mr. Pickwick was fast recovering its customary expression.
This passage is in fact a complete reversal of the tale. Whereas the latter depicted drinking as a moral malady, here we are shown the “virtues of a bumper.” Whereas the latter showed a contented character destroyed by drink, here the brandy restores an outraged Pickwick to good humor. Whereas in the latter alcohol caused violence – here it prevents it. In the end, Jemmy’s story seems to prove far less effective in promoting the cause of order and happiness than the drink he mixes in contradiction of it.

**The Brick Lane Branch of the United Grand Junction Ebenzer Temperance Association**

One might think this were enough to settle the matter, at least into a convenient ambiguity: the tale exemplifies the dangers of alcoholism, the main story plays with its pleasures, and the novel as a whole is not overly committed one way or another. But the attack on temperance and its stories continues, which suggests the ambiguity was not convenient after all. Thirty chapters later, most readers have probably forgotten about Dismal Jemmy and his cause, but the narrative has not, and delivers a final blow, this time in the form of a direct satire on temperance societies and their fictions. Nearly every line depicting The Brick Lane Branch of the United Grand Junction Ebenzer Temperance Association is dripping with satirical humor, but for our purposes none is as funny as the committee’s report on “additional cases of converts to Temperance” (ch. 33). These case studies all offer a satirical indictment of the society’s reductive tendency to attribute all manners of evil to alcohol, and all good “solely to …temperate habits.” More importantly, the foolishness of abstract reasoning is again positioned against concrete, bodily reality, as most of the characters are reported to have somehow lost body parts to the malignant effects of inebriation. Like the clown in The Stroller’s Tale, H. Walker lost his job, but in this case it was either because of “the porter” or because of “the loss of the use of his right hand,” which he “thinks it very likely that, if he had drunk nothing but water all his life, his fellow workman would never have stuck a rusty needle in him.” Betsy Martin only had one eye, and “shouldn’t wonder if [her mother’s drinking] caused it.” It stands to reason, following this peculiar logic, that “it [is] not impossible that if she had always abstained from spirits she might have had two eyes by this time.” Thomas Burton only had one
leg, and found that the used wooden ones “split and rot very quickly,” and “is firmly persuaded that their constitution was undermined by the gin-and-water.” Naturally, he replaced them with new wooden legs, which lasted twice as long, no doubt “solely [due] to his temperate habits.”

It isn’t just that the narrative mocks the reasoning of the society members, however; it comes very close, by confiscating a body part from every speaker, to arguing the opposite extreme, that “temperate habits,” and the didactic impulse they symbolize, actually diminish a person’s presence in the real, physical world. Jemmy’s cause, then, is thoroughly thrashed by the narrative, and Dickens closes the book on both by turning the dismal man into the villain Job Trotter’s brother, who tells us Jemmy was a far worse conman and fled to America “in consequence of being too much sought after here” (ch. 53).

The Tale of the Queer Client

The Tale of the Queer Client is yet more complicated in its commitments, both artistic and didactic, and is therefore treated to less continuous contempt by the primary story, which even follows its lead into the unlikely debtors’ prison. Yet, in many ways it is the successor of The Stroller’s Tale, and presents the same dilemma to the novel. The second tale Jemmy never got to tell, “The Romance of Real Life,” is the starting point of this one, as the pallid old man admonishes Pickwick to note the horror of inns of court, “the romance of life, Sir, the romance of life!” (ch. 5, 21). Like Jemmy, the old man is discredited before he begins his tale, as the “wild slyness in his leer” is the only thing the narrator describes as “repulsive” in the entire novel (ch. 20). Like Jemmy, the old man is made to look hypocritical, as he preaches on social injustice not out of moral concern but “[rubbing] his hands as if in delight at having found another point of view in which to place his favourite subject.” Like Jemmy, the old man structures his tales around the binary of common versus singular experience, and ties the “most common and least romantic light” of these tales to a host of abstractions (italicized), and an explicit mode of social critique:

What fine places of slow torture [these inns] are! Think of the needy man who has spent his all, beggared himself, and pinched his friends, to enter the profession, which is destined never to yield him a morsel of bread. The waiting--the hope--the
disappointment—the fear—the misery—the poverty—the blight on his hopes, and end to his career—the suicide perhaps, or the shabby, slipshod drunkard. (21)
The “shabby, slipshod drunkard” even suggests that another temperance tale might be in store, but this is where the analogy between the two narrators exhausts its usefulness, as the old man is a far more artistically motivated narrator than Jemmy, and complicates the novel’s binary opposition between the commonplace, abstract and didactically uninteresting on the one hand, and the concrete, singular and fascinating on the other. Indeed, as a narrator the old man seems to be more of an experiment in mixing sermonic and novelistic discourses than in shifting from one to another. His first few sentences position him as a preachy, cranky old man who is there to tell Pickwick the truth about the inns, and berate him for his ignorance. Yet, in those same sentences he aligns himself with the narrative against the scholarly, and implicitly its didacticism:

'YOU!' said the old man contemptuously. 'What do YOU know of the time when young men shut themselves up in those lonely rooms, and read and read, hour after hour, and night after night, till their reason wandered beneath their midnight studies; till their mental powers were exhausted; till morning's light brought no freshness or health to them; and they sank beneath the unnatural devotion of their youthful energies to their dry old books? (ch. 21)

This attack on bookish learning complicates the novel’s general premise that scholars are the ones who moralize: here we have a character moralizing, as it were, against the moralizers, and adopting the same rhetorical methods in the process: abstract language, hostile addresses to the reader, and a general tone of stern disapproval. Pickwick is at a loss for words at this, and so is the reader, whose Pickwickian associations with didacticism are being attacked.

One of those associations, as we have suggested, is with the commonplace, a sense in the novel that educational characters and stories must be common in order to bear the weight of the moral and social abstractions they are made to signify. The leering old man does, as we have seen, pay homage to this association, but not in the apologetic vein of a Jemmy, nor in the satirical vein of the Pickwickian narrator. Rather, he treats the common and the uncommon as
interchangeable; at times he announces that the inns of court hold “no ordinary houses,” and that “the true history of one old set of chambers” would be more terrifying than “many a legend”; at other times he promises to depict them at “their most common-place and least romantic.” Similarly, the tales of sudden deaths and confused ghosts, most strange and wonderful to Pickwick and company, are to this narrator, “funny, but not uncommon.” Because his narrative dissolves the boundary between the commonplace and the exceptional, the leering old man can narrate abstractions with “delight,” as the abstractions are no longer opposed to individual or uncommon experience. The result of that duality is that almost self-contradictory hybrid, the “romance of real life” – a tale that generalizes even as it specifies, and waxes didactic even as it entertains its narrator and fascinates its audience.

Complicating these binaries allows the leering narrator to play with the other binaries of didactic fiction, between direct and abstract didacticism on the one hand, and indirect, embodied education on the other. This he does first on a macro level, with the stories framing the inset tale, and then on a micro level, within The Tale of the Queer Client itself. Both within the tale and outside of it, then, the message that the poverty-stricken areas of London are uninhabitable finds both subtle-humorous, and explicit-serious expression, suggesting the facility of mixing the two modes. In the stories preceding the leering man’s central tale, a man’s apoplectic attack lands his head in the mailbox, another’s suicide renders him an inconvenient house guest, and a third, long expired, sees the error of his haunting ways when the current tenant asks him to explain the ghostly logic of choosing “the very places where you have been most miserable” (ch. 21). In all these stories, the underlying sense that horror and its ghosts and skeletons are commonplace in London’s poorer parts allows the narrator to move rapidly within and between tales without moral commentary or frequent generalizations.
The most didactic of speeches in these tales, the one wherein the tenant convinces his ghostly roommate to haunt better locales, is conveyed in an understated tone of relative ethical neutrality: “this is a very uncomfortable room. From the appearance of that press, I should be disposed to say that it is not wholly free from bugs… to say nothing of the climate of London, which is extremely disagreeable.” As the ghost is convinced by this argument, the reader is shown that one need not moralize directly about the degraded state of London to convey a powerful and convincing impression of it. When these humorous educational moments are complemented by the central tale’s more earnest didacticism, however, the overall impression is that narrative technique can alternate unencumbered between a humorous, suggestive critique, and an overt, moralizing one.

Indeed, the narrative of the inset tale can itself be read, again, as an experiment in mixing concrete and abstract storytelling. The tale opens with a scathing critique of conditions of the Marshalsea debtor’s prison. The prisoners are described in tight phrases that unite the two modes we have been discussing: their faces are “wasted with famine” and “sallow from confinement,” their physical condition naturally arising out of social iniquity. Similarly, abstract conditions like “poverty and debauchery” and “want and misfortune” dwell naturally in the physical environment of “crowded alleys” and “the narrow prison,” respectively. The narrator, in fact, explicitly makes the abstract concrete by declaring it “no figure of speech to say that debtors rotted in prison, with no hope of release and no prospect of liberty.”

In a sense, this experiment fails. The Pickwickians’ initial fascination with the old man’s more humorous horror dissipates by the end of the Client’s Tale, with one character falling asleep, and the “major part of the company, deeply occupied in the humorous process of dropping melted tallow-grease into his brandy-and-water” (21). Technically, too, the mixing of
the modes, much like the initial sermonizing of The Stroller’s Tale, gives way to a far more embodied narrative of delirium and violence. Perhaps most problematically, the plot abandons its social project, exchanging it for an implausible revenge tragedy. After we are led to believe in the first part of the plot that the conditions of London caused this family’s plight, the blame shifts dramatically to a pair of domestic culprits, the two fathers of the couple, one of whom throws the protagonist in prison, and the other of whom refuses to bail him out, despite being extremely wealthy. After his wife and child die from privation, the protagonist comes into money and turns from a sympathetic prisoner into a vengeful madman who devotes the rest of his life to the destruction of his father-in-law. He buys up the debts of his former debtor, bides his time, and then, when the father-in-law’s business takes a downturn, calls in the lot. His final stroke, after cornering his victim in some shabby hideaway, is to announce that now he, the father-in-law, will know the “living death” of the debtors’ prison. In this way, the Marshalsea has been transformed from a social evil to a tool for settling personal scores between ogres.

In another sense, however, the experiment was a success. While the tale itself partially abandons its literary social mission, it – and to a lesser degree, the other tales – does exert a didactic pressure on the novel as a whole, a pressure that the main narrative could not resist forever.31

“I have seen enough”

By sending Pickwick to Fleet prison, the novel moves from a coquettish flirtation with didacticism to serious courtship. So long as Pickwick’s engagement with social misery was consigned to the interpolated tales, as we have seen, it was possible to contain the social and moral commentary by discrediting its narrators and registering boredom with their narratives.

31 Robert L. Patten’s “The Art of Pickwick’s interpolated tales” has done a lot more justice to the tales’ influence on the main narrative than the scope of the argument will allow me to do. Pages 361-3 explore the thematic links and contrasts between the two particularly effectively.
Once the main narrative goes to the debtors’ prison, such methods of containment become problematic: the narrator cannot be bored with his own narrative, nor dismiss his own voice, however comical its authority. Nor can the narrative merely continue with its frolicking picaresque vein; the prison is too bleak a space for uninterrupted comedy. The social consciousness that drives the interpolated tales, then, seems to demand explicit commentary, but of what kind?

The documentary style of narrative (letting the dry facts speak for themselves, as it were) has the benefits of indirection, but Dickens generally associated it with tedious blue books and foolish statistical societies, and was especially keen on differentiating himself from such a style in his depictions of prison life.\(^{32}\) Critical narratorial interventions seem to be the likeliest solution, and yet that technique is precisely what the humor had been satirizing up to this point. In prison, then, any narrative moment risks moral callousness and social negligence on the one hand, didactic preachiness and statistical tedium on the other. Put more positively, prison presented Dickens with the opportunity of articulating his social and moral views, but every formal device for doing so had potential costs. What was Dickens to do?

First, he employs to the full the counter-didactic arsenal he developed in the earlier parts, to suggest that whatever social commentary follows should not be read as the guiding purpose for the prison episodes. To show that the narrative will not utterly abandon its humor, Dickens introduces a host of comical prison scenes, culminating in a parody of cruel debt

\(^{32}\) See *Sketches by Boz*, “Scenes,” ch. 25: “We have only to premise, that we do not intend to fatigue the reader with any statistical accounts of the prison: they will be found at length in numerous reports of numerous committees, and a variety of authorities of equal weight. We took no notes, made no memoranda, measured none of the yards, ascertained the exact number of inches in no particular room: are unable even to report of how many apartments the gaol is composed.” The reader of *Hard Times* knows that Dickens never quite warmed to such committees or their methodology.
collection, with Sam begging his father to release him of a fictional debt he has contracted in order to serve Pickwick in prison (43). To remind readers of his distaste for the preacherly, Dickens brings back the ultra-didactic Reverend Stiggins who, now jaundiced with a liver inflammation, gives “an edifying discourse” on hypocrisy and “the vice of intoxication” (44). To acknowledge the potential boredom to picaresque readers of an earnest depiction of misery, Dickens introduces a mini-version of an interpolated tale by an imprisoned cobbler whose story of a convoluted suit reminiscent of Jaryndice and Jaryndice puts Sam Weller to sleep (64). Finally, to show that the narrative is not taking an ideological or dogmatic stance against debtors’ prisons, Dickens has the imprisoned Sam Weller narrate the story of a man who does everything “on principle,” and naturally kills himself to prove that the crumpets he had been eating on principle “wos wholesome” (64). All readerly objections to the didactic, then, are thematized within the prison, which dialectically creates more space for the narrative to incorporate new didactic techniques itself.

**Pickwickian Questions**

The prison, then, leads to several new experiments in fictional education, but in none of these experiments does Dickens wholly abandon the artistic principles underlying the novel. Perhaps the most organic of these experiments is that of turning Pickwick into an unwitting social critic by taking advantage of his indefatigable curiosity. Throughout the novel, Pickwick asks countless innocent questions on horses, games, hunting, and people, most of which expose his foolishness and dispose readers to trust that Pickwick’s education has little to do with their own.33 In the Fleet prison, although the format is preserved – Pickwick wandering about, asking astonished questions about everything he sees – the questions are decidedly not foolish, but carry

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33 The fact that Pickwick’s education has everything to do with the reader’s, as Kincaid has shown, is more a point in favor of the argument than one contradicting it (24-5). Because the reader is instructed via Pickwick, she needs to be assured of the opposite. Such, in general, are the rules of the counter-didactic game.
explicit social criticism.\textsuperscript{34} Going to the Sarjeant’s Inn to comply with the warrant for his arrest, Pickwick’s “curiosity [is] quite excited” by a group of “shabby-genteel” men whose presence there he does not understand. When he asks about them, he is told that they are “bail[s],” a word that, like many others in the novel, Pickwick is not familiar with (40). In this case, however, the word signifies a serious social problem rather than a bit of local color – the corruption of perjury for hire. Pickwick’s reaction is not another innocuous question, nor a contented “well”; rather, it is an expression of moral indignation: “[w]hat! Am I to understand that these men earn their livelihood by waiting about here, to perjure themselves before the judges of the land, at the rate of half a crown a crime!”

Similarly, upon taking his first survey of the prison, Pickwick mistakenly assumes (as is his custom) that the “damp and gloomy stone vaults” he sees “are the little cellars where the prisoners keep their small quantities of coals” (41). When the turnkey informs him that these are in fact the prisoners’ living quarters, Pickwick conveys the novel’s social critique through another rhetorical question: “‘[m]y friend,’ said Mr. Pickwick, ‘you don’t really mean to say that human beings live down in those wretched dungeons?’” Eventually, Pickwick’s questions do not merely make explicit the social criticism of prison life, but come to articulate the social significance of potentially neutral prison experiences. Hearing that a fellow prisoner is dying of consumption, Pickwick exclaims, in his usual astonished fashion: “[g]reat Heaven!…has this man been slowly murdered by the law for six months?” (64) Thus, without making a single direct statement, and without even changing the basic structure of his episodes, Dickens manages

\textsuperscript{34} It can be argued that Pickwickian curiosity is used as a site for readers’ education as early as chapter 16, when Pickwick asks what a “two-penny rope” is, and is consequently informed of conditions in cheap lodging houses. But in such early cases the burden of education and critique lies with Sam Weller, whereas in the prison Pickwick’s questions themselves form the criticism.
to tell his readers that the justice system is corrupt, prisoners live in conditions only fit for coal, and that in some cases the law is even guiltier than the men it punishes.

I imagine that when Victorian readers asked that the novel teach them life lessons without being didactic, this kind of subtle rhetorical use of narrative technique and character traits is exactly what they had in mind. Yet, Dickens does his readers one better – every one of these rhetorical questions is instantly rejected, or modified, by the person asked. “Perjury” is a “harsh word,” Pickwick’s lawyer replies, and offers the more oblique “legal fiction” as a replacement (40). Yes, people “live down there,” the turnkey acknowledges, only to rebuff the accusation with three rhetorical questions of his own: “’and what of that? Who’s got to say anything agin it? …[A] verry good place it is to live in, ain’t it?’” (41). The prisoner’s dying of consumption may seem to Pickwick the result of the iniquitous system of debtors’ prisons, but “he’d have been took the same, wherever he was” (64). Far from pounding social critique into his readers, then, Dickens gives them the freedom of treating it as a mere Pickwickian question.

“The Law had his Body”

From a literary perspective, this is a fairly mild way of introducing social critique into fiction. From an educational perspective, however, these scenes leave something to be desired – namely, the very explicitness and authority which their technique masques and qualifies. To offer that clarity, Dickens uses the technique we most associate with didactic fiction, and perhaps with Victorian fiction – the narratorial intrusion. As if to back up the least authoritative of Pickwick’s rhetorical questions – “has this man been slowly murdered by the law for six months?“ – the narrator turns it into a declarative sentence in his description of the consumptive prisoner’s corpse: “the law had his body, and there it lay…an awful witness to its tender mercy” (44). But at this point, Dickens is still committed to an artistic crafting and veiling of his message, as can
be seen from the scene ending with this didactic moment. Notice how Dickens constructs layers upon layers of mediating details and syntax that very slowly ease the reader into the moment of social criticism:

Lolling from the windows which commanded a view of this promenade were a number of persons, some in noisy conversation with their acquaintance below, others playing at ball with some adventurous throwers outside, others looking on at the racket-players, or watching the boys as they cried the game. Dirty, slipshod women passed and repassed, on their way to the cooking-house in one corner of the yard; children screamed, and fought, and played together, in another; the tumbling of the skittles, and the shouts of the players, mingled perpetually with these and a hundred other sounds; and all was noise and tumult--save in a little miserable shed a few yards off, where lay, all quiet and ghastly, the body of the Chancery prisoner who had died the night before, awaiting the mockery of an inquest. The body! It is the lawyer's term for the restless, whirling mass of cares and anxieties, affections, hopes, and griefs, that make up the living man. The law had his body; and there it lay, clothed in grave-clothes, an awful witness to its tender mercy.

Fittingly, the majority of this scene is devoted not to the corpse and the social critique it embodies, but to the antithesis of didacticism – pure play. Only after we see the prison at its most joyful, with ball-tossing, racket-playing and skittles, are we exposed to the body. That exposure itself is marginalized explicitly and syntactically, as the corpse is placed “a few yards off” the main scene, in the subordinate clause of a subordinate clause which itself modifies the third independent clause of the sentence. The first explicit criticism, “awaiting the mockery of an inquest,” is more embedded still, appearing as the final qualifying statement in a chain of 4 subordinations (“save for… where lay… who had died… awaiting) each of which is itself qualified by at least one non-clausal phrase (“a little miserable shed a few yards off… all quiet and ghastly… the night before”). All this craft suggests that even at its most explicit the narrative will not abandon its commitment to literary implicitness.

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35 And the exposure is more gradual still, if you consider the increased violence of the playful scene subtly preparing the reader for the transition.
Yet, that is precisely what the last two sentences of this scene do. After finally edging the corpse into the scene, balancing narrative and didactic concerns, the narrator abruptly pivots to explicit, unmediated didacticism: “The body! It is the lawyer’s term for the restless, whirling mass of cares and anxieties, affections, hopes, and griefs that make up the living man.” In so doing, he rejects the hybrid strategy he had just adopted: “body,” he says, is a lawyer’s term, designed to obscure a harsh moral reality. It is as if Dickens, whose aversion to circumlocution became the subject of one of his most famous satires, was displeased with his own web of mediations, perhaps even feeling that his narrative was neglecting the consumptive body no less than the prisoners at their play. In fact, far from a smooth transition between the scene and its moral conclusion, we see here direct hostility between the sermonic abstraction and the earlier depiction which inspired it. The narrative technique that treats social injustice with relatively neutral language seems just as much to blame as the system of law that perpetrated that injustice in the first place.

**Our Counter-Didactic Method**

Such hostilities cannot continue. If this dissertation were to offer its readers a single methodological insight into reading Victorian fiction, it would be this: when the Victorian novelist stops his narrative to clarify its educational meaning or express social criticism, you can expect a qualifying counter-measure, a device that would suggest this is not what the narrative aims to do. Very often, as the narrator is virtually disqualifying his own attempt at direct communication, the transition back to the story will be awkward. For the sake of visual convenience, here is what the transition looks like in this instance:

The body! It is the lawyer's term for the restless, whirling mass of cares and anxieties, affections, hopes, and griefs, that make up the living man. The law had his body; and there it lay, clothed in grave-clothes, an awful witness to its tender mercy.

'Would you like to see a whistling-shop, Sir?' inquired Job Trotter.
As the whistling-shop has little to do with the consumptive prisoner, this may seem like bad writing. But if the break in narrative flow is bad, I would argue it is purposefully so, as a smooth transition would suggest that the main story has been turned over to the cause of institutional criticism. By ignoring his own intrusion, on the other hand, the narrator acknowledges the readers’ potential discomfort with the passage, and implies that he shares their literary concerns. The socially committed narrator has judged the artistically committed one, and the latter has returned the favor by continuing the story as if the critical intervention never happened.

But the prison’s social evils are too strong to keep the committed narrator away from the narrative for long, especially as the distancing devices allow the intrusions to enter the narrative without overwhelming it. Indeed, the longer the narrative stays in prison, the more emboldened the committed narrator gets. When Pickwick ventures into the poor side of the prison, this narrator takes over, first with a more factual description of the prison, then here with a turn to the sermonic:

…the miserable and destitute condition of these unhappy persons remains the same. We no longer suffer them to appeal at the prison gates to the charity and compassion of the passersby; but we still leave unblotted the leaves of our statute book, for the reverence and admiration of succeeding ages, the just and wholesome law which declares that the sturdy felon shall be fed and clothed, and that the penniless debtor shall be left to die of starvation and nakedness. This is no fiction. Not a week passes over our head, but, in every one of our prisons for debt, some of these men must inevitably expire in the slow agonies of want, if they were not relieved by their fellow-prisoners. (62)

All the markings of unveiled didacticism are here: a myriad of moral adjectives and abstractions, an earnest appeal to the reader, the unambiguous authority of a third person narrator assuming the royal “we”. After all the balancing acts we have seen throughout this chapter, what we have here is the most complete surrender to the preacherly. There is even an explicit renunciation of the literary form of the narrative: “this is no fiction.” As we pointed out above, such intrusions
must be immediately renounced in one way or another by the narrative. Here, as social criticism has been given much more space, the device needs to be all the more aggressive:

Turning these things in his mind, as he mounted the narrow staircase at the foot of which Roker had left him, Mr. Pickwick gradually worked himself to the boiling-over point; and so excited was he with his reflections on this subject, that he had burst into the room to which he had been directed, before he had any distinct recollection, either of the place in which he was, or of the object of his visit.

The qualification, then, is that the sermon is in fact not the narrator’s thoughts but Pickwick’s. This is a more explicit way of protecting the narrative from the charges of didacticism which narratorial intrusions so frequently incurred, but if it achieves that goal (which I doubt), it does so at great cost. First, the main benefit of an authoritative didactic intrusion is its communicative clarity – it tells readers unequivocally where the narrator, and by analogy his narrative, stands. If these are merely the thoughts of a character, and a foolish one at that, then that clarity is obscured, and the message is diluted. Second, whereas in the first example there was a momentary awkwardness, this device seriously damages the tonal consistency of the book: this is neither Pickwick’s tone nor his diction. He would not know about the changes in the law, nor make any reference to the fictionality of his thoughts. One might not put abstract phrasing past him, but the sarcastic word-choice and the urgency of the plea is certainly beyond his scope. In fact, what happens to Pickwick in this scene is a perfect analogy, and perhaps even an apology, for what happens to the narrator and his story. Just as Pickwick, overly “excited with his reflections on the subject,” loses track of where he is in the prison, so the narrator loses track of where he is in the story, launching into a didactic spree that can be plausibly associated neither with his own voice nor that of his protagonist.

The Art of Social Commitment
But social commitment is not always so problematic for the narrative, and in fact creates opportunities for artistic achievements, as well. Pickwick not only comes to ask socially-conscious rhetorical questions, but develops into a much more complex and intelligent character while in prison. Sam Weller, too, adds a layer of self-sacrificing depth to his comical good nature by committing himself to prison in order to be able to serve Pickwick there. More broadly, characterization in the prison comes to have a social framework that exceeds the boundaries of Pickwickian idiosyncrasies, and allows readers to see characters more immediately as members of a class. In fact, most instances of the word “class” appear in or around the prison, and with the word comes a new sense of social identity:

There were many classes of people here, from the labouring man in his fustian jacket, to the broken-down spendthrift in his shawl dressing-gown, most appropriately out at elbows; but there was the same air about them all—a kind of listless, jail-bird, careless swagger, a vagabondish who's-afraid sort of bearing… (41)

This last man was an admirable specimen of a class of gentry which never can be seen in full perfection but in such places—they may be met with, in an imperfect state, occasionally about stable-yards and Public-houses; but they never attain their full bloom except in these hot-beds, which would almost seem to be considerately provided by the legislature for the sole purpose of rearing them. (41)

This change in focus can easily be read negatively as a flattening of characters, turning them from individuals into “specimen of a class,” and ignoring the differences between them in favor of emphasizing the atmosphere of social misery that “was about them all.” But in Pickwick, idiosyncratic characterization has been taken to such extremes that social characterization offers a relief from what J. Hillis-Miller described as the “effect…of a swarming multiplicity”(11). As Hillis-Miller suggests, this method of characterization is first experienced as “an inexhaustible fecundity of invention,” but also makes characters unrelatable and “unthinkable,” and can quickly devolve into “sheer chaos” (11-4). Beyond the educational value of identifying characters with their social classes, then, the technique offers the reader an artistic mooring that the host of characters “detached from all the others and incommensurate with all the others” could not (Hillis-Miller 11).
Social commitment, then, creates both tremendous narrative challenges and new opportunities for (at least internal) literary innovation. The greatest challenge, I would argue, is also the site for one of the novel’s greatest technical accomplishments. The challenge is that the abstract language of social categories and the moralizing language of social criticism both imply a disbelief in the pure power of implicit, embodied narration. That is, once a narrator has explicitly abstracted classes and hopes and miseries from external reality, he has effectively dismissed the possibility of that reality carrying its meaning in and by itself. Hence Heuser and Le-Khac’s history, where the two modes are clearly shown to be at odds with one another: if you believe embodied narration is perfectly intelligible, you do not evaluate its moral and social significance with abstractions and adjectives. If you believe, on the other hand, that external reality is only intelligible through a guiding abstract wisdom, the details of that reality become much less significant, as they signify practically nothing on their own. We have seen Dickens’ interpolated narrators attempt various forms of synthesis, but all those attempts the novel registered as failures, which suggests just how incompatible the two modes are. Yet, in prison, the narrator finds a way to consistently bridge the divide.

The Apophasis of Embodiment

The bridge is a form of apophasis, an explicit declaration of faith in the power of embodied narration whose very form is a denial of that power. That is, the narrator tells his readers that no description can match the meaning embodied in external reality while describing that reality extensively. The best example of this is the ending of the passage we just read, a part of which I repeat here for convenience:

…but there was the same air about them all—a kind of listless, jail-bird, careless swagger, a vagabondish who's-afraid sort of bearing, which is wholly indescribable in words, but which any man can understand in one moment if he wish, by setting foot in the nearest debtors' prison, and looking at the very first group of people he sees there, with the same interest as Mr. Pickwick did.
This can easily be read as a form of artistic mission statement, proclaiming the value of narrative showing over telling, of the superiority of sensory, bodily experience to verbal, overt communication.

Yet, the writing itself contradicts this statement, as, far from the experience being “wholly indescribable in words,” there are but too many words to describe it (5 adjectives and 2 abstract nouns, at least). As if to make sure we do not miss the irony here, Dickens then has Pickwick misconstrue what he sees, precisely by abstracting from the men to the general experience of the population: “it strikes me Sam… that imprisonment for debt is no punishment at all.” Thus, external reality simultaneously communicates more than any explanation of it, and requires extensive explanation lest it be misunderstood.\(^{36}\)

Throughout the prison chapters, the narrator’s increased abstraction and moral evaluation coincide with increased emphasis on the self-sufficiency of implicit meaning. The following statements all tell us about the perfect intelligibility of bodies and their actions, but to do so they all offer explicit evaluation which undercuts that very intelligibility:

Mr. Pickwick’s face, however, betokened such a very trifling portion of satisfaction at the appearance of his lodging…” (41)

Sam, with a comprehensive gaze which took in Mr. Smangle's cap, feet, head, face, legs, and whiskers, all at the same time, continued to look steadily on, with every demonstration of lively satisfaction, but with no more regard to Mr. Smangle's personal sentiments on the subject than he would have displayed had he been inspecting a wooden statue, or a straw-embowelled Guy Fawkes. (42)
There sat Mr. Alfred Jingle; his head resting on his hands, his eyes fixed upon the fire, and his whole appearance denoting misery and dejection! (42)

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\(^{36}\) Another example, to drive the apophasis home: “Mr. Pickwick was affected; the two men looked so very miserable. The sharp, involuntary glance Jingle had cast at a small piece of raw loin of mutton, which Job had brought in with him, said more of their reduced state than two hours’ explanation could have done” (42) Dickens could very easily have written: “said more than two hours’ explanation…,” but he adds “of their reduced state,” which suggests that even looking at raw mutton is not sufficiently expressive of poverty to not require explanation.
On the one hand, faces, whiskers, looks, are all as meaningful as they can possibly be. On the other hand, the fact that we are either not given the features of those bodies (first two examples) or those features are not sufficient (third example) suggests that external reality might be less immediately intelligible than the narrator’s interpretation of it would suggest. The paradox is rather strengthened by the insistence that in prison, even a conman like Jingle is “wholly unable to keep up appearances any longer,” a phrase itself suggestive both of the transparency and deceit of external reality. Thus, Dickens gives his readers a sense that the prison’s social misery requires no abstract moralizing by carefully delineating the moral and abstract meaning of its physical reality.

**Enough?**

Did all these experiments work? That depends on your reading of the end of Pickwick’s engagement with the Fleet, effectively the end of the novel’s social engagement. After experiencing the prison in all its bleak realities, Pickwick eventually declares: “I have seen enough,” and consigns himself to a solitary existence for the rest of his stay. It is tempting, especially in a dissertation seeking to establish the didactic problems of fiction, to claim that this signifies the genre’s incapacity to accommodate social critique, that Pickwick’s withdrawal serves as the ultimate acknowledgment of an incompatibility between Picaresque humor and serious social engagement. Indeed, as Hillis-Miller points out, by the end of the novel the narrator’s point of view becomes increasingly aligned with Pickwick’s, which would suggest that the hero’s withdrawal from the outside world coincides with the narrator’s, and the narrative’s (33-4). Yet, it seems to me that Dickens’ counter-didactic project requires this withdrawal, paradoxically, *for* social purposes. To return to the statements on fiction with which we opened this chapter, there is a clear sense that giving full expression to one’s didactic purposes in fiction would defeat those very purposes.

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37 The Reader may object that bodies and their actions are depicted as highly communicative well ahead of the prison. On some level this is true, but the ironic narrator’s mocking distance makes it difficult to decide if that intelligibility should be taken seriously or not.

38 We can also acknowledge Welsh’s tentative counterpoint, that “in the hero’s retirement at the end one can sense Dickens cautiously withdrawing his commitment to his first great creation”(30). Welsh himself immediately qualifies the statement along the lines of Hillis-Miller’s point, but it is worthwhile to contemplate the two views side by side, as an ambivalence towards Pickwick naturally follows the ambivalence towards his and the reader’s social education.
Pickwick’s withdrawal, then, not only ends the novel’s engagement with poverty and institutional critiques, but also establishes it by not overwhelming readers and thus “throwing off allies as they spring up.” “I have seen enough” is an announcement of disengagement, to be sure, but it is also in a sense triumphant, especially when we consider all the different tools Dickens had used to demonstrate how meaningful just a little seeing is. As frequently as the novel is attacked for its weak episodic structure, its counter-didacticism achieves a balance between social purpose and comical escapism that is quite admirable. No one comes out of reading *Pickwick* feeling that they have been lectured at, and yet few would be confused as to the novel’s stance on social issues like the debtors’ prison. We, too, have seen enough.
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Silent All These Years: Aesthetic Ambivalence in Dickens’ Fiction.

I hear my voice
And it’s been here
Silent all these years. Tori Amos.

Tori Amos’ lyrics above offer a partial explanation for the radical transformation Dickens’ fiction undergoes after *David Copperfield*. On one level, at least, the later novels suggest that Dickens heard his narrative voice, particularly his political narrative voice, for the first time in writing *Bleak House*.

Granted, the earlier fiction had its share of narratorial intrusions and sermonizing passages, but nothing close to the biting social satire and lengthy moralizing of the later fiction. Indeed, as we have seen in the previous chapter’s analysis of *Pickwick Papers*, there was plenty of social criticism in the early texts. But for the most part, the criticism was a silent one, the voiceless literary influence that Victorians writers and reviewers both demanded and attacked.

The shift in Dickens’ fiction is an extremely complicated one, involving intense ambivalence towards language, the body, the theatre, and ultimately the political role of fiction. But there is one version of the story that is far simpler, and while it cannot entirely do justice to the problem, it gives us a key to the heavily locked door of Dickens’ artistry. To return to Tori Amos, the simple story is that the later Dickens realized he had been literally silent all these years, and was as pained by the silence as Tori. Put differently, Dickens’ later fiction registers a far more hostile attitude towards silences than his novels before 1850. That attitude deeply resonates with the stylistic shift towards greater narrative intervention and more explicit criticism. The simple story, then, is that Dickens became suspicious of his own silences and dramatically reduced his reliance on them for novelistic social influence.

**The Profundity Hypothesis**

How can we prove a changing attitude towards silences? Tracing the word itself through the Dickens corpus is a good first step. The graph below shows a pronounced decline in the phrase “profound silence”
(and its derivatives\textsuperscript{39}) over Dickens’ career, a decline that becomes more linear (especially judging from the moving averages) after \textit{David Copperfield}. On a rhetorical level, at least, silence all but loses its profundity in the more political phase of Dickens’ career.\textsuperscript{40}

![Graph showing profound silences over Dickens' novels](image)

Clearly, the pattern is not absolutely linear – \textit{Bleak House} has more instances of the expression than \textit{The Old Curiosity Shop}, and the same number as \textit{Oliver Twist}\textsuperscript{41} but the overall trend is compelling. After all, one of the least “profoundly silent” of Dickens’ early fiction, \textit{Oliver Twist}, has as many instances of the expression as the last 5 Dickens novels combined! Examining the particular ways in which the phrase is utilized sheds more light on the artistic and educational significance of the decline.

In the early novels, “profound silence” frequently signals the narrator’s comfort with the implicit meaning of socially charged moments, his willingness to let readers deduce the educational significance

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{39} The synonymous versions examined were “profoundly silent/taciturn” as well as “deep” silence/s. An analysis of the range of adjectives used to describe silence will follow.

\textsuperscript{40} I reached these results manually, by searching each Gutenberg version for the phrase and its iterations, and adding those up. The same goes for the silences table below.

\textsuperscript{41} One is tempted to account for parts of this trend by normalizing for length, \textit{Bleak House} being more than twice the size of \textit{Oliver Twist}, and 50% longer than \textit{Old Curiosity Shop}, but that game can easily be played both ways. The silence hypothesis is slightly weakened, for instance, by the fact that \textit{Hard Times} and \textit{Tale of Two Cities} are the two shortest Dickens novels. Still, 3 of the 6 last novels are among the longer ones, and the overall trend is not disrupted by this fact.
\end{footnotesize}
of the fiction without narratorial help. Consider the following scene from *Pickwick Papers*: Sam encounters Job Trotter, one of the texts’ chief villains, in prison, in a scene that arguably signifies the moral apex of the novel. In the later novels, the destructive nature of poverty, moral corruption and the justice system would be too tempting an opportunity for a didactic intervention, perhaps after a particularly virtuous character voiced similar opinions. Here, the social and moral meaning is encapsulated and encased in a profound silence, which is itself surrounded by several other overtly meaningful silences, broken speech and non-verbal gestures (bolded):

Following close at his heels, came Mr. Job Trotter… As he took off his hat to our benevolent old friend, he murmured some broken expressions of gratitude, and muttered something about having been saved from starving….

'Here, give me your arm,' said Mr. Pickwick.

'No, no,' replied Jingle; 'won't indeed—rather not.'

'Nonsense,' said Mr. Pickwick; 'lean upon me, I desire, Sir.'

Seeing that he was confused and agitated, and uncertain what to do, Mr. Pickwick cut the matter short by drawing the invalided stroller's arm through his, and leading him away, without saying another word about it.

During the whole of this time the countenance of Mr. Samuel Weller had exhibited an expression of the most overwhelming and absorbing astonishment that the imagination can portray. After looking from Job to Jingle, and from Jingle to Job in profound silence, he softly ejaculated the words, 'Well, I am damn'd!' which he repeated at least a score of times; after which exertion, he appeared wholly bereft of speech, and again cast his eyes, first upon the one and then upon the other, in mute perplexity and bewilderment. (ch. 45)

As we have seen in the previous chapter, in *Pickwick* moments of educational importance tend to celebrate implicit over explicit meaning, gestural, unspoken communication over words. What the silences add to this picture, I would argue, is the sense that language breaks down under the pressure of moral and social significance, which paradoxically demonstrates Dickens’ educational, linguistic mastery over his fiction. That is, the narrator’s disavowal of his chief medium, words, paradoxically (and perhaps disingenuously) proves both his independence from it and his perfect control of it. Thus, on the one hand, the text’s arguably most allegorical moment can only be captured non-linguistically, as Pickwick’s transcendent aid to his vanquished foes evokes Trotter’s “broken expressions of gratitude,” the whole scene producing nothing more eloquent than Weller’s face and “profound [silent stares].” Indeed,
arguably the main purpose of the exchange between Pickwick and Jingle is to demonstrate that under morbid social circumstances, gestural communication is far superior to even the simplest of verbal utterances: Jingle meets Pickwick’s clear statements with confusion but implicitly accepts his physical help when it is tendered “without a word.”

On the other hand, this highly sophisticated disavowal of language is itself a rhetorical feat: the sheer preponderance of acts of speechlessness exhibits meticulous control of language. Thus, while the narrator insists on the implicit meaning of silence, his elaborate vocabulary for it – “mute,” “broken expressions,” “without another word,” – suggests how loud even the most profound of silences can be.

Still, the paradox of highly verbal silence does not take away from the educational victory of this scene. Dickens may not have been able to be silent about how meaningful his silences were, but the moral and political commentary is largely veiled, if not entirely implicit. “Well, I AM damn’d!” is the closest we get to a direct statement on the significance of the event, and yet it seems profoundly sufficient for the narrator. Partly, this is because the phrase itself harmonizes opposite meanings, expressing at once “mute bewilderment” and recognition, both of who Jingle and Trotter are, and what their situation means. The very form the phrase takes here, much like the rest of the scene, is a celebration of the loudness of silent influence, as Weller “ejaculates softly,” an oxymoronic softness yet further complicated by the volume of the exclamation mark it ends with. Then the phrase is repeated to exhaustion, as if its implicitness created an echo that deeply reverberates through the audience, ending in a muted but deeply charged astonished. Nothing really has been said, except that we have been told many times that nothing has been said, but that unsaid, broken “something” is all we need. The narrator says “not a word more.”

Not all instances of “profound silence” articulate this scene’s artistic comfort with implicit moral and social meaning, but most do. 42 In Nicholas Nickleby, the novel most invested in the term, the first

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42 Our theory of the disappearance of the phrase, therefore, does not account for the entire story, and I suspect several other causes are at play here. Most prominently, “profound silences” lend themselves very well to the exaggerated, sarcastically benevolent rhetoric of the mock-epic style, which is far more frequent in the early fiction.
“profound silence” emerges as a reaction to the first social and moral climax of the novel. After several chapters relating the abusive educational practices of Mr. Squeers, the school’s most broken child, Smike, runs away, showing that even the institution’s more passive victims cannot endure such treatment for long. Livid, Squeers terrorizes the remaining pupils into a confession of the truth, but refuses to accept it, beating the boy that suggested it “until the little urchin in his writhings actually rolled out of [Squeers’] hands” (ch. 13). Squeers then proceeds with a threat that brings to the foreground the problem of language in the face of social woes, and elicits a “profound silence.” This part of the scene is so rich with implications for the (artistic) problem of expressing criticism that it is worth attending to at length:

‘There,’ said Squeers. ‘Now if any other boy thinks Smike has run away, I shall be glad to have a talk with him.’

There was, of course, a profound silence, during which Nicholas showed his disgust as plainly as looks could show it.

‘Well, Nickleby,’ said Squeers, eyeing him maliciously. ‘You think he has run away, I suppose?’

‘I think it extremely likely,’ replied Nicholas, in a quiet manner…

There is a striking resemblance between the children’s “profound silence,” Nicholas’ “quiet manner” and the narrator’s ironic style, which rarely indicts Squeers or his institution in direct terms. Indeed, Squeers’ threat suggests that the breaking down of language is an inevitable part of institutional oppression, as it turns “a talk” into an invitation to a beating. There is, then, a sense of helplessness in this silence, but it is at least not an unclear helplessness: Nicholas can “show his disgust” wordlessly, and still voice his opinion without breaking with the overall silence, just as Weller’s “soft ejaculation” did. The narrator may not speak up for the children, either, but he has at least coded that silence as meaningful. The institution replaces explicit language with violence, but the oppressed have recourse to the narrator’s more artistic solution of “showing” what they cannot tell.

Throughout Nicholas Nickleby, Dickens sprinkles such profound silences to substitute for or supplement narratorial criticism. When Nicholas learns of a letter from the Squeers’ to his uncle denouncing him as a murderer and a thief, the narrator passes over this “choice epistle” with a “profound
silence” that amply shows its moral value (ch. 15). The sharp contrast between this silent treatment and the letter’s moralizing language (“monster, thief, assassin”) suggests that not only is explicit moral judgment unnecessary, but its rhetoric has been so coopted by oppressive forces that using it becomes suspect. Elsewhere, the profound silence bespeaks the moral gravity of a duel (ch. 50), the wickedness of Ralph’s conspiracy with Gride (ch. 54), the anxiety of Mr. Squeers as Justice closes in (ch. 57), and the moral approval of the silently virtuous Cheerybles of Nicholas’ oath of allegiance (ch. 61). Thus, the most significant social and moral events of the novel can go over unremarked because their meaning is enshrined in silence.

*Martin Chuzzlewit* does not have quite this cosmic of a correlation between the phrase “profound silence” and the novel’s criticism, partly because the novel has thematized the value of silence via other means. In particular, the novel’s treatment of its darkest social issue, slavery, is ridden with silences that are, as John Bowen has compellingly argued, “more eloquent than words.” To continue with Bowen’s analysis, the ironically named slave “Cicero is silent [because] his eloquence [is] written not in language but with the marks and brands on his body” (205). Any study of slave narratives would recognize the communicative value of the slave’s tormented body, but in the context of our analysis, Cicero is no different than Sam Weller responding to Job and Trotter’s imprisonment, or Nicholas Nickleby responding to Squeers’ tyranny. Only Cicero’s body is scarred, but all of these characters communicate with their bodies more than they do with words in their encounter with, and testimony of, social and moral evil. In aesthetic terms, all these characters signify the importance of embodying or dramatizing criticism rather than saying it.

“Disquiet in the Deep Silence”

*Martin Chuzzlewit* is not entirely without recourse to the rhetoric of profound silences, however. Beyond the narrator’s undertones of moral judgment which surround Pecksniff’s “profound silences,” Dickens infuses this kind of silence into one of the novel’s most critical depictions of America:

> For all [of Mark’s] light-hearted speaking, it was long before he slept himself...
The novelty of their dreary situation, the dread of some rapacious animal or human enemy, the terrible uncertainty of their means of subsistence, the apprehension of death, the immense distance and the hosts of obstacles between themselves and England, were fruitful sources of disquiet in the deep silence of the night. (ch. 23)

Like so many other passages of social criticism in the early fiction, this one opens by problematizing language. Mark Tapley’s “light-hearted speaking,” idealized throughout the novel, here becomes a false or (self)-deluding device, not nearly as communicative as the body, whose restlessness conveys Mark’s true state of mind. Once language is discredited, the narrator’s own use of it ironically becomes more authoritative, as Dickens turns to the elaborate parallelism of public oratory to decry America. To give a sense of how epically authoritative the discourse becomes, the syntactic formula (emphasized for the reader’s convenience), is roughly this: “The (moral adjective) abstract noun of the (moral adjective) noun (of another noun).” It is repeated with variations five times in a row, without more than a comma delaying the accumulation of critical observations: “the novelty of their dreary situation, the dread of some rapacious animal…the terrible uncertainty of their means of subsistence…” But then, all of this oratory is dialectically enabled by the “deep silence of the night.” There is a rhetorical wonder to this that is hard to capture analytically: language, Dickens is showing us, reaches its greatest heights out of its direct opposite, silence. Criticism is expressed with the most elaborate wording at the very moment there are no words at all.

But the dialectic between language and its rhetorical other, the body, is not entirely an harmonious one. Even in the passage we just read, the dialectic ends on a rather uncomfortable note, with a “fruitful disquiet” of silence. Disquiet is a jarring descriptor for silence, and “fruitful” is yet more jarring as a modifier of “disquiet.” Indeed, “fruitful” is particularly ironic in relation to America, a land the novel depicts five times as “pestilential,” and a space where it seems impossible not to contract some form of mortal malady. What, then, are we to make of this contradictory turn of phrase, “fruitful sources of disquiet in the deep silence of the night”? I would argue that it registers an artistic discomfort with the passage’s otherwise perfect harmony with its criticism. There is something too smooth, in other words, in
the way Dickens makes space for explicit intervention by book casing it with implicit disavowals of his own medium. The word “fruitful,” then, is a silent admission by the narrator of the aesthetic pressure he has put on the scene to derive harmony from a situation that strains his artistic capabilities in both directions, both towards oratorical language and towards its embodied disavowal. The phrase is jarring because it is jarring for the narrator to derive so much art and rhetorical pleasure from such a dismal scene.

Art, then, is a double-edged sword. It gives the Dickensian narrator political and aesthetic power, but in so doing it makes criticism beautiful, or at least palatable. What is perhaps more dangerous, such artistry risks the suspicion, common to Dickens’ contemporary critics, that the author derives pleasure and artistic materials from his political and moral vitriol.

The Dark Side of Silence

The ethical problem of turning to verbose, authoritative discourse under the cover of silence, the ethical problem of turning criticism into art, is at the heart of the death of “profound silences.” The scene exhibiting this most directly is from Bleak House, the novel that the moving averages signal as the turning point in the life of Dickensian silences. The speaker is fittingly an artist, and therefore a potential proxy for Dickens himself, but his use of the term reads like a direct judgment of the American jungle scene we had just read in Martin Chuzzlewit. Here is Bleak House’s aesthetician Harold Skimpole, on the silent depth and beauty of African “natives”:

I can sympathize with the objects. I can dream of them. I can lie down on the grass—in fine weather—and float along an African river, embracing all the natives I meet, as sensible of the deep silence and sketching the dense overhanging tropical growth as accurately as if I were there. (ch. 6)

The scene is very similar to the earlier one, deriving “deep silence” from an Oriental landscape and a colonial sense of the native population. In the earlier passage, the natives were interchangeable with
animals ("rapacious animal or human enemy"), here they are interchangeable with "objects", but the process of deriving meaning and aesthetic pleasure from a socially problematic situation is the same.

The difference, however, is that whereas *Martin Chuzzlewit* largely muted the ethical concerns it had with the aesthetic solution of "deep silence," here Dickens places them front and center by giving this sentiment to one of his more morally dubious characters. Skimpole may find the same depth in the silence of socially problematic spaces, but his profundity is false and self-serving, whereas *Chuzzlewit's* was at least well-meant, if not perfectly harmonized. Reading the two passages together, *Bleak House* seems to parody and deride the aesthetic impulse that dominated the early fiction’s attempts at silent, verbose social criticism.

The other adjectives of "silence" tell a similar story of growing discomfort with implicit communication. In the earlier fiction, silence has its horrific side, to be sure, with adjectives like “awful, awkward, dead(ly), terrible, gloomy, grim, moody, rigid, uneasy, tearful” sprinkled throughout. But “silence” had its bright side, too, with “thoughtful, glad, happy, sturdy, dignified, placid, breathless, orderly, respectful” and even “admiring.” Fast-forward to the later fiction, and almost all positive associations with silence have been eliminated. The table below shows the non-temporal adjectives of silence (excluding “profound”) in the last six novels:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Novel</th>
<th>Adjectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Bleak House</em></td>
<td>Strict, grinning, intense, oppressive, dogged, awkward, blank, musty-rotting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hard Times</em></td>
<td>Hangdog, mournful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Little Dorrit</em></td>
<td>Rigid, fixed, cold, dead, primeval, freezing, irksome, majestic, awkward.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**A Tale of Two Cities**
Blank, unnatural, awkward, steady and set, gloomy.

**Great Expectations**
Wondering, marked, dead.

**Our Mutual Friend**
Deadly, moody, intervening, ministerial, fruitless, patient, awful, disconcerting, welcome.

The contrast between the “fruitless, blank, musty-rotting” silences of the later fiction and the “fruitful disquiet” of silence of the *Chuzzlewit Passage* is striking, and the generally negative picture is only heightened when you consider the context of the few positive adjectives the later fiction entertains. *Little Dorrit*’s “majestic silence” is used to describe the faux-aristocratic Mr. Dorrit, whose noble mannerisms in the debtors’ prison are more ironically majestic than earnestly so (ch. 15). The “welcome” silence of *Our Mutual Friend* is disconcertingly “welcome”, as it “[revives] the heavy disappointment” of Eugene’s deathbed companions when he does not seem to be getting better (bk. 4, ch. 10). Silence has always been a gothic affair in Dickens’ fiction -- “deathlike” and its synonyms pervading the earlier fiction as well – but it used to have a host of positive associations as well, from deference, through profundity and thoughtfulness, to sheer joy. After *David Copperfield*, silences lose nearly all their luster.

**Not Quite “Indescribable”**

While silence, the absence of language, grows more suspicious in the later fiction, narrative language becomes a stronger, more reliable medium. The adjective “indescribable” (and its derivatives) follows a very similar pattern to that of “profound silence,” with the average use dropping 75 percent from 4
instances in the earlier fiction to just 1.16 in the later fiction. This trend is strengthened when we consider negative instances of the verb “describe,” wherein we are told—to use but a few examples—that a literary moment was “impossible/difficult” to describe, that it is “more easily conceived than described,” that it can “only be imperfectly and vaguely described.” Such implicit denunciations of literary language become far rarer in the later fiction, dropping 75 percent as well from 6.5 instances on average up to *Copperfield* to 1.6 on average from *Bleak House* onwards. In fact, the two trends compliment each other nicely, with early novels that are light on “indescribables” like *Old Curiosity Shop* (1) and *Dombey and Son* (3) showing the limits of their narratorial abilities with a proliferation of negative “describe”s (5 and 11, respectively). As silence becomes dubious in the more overtly political phase of Dickens’ career, literary description gains a rhetorical foothold it never had in the earlier fiction. This alone would account for the more sermonic tendency of novels after *Copperfield*—it is hard to sermonize when your fiction is so aware of the limits of its language.

**The Two Pointing Hands**

As the later fiction’s verbal language rises in value, unspoken, physical language naturally falls. Nothing bespeaks this transformation more starkly than the contrast between *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*’s attitudes to expressive gestures. At the climax of both is perhaps the most explicitly communicative of bodily gestures, the pointing hand. But the two novels could not have treated the gesture, and through it the significance of body language, more differently. On the one hand, the beautiful and virtuous Agnes Wakefield literally ends *David Copperfield* as the perfect symbol of the benevolence

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43 When synonyms like “inexpressible, ineffable, indefinable” are brought into the picture, the average trend remains, though the ratios are less pronounced, with 11.5 average instances in early Dickens and 6.6 in the later. It is important to note that *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* both have 6 instances of “inexpressible” and only 1 instance of “indescribable.” The nuance is difficult to parse, but I would tentatively suggest that perhaps the narrative component of language is becoming stronger while language itself remains flawed. Put another way, “indescribable” seems the more literary or aesthetic term for “beyond language,” and so literary language becomes stronger.

of silent influence, “ever near me…pointing upward!” (ch. 64). On the other hand, a painted Roman ceiling named Allegory signals the final turn in *Bleak House* by pointing downwards, towards Tulkinghorn’s corpse. On the one hand, the sublime morality of Agnes’ implicit influence is utterly transparent, as David and readers can trust implicitly the meaning of the Christian ideal embodied by the gesture of pointing upward. On the other hand, Allegory, whose very name clearly marks it as a self-reflexive image (a symbol, essentially, of symbolism), is ironically impossible to decipher:

> For many years the persistent Roman has been pointing, *with no particular meaning*, from that ceiling. It *is not likely that he has any new meaning in him to-night*. Once pointing, always pointing—like any Roman, or even Briton, with a single idea. There he is, no doubt, in his impossible attitude, pointing, *unavailingly*, all night long….There he is still, eagerly pointing, and no one minds him. *(Bleak House, ch. 48)*

On the one hand, Agnes will definitively lead David to Heaven by the force of her presence alone. On the other hand, Allegory not only cannot be understood, but is not cared about, as “he” points “unavailingly… and no one minds him.” If the gesture in *Bleak House* does have meaning, as the text later suggests it does, then, like the power of silence, that meaning is entirely “deadly”:

> So it shall happen surely, through many years to come… that the Roman, pointing from the ceiling shall point, so long as dust and damp and spiders spare him, with *far greater significance than he ever had in Mr. Tulkinghorn's time, and with a deadly meaning*. For Mr. Tulkinghorn's time is over for evermore, and the Roman pointed at the murderous hand uplifted against his life, and pointed *helplessly* at him, from night to morning, lying face downward on the floor, shot through the heart.

Even at its most communicative, the Roman’s pointing hand is far from the transparency of Agnes’. On a narrative level, neither the reader nor the characters learn from it who the actual murderer was. On a moral level, though one gathers from this passage that there is “greater significance,” one does not know more about that significance that that it is deadly, and the gesture’s “helplessness” suggests that body language has not only lost its moral clarity but has lost much of its force as well. In the land of the
describable gestural language is literally up-rooted, and from its mute place in the ceiling it can do very little.

Thus ends the simple version of our story. Over the course of Dickens’ career, then, we find a major turn from indirect to direct rhetoric, from silences to confident speech, and from body language to verbal language. Of course, there is plenty of direct rhetoric, confident speech, and verbal language in the earlier novels too, but their power to convey meaning is consistently called into question. Beginning with Bleak House, however, the apologies for language become fewer and fewer, and the narrator reaches at least a partial rapprochement with the novel’s eternal enemy, the sermon. Put negatively, direct language becomes necessary because other means of communication have lost their power. It would be fitting to end a simple story with a simple mouthpiece, and so we find ourselves with Tip, Little Dorrit’s brother, as the unlikely articulator for Dickens’ transformation. When Tip euphemistically tells his sister that he, too, is under arrest for debt, she exclaims: “Oh, Tip, don’t say you are a prisoner! Don’t, don’t!” As Dickens might have responded to the critics of his later sermonizing, Tip replies: “well, I don’t want to say it… but if you can’t understand me without my saying it, what am I to do?” (7)

Politics for Art’s Sake

Unfortunately, the simple story seldom suffices. While on a rhetorical level there is a shift after Copperfield visible both to the quantitative and naked eye, on another, more macro scale, Dickens’ fiction is never satisfied with either the silent or the sermonic solutions to the problem of politics in the novel. Nor is it ever fully comfortable with the role fiction plays in political discourse, or the role political discourse plays in fiction.

In fact, some of the best Dickens scholarship over the years has devoted itself to studying the deep tie between Dickens’ art and the institutions it criticizes. Thus, D.A. Miller’s “Discipline in
Different Voices” shows how Bleak House is constantly concerned with distinguishing its form from the cumbersome, equally lengthy and delayed narrative logic of the Chancery suit the novel satirizes. To do so, Miller argues, it turns to the teleological structure of detective fiction, but that turn implicates it in the logic of the Police, itself a problematic institutional force for Dickens. In a similar vein, though treating a different novel from a different critical lens, Ruth Yeazell’s “Do It or Dorrit” points out the artistic complicity between Dickens’ circumlocutionary style throughout Little Dorrit and The Circumlocution Office that novel satirizes. More recently, Matthew Bevis’ The Art of Eloquence interrogates the paradoxical rhetorical eloquence with which Dickens satirizes institutional oratory throughout his fiction.

45 John Bowen, John Kucich, the majestic Chesterton – all have a version of this claim that Dickens makes use of the very institutional devices he criticizes. 46 They are all right.

How did Dickens find his way into this dilemma in the first place – such that he could hardly criticize an institution without borrowing, in some way or another, the logic that underlay it, its art, as it were? The problem was that dual discomfiture that we see time and again in his fiction – that reluctance on the one hand to make direct political arguments, and that distaste on the other hand for an overly aestheticized form of fiction, one that shies away from political engagement. Often this double aversion of Dickens expresses itself in a sort of hybrid critique, an argument that institutional ideology and

45 Thus, for instance, Bevis writes: “a resemblance between the writer and the orator whom he distrusts turns into a vision of ‘identical things’. Weeping at what he is about to create, Dickens now sees his blurred perspective as a part of that which it condemns. In [Bleak House], the author was concerned not merely to mock the Conservatives, but to examine his own guarded attraction to certain impulses in their rhetoric” (114). Similar analysis of the rhetoric of radicalism in the early fiction is to be found on page 108.

46 Thus, Bowen: “Dickens throughout his writing both demonstrates and exploits the despotism… of human languages, cultures, social structures, and power….Mr Bumble… the House of Commons, and [Dickens’] own writing hand are engaged alike in the exercise of a power both arbitrary and despotic” (8). Kucich’s argument that Dickens uses a technique of “authorial reverse slumming” (mimicking the discourse of upper-classes, to parody and reify them) does not directly name political institutions, but his analysis of Dickens’ duality towards “polite discourse” can easily be extended to the institutions benefiting from such discourse: “like Dick [Swiveller], Dickens impersonates conventions of polite discourse, indulging a genial knowingness about its obfuscations and turning pompous speech into convivial humor between narrator and reader. The delicate balance between affectation and goodwill produced by this authorial reverse slumming sustains the complex attitudes towards social boundaries that made Dickens’ prose so magnetizing…” (481). Finally, Chesterton, on Dickens’ parody of America: “He has his finger on the nerve of an evil which was not only in his enemies, but in himself. The great democrat has hold of one of the dangers of democracy. The great optimist confronts a horrible nightmare of optimism. Above all, the genuine Englishman attacks a sin that is not merely American, but English also. The eternal, complacent iteration of patriotic half-truths...” (ch. 6).
aesthetic self-indulgence, are at bottom one and the same. Stiggins, Squeers, Pecksniff, Chadband, Podsnap -- to name but a few of Dickens’ host of putative ideologues -- all enjoy wordsmithing so much that their exuberant speechifying suggests they are sermonizing simply for the pleasure of it, rather than a moral or social purpose. Pecksniff, for example, is given to “the frequent habit of using any word that occurred to him as having a good sound, and rounding a sentence well without much care for its meaning” (ch. 2). Squeers and Stiggins, too, are utterly bereft of a moral backbone, and seem to derive much of their ideology from and for the pure pleasure of words. Podsnap may well care for what brings a blush into a young person’s cheek, and does not care much for literature, but there is still a certain oratorical luxuriousness in his famous flourish of the right arm, the flushed cheek and “sounding pomp” with which he speechifies (ch. 11).

In the same way, characters we would normally associate with a an aesthetic disregard for social issues – Skimpole, Gowan, Micawber, Eugene Wrayburn – all begin, or end up, tied to that most infamous of Dickensian institutions, the Law. Gowan is a member of the illustrious family of circumlocutionary Barnacles; Skimpole plays a crucial role in the investigation of Lady Dedlock; Micawber ends up an implausible magistrate in Australia; and Wrayburn, for all his jaded rejection of his practice as a lawyer, ends, too, by playing a pivotal role in the novel’s legal mysteries. As we shall see, the relationship of the Law to aesthetics is a symbiotic one, for legal institutions are surprisingly entertaining to those around them in Dickens’ fiction.

By showing us the institutional aspect of the aesthetic frame of mind, and the artistic drive of the political frame of mind, Dickens tries to carve out for himself some middle ground. The effect, however, is more often than not a collapse of the whole spectrum into a single point, to leave himself no middle ground at all. When the didactic and aesthetic extremes have become versions of each other, whichever side Dickens temporarily occupies, he is bound to wind up resembling, to some extent, the other as well. It is only fitting, then, that Dickens’ art, like his artists, should be drawn to the institutions it attacks.
The Jellyby-Skimpole Mirror

No novel better exemplifies the breakdown of the opposition between artistic and institutional characters than *Bleak House*. At the heart of this opposition are two ideal types, Mrs. Jellyby, Dickens’ purest archetype of social didacticism, and Harold Skimpole, as elaborate a portrait of aestheticism as we see in his fiction. Mrs. Jellyby, a “character who devotes herself entirely to the public,” whose relentless production of “five thousand new circulars” a chapter would put *The Pickwick Papers*’ tract societies to shame, literally cannot stop herself from dictating (ch. 4, 14). Harold Skimpole, on the other hand, seems to care little for any cause, and is so artistically inclined he cannot be bothered to do anything. Indeed, from the start Skimpole positions himself against Jellyby:

We have been mentioning Mrs. Jellyby. There is a bright-eyed woman, of a strong will and immense power of business detail, who throws herself into objects with surprising ardour! I don't regret that I have not a strong will and an immense power of business detail to throw myself into object.... I can admire her without envy. I can sympathize with the objects….I don't know that it's of any direct use my doing so, but it's all I can do, and I do it thoroughly. (ch. 4)

The opposition between the socially minded type and the lethargic aesthete could not be more bluntly stated. And yet, the novel as a whole does much to discredit Skimpole’s dichotomy. Like Jellyby, Skimpole is in the business of endlessly producing language. In fact, Esther defines Skimpole by his “flow of words” (ch. 4). Like Jellyby, Skimpole neglects his children, fittingly named Sentiment, Beauty and Comedy, for the sake of his cause. Philosophically speaking, Skimpole may claim to have “not the least idea” what a principle is, but he in fact is no less ideological, perhaps even more so, than Jellyby (ch. 18). His ideology is the Drone Philosophy, whereby some people are not meant for labor, and should, like the drone bee, be taken care of by the more pollinating members of the species. It is only fitting, then, that Skimpole should end his life leaving a moralizing diary “which showed him to have been the victim of a combination on the part of mankind against an amiable child” (ch. 61). The only line we are fortunate enough to read from this diary could have easily come from a Pardiggle, a Pecksniff, or many another Dickensian preacher: “Jaryndice, in common with most other men I have known, is the incarnation of
selfishness.” What is perhaps most terrifying about Skimpole, then, is not his decadent disavowal of the practical world, but the moral philosophy that Dickens places at the heart of such decadence.

“Writers, Painters, Patriots.”

Henry Gowan may not be as complete a philosopher of art for art’s sake as Skimpole, but he does embody a lackadaisical artistic sensibility that involves very little care for practical or moral matters. When we look a little closer, however, we find that he too has a great deal to do with the institutional realm – in this case the maddening bureaucracy of his circumlocutionary relatives, the Barnacles:

‘Buy one of my pictures, and I assure you, in confidence, it will not be worth the money. Buy one of another man’s--any great professor who beats me hollow--and the chances are that the more you give him, the more he’ll impose upon you. They all do it.’

‘All painters?’

‘Painters, writers, patriots, all the rest who have stands in the market. Give almost any man I know ten pounds, and he will impose upon you to a corresponding extent; a thousand pounds--to a corresponding extent….So great the success, so great the imposition.’

‘I had rather thought,’ said Clennam, ‘that the principle you mention was chiefly acted on by--’

‘By the Barnacles?’ interrupted Gowan, laughing.

‘By the political gentlemen who condescend to keep the Circumlocution Office.’ (bk. 1, ch. 26)

I suspect many a reader is as surprised by Gowan’s turn from “painters” to “patriots” as Clennam is, but as I have been arguing, the collapse of decadence and politics is quite natural to the Dickens universe. According to Gowan’s vision of society, everyone is tainted. Painters, writers, and patriots are all, he argues, out to swindle the trusting and the generous. Fundamentally, there is no difference between the artist and the politician. And since the artist and the politician each comes with a separate set of stereotypical vices, Gowan is able, by collapsing the two into a single category, to double the odium of each: the artists are just as venal and dishonest as the politicians; the politicians are every bit as idle as the artists.
The Dangers of the Law’s Hilarity

Indeed, if there is something worse in Dickens’ universe than the ideological dogmatism of artists, it’s the aesthetic pleasures of social institutions. One often thinks in this period of “the Novel” as an educational rival to the essayistic genres that Parliament and the Law are so known for. But what we see in Dickens’ fiction is that the rivalry goes both ways, that just as the novel is encroaching on the educational space of institutions, those institutions in turn encroach on the novelistic realm of entertainment. As we have seen, throughout Dickens’ fiction there is a correlation between political characters and artistic pleasure, a sense that their social and moral corruption is motivated by a love of language and fleshly pleasures one would normally associate with the novelistic, especially in Dickens’ case. Indeed, what is arguably most haunting about the deplorable social institutions of Bleak House is not so much the injustice of their elaborate bureaucracies, as the entertainment value they possess, both to their practitioners and their victims. Conversation Kenge, chief advocate in Jaryndice and Jaryndice, enjoys “beyond anything the sound of his own voice,” much like Pecksniff, who “round[s] a sentence” with great satisfaction” (ch. 3). Inspector Bucket, the most powerful institutional character in the novel, is no less musical than Skimpole, and in fact shows “so much musical taste that” he is suspected of being a singer, which suspicion he partially corroborates by giving a performance that quite beguiles the company, shortly before putting one of its members under house arrest (ch. 49). Such a link between aesthetic sensibility and power becomes yet more haunting when Bucket comments that the legal puzzle at the heart of the novel is “a beautiful case… from [his] point of view” (ch. 52). One is almost left feeling that the arms of the law would not reach quite so far if it did not hold such an artistic fascination for its practitioners.

Indeed, it is the mesmerizing aesthetic effect of Jaryndice and Jaryndice that makes that suit so deadly to its victims. Richard Carstone and Miss Flite are less ruined by the suit itself than they are by the interest with which it holds their minds and financial resources. Esther summarizes this effect succinctly in her comparison of the two under the thralls of Jaryndice and Jaryndice, Richard being “so young and handsome, and in all respects so perfectly the opposite of Miss Flite! And yet, in the clouded, eager,
seeking look that passed over him, so dreadfully like her!” (ch. 37). This is strangely similar to the puritanical objection to novel-reading, that novels consume their readers and prevent them from engaging in any other pursuit. Indeed, the portrait of Carstone’s soul under the influence of the Chancery reads a lot like the depiction of that archetypally voracious novel-reader, Madam Bovary:

His hopefulness had long been more painful to me than his despondency; it was so unlike hopefulness, had something so fierce in its determination to be it, was so hungry and eager, and yet so conscious of being forced and unsustainable that it had long touched me to the heart. (ch. 51)

Like Bovary, Carstone has been taken with the romantic delusions of a sustained fiction, “so hungry and eager” to match his reality to the promise of the suit that he can think of little else. Lest I be accused of stretching the analysis too far, Dickens repeatedly ties the lawsuit’s charms to the Victorian discourse of the novel: Esther tells us “everybody concerned [in the suit] was in a state of idle entertainment,” that perennial objection to novels (ch. 29). Similarly, the narrator may tell us that “no crumb of amusement ever falls from Jaryndice and Jaryndice,” but the suit is no less disturbingly amusing than novels were to Evangelicals: two paragraphs after the last statement, the same voice contradictorily claims that the only value of the suit is as “a joke” (ch. 1). Carstone’s descent into regular attendance of the court, too, is described as an act of amusement, both on his part and the court’s: “My dearest,” says Miss Flite,

You know what I told you of the attraction on the Chancellor’s table? My dear, next to me [Carstone] is the most constant suitor in the court. He begins quite to amuse our party. Very friendly little party, are we not? (ch. 60)

I believe it is only in Dickens’ world that a court of law becomes a salon party. One almost expects a game of whist to follow among the “friendly little party” of advocates, judges and clients. But as deplorable as this marriage of the law with the novelistic seems here, it is far worse at Bleak House’s climax, where the suit’s spontaneous combustion leads implausibly back to entertainment:

…Still [the people] were all exceedingly amused and were more like people coming out from a farce or a juggler than from a court of justice. We stood aside… and presently great bundles of
paper began to be carried out…. Even these clerks were laughing. We glanced at the papers, and seeing Jarndyce and Jarndyce everywhere, asked an official-looking person who was standing in the midst of them whether the cause was over. Yes, he said, it was all up with it at last, and burst out laughing too. (ch. 65)

It is important to note that it is not just the callous clerks that are laughing, but everyone coming out of the court. If Dickens’ contemporaries, as we have seen in chapter one, were concerned that the novel will use its powers of entertainment to unduly influence policy, Dickens here rebuts with an image far more haunting, of a social institution oppressing people by those very means. Part of Dickens’ ambivalence towards politicizing fiction, then, is the sense that doing so would be to mirror the ways institutions use literary techniques for political control. A world where “writers, painters, patriots” are conflated is a world where one’s own writing needs to be very careful not to become complicit with the mechanisms of power. This is considerably harder in the case of a humorous writer who, as G.K. Chesterton astutely remarked, “regarded the House of Commons much as he regarded the House of Lords, as a sort of venerable joke” (ch. 3).

“Screwer by Deputy”

Political engagement and artistic autonomy, then, tend to be interchangeable for Dickens. But this is not the only reason his fiction is ambiguous towards its social role throughout his career. The other reason is that Dickens registers throughout his fiction discomfort with his own central approaches to the problem of integrating social criticism into novels. The first approach, that of letting the narrative carry its social meaning without intervention, runs the risk of misunderstanding, and as we are about to see, of being disingenuous. The second, of didactic intervention, runs the risk of being ineffectual, if not outright antagonizing, and worst of all, boring. In the early sections of this chapter I argued that Dickens shifts his emphasis from the first approach to the second. In these last sections I will argue that despite this change of emphasis, two remarkably consistent character types show that both approaches were highly problematic throughout Dickens’ career. Those types are the deputy and the debtor, the first unique to
Dickens as a consistent figure, the second hardly unique, but still more persistent in Dickens’ fiction than arguably any other canonical Victorian novelist.

By deputy I mean those characters who are forced to act as straw men for the villainy of others, most famously Pancks and Riah. As Harold Folland points out, “Dickens frequently depicts – and obviously hates – characters who…get their dirty work done [through others] without soiling their own hands” (412). In the coming pages I will argue that Dickens’ obsession with such “screwers by deputy” registers a fear of becoming one himself in his fictional practices. That is, the deputy-villain relationship can be read as an analogy for the character-narrator, or character-author relationship, which suggests that Dickens was never thrilled with just letting his characters do the narrative “dirty work” of social criticism for him.

Before I proceed to flesh out the analogy, I must allow that it is the most problematic of the claims I make in this chapter. First, it can easily be argued that deputies permeate the Dickens universe as a critique of capitalism, particularly its use of a highly differentiated social system to shrug responsibility. This I would concede, but still maintain that there is room for both levels of interpretation, the Marxist and self-reflexive, to coexist. What is perhaps more damaging, it can justly be argued that a narrator’s social criticism is hardly as dirty of a job as the Dickensian “screwers” need deputies for, and that therefore the analogy does not hold. While this, too, is undeniable, I would argue that independently of the ethics of what is being done or said, there is something shameful for Dickens in using mouthpieces to voice one’s own opinions, something which accounts both for his narratorial interventions and his literary obsession with deputies. At the very least, Dickens might have felt that letting his criticism be spoken by someone else was a little too close to the social deputizing he abhorred.

The best example of this is the voice quoted in the title of this section, the Ur-deputy Pancks, who collects rents for the ironically named “benevolent patriarch” in Little Dorrit. From Mr. Plornish’s introduction, Pancks invokes the problem of instrumentalizing a person or character. “Mr. Pancks… he
collects the rents. That... *that is about who [he is], you may believe me or not...*” (12). Just as reviewers objected to the use of didactic characters as instruments for argument, so Dickens here is raising the problem of a character entirely defined by his function. That this is something of an infringement on artistic practice we can deduce from Plornish adding: “believe me or not,” a hallmark of the problem of instrumental character appearing, indeed being, implausible, the greatest offense to Realist aesthetics.

Dickens continues to thematize the artistic undercurrent of Pancks’ instrumental dirty work with his lengthy description of the man. Mr. Pancks, the narrator tells us, had a complexion “very dingy by nature, or very dirty by art, or a compound of nature and art” (13). This, too, brings to the surface the artificiality and unidimensional narrative work going into producing a didactic character, as Mr. Pancks is entirely blackened in the description, much as a villainized literary character would be: “he was dressed in black….had jet black beads of eyes; a scrubby little black chin; wiry black hair…. As if he had been in the coals.” This description is the only one in the novel that brings awareness to its own artistry, an important factor when you consider that such external blackness would normally lead the reader to expect an internal blackguard. The deputizing process, like a didactic narrative process, creates implausible characters whose external appearance belies human nature. It is no coincidence, then, that Pancks’ signature physical gesture is “snorting,” an act of inarticulate noise that implies suppressed indignation. As a character and a worker, Pancks has been reduced into a false tool, and his rage at this offense surfaces whenever he speaks.

All of this comes to a head when Pancks directly exposes the immorality of using people in this fashion. The speech is as great an indictment of deputizing as anyone can find in Victorian fiction, so I quote it with some pleasure:

'I have discharged myself from your service,' said Pancks, 'that I may tell you what you are. You're one of a lot of impostors that are the worst lot of all the lots to be met with....You're a driver in disguise, a screwer by deputy, a wringer, and suzezer, and shaver by substitute. You're a philanthropic sneak. You're a shabby deceiver!' (32).
“In disguise, by deputy, by substitute” – clearly the attack is targeting the process of indirectness as much as it does the actual cruelty of the Patriarch’s practices, if not more. The reader may recall how often reviewers and novelists object to the didactic process of “sneakily insinuating”47 opinions through fiction and characters; it is only appropriate, then, that Pancks should add it to his tirade against Casby’s narrative and labor practice, calling him a “philanthropic sneak.” Like many a social novelist, Casby has pretended to be someone he is not, and abused his narratorial powers as an employer to further his self-interested cause.

“Lords and Gentleman and Honorable Boards”

This, then, makes sense of the narratorial bolstering of Betty Higden, Dickens’ deputy for his criticism of the Poor Law in Our Mutual Friend. Between her caring for little children, her poverty and her integrity, Betty is one of the most lovable of Dickens’ characters. Add to this the clarity of her social criticism, and it isn’t at all clear why Dickens’ narrator sees the need to add his voice of support. Yet, this is precisely what he does, no less than 12 times, whenever Betty’s story comes up, with a direct appeal to the “lords and gentlemen and honorable boards.” The most famous example of this is below – as you read, imagine the text without the narratorial rhetorical questions and bitter irony:

'The Poor-house?' said the Secretary.

Mrs Higden set that resolute old face of hers, and darkly nodded yes.

'You dislike the mention of it.'

'Dislike the mention of it?' answered the old woman. 'Kill me sooner than take me there. Throw this pretty child under cart-horses feet and a loaded waggon, sooner than take him there….'

A surprising spirit in this lonely woman after so many years of hard working, and hard living, my Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards! What is it that we call it in our grandiose speeches? British independence, rather perverted? Is that, or something like it, the ring of the cant?

47 See earnest section of intro. The word “sneaky” is a keyword, in fact, in the objection to the putatively underhanded practices of educational novelists.
'Do I never read in the newspapers,' said the dame, fondling the child...’how the worn-out people that do come down to that, get driven from post to pillar and pillar to post, a-purpose to tire them out! .... Do I never read how they grow heartsick of it and give it up, after having let themselves drop so low, and how they after all die out for want of help? Then I say, I hope I can die as well as another, and I'll die without that disgrace.'

Absolutely impossible my Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards, by any stretch of legislative wisdom to set these perverse people right in their logic?

(bk. 1, ch. 15)

Conceptually, do we really need the narratorial asides to “my lords and gentlemen and honorable boards”? Is it not sufficiently convincing to see the “resolute old face” and hear Betty indict the Poor Law while “fondling the child”? In most likelihood, we do not. But one feels that Dickens knows he is making his character carry the torch of his social criticism, and that he would disdain to hide behind her story like the Benevolent Patriarch hides behind Pancks, Fledgeby hides behind Riah, or Spenlow behind Jorkins. Indeed, even after this dozen instances of lending explicit support to Betty, Dickens feels the need to clarify his position: “that my view of the Poor Law may not be mistaken, I will state it here. I believe there has been in England...no law so often infamously administered, no law so often openly violated, no law habitually so ill-supervised...” (bk. 4, ch. 18). I imagine this was Dickens’ way of making sure his character, whom he would have considered a dear friend, did not have to face the brunt of his audience’s hostility on her own, the way the novels’ deputies so often do.

**Wordy Debtors**

On the other side of indirectness is the problem of excessive wordiness, of being overly direct. Thus, the other persistent character type from Dickens, which appears in every single novel, is the debtor. Here, too, many explanations could account for the prominence of the debtor, from the autobiographical view that Dickens was dramatizing his father’s debt, to the social view that Dickens cared greatly about the host of social and moral issues involving debt and poverty. To be sure, these explanations have great merit, but they do not account for a peculiar quality that most of Dickens’ debtors, and all of his most
famous ones, Micawber, Swiveller⁴⁸, Skimpole and Mr. Dorrit, possess. Dickensian debtors, as a species, are extremely verbose, which suggests that a literary interpretation might be in order, as neither autobiography nor social critique requires the Dickensian debtor to be so infatuated with language.⁴⁹

What, then, does debt mean in the context of language? What would a literary account have to add to the pervasiveness of Dickensian debtors?

In the context of literature, debt signifies a necessary gap between words and actions. A debtor literally gives his word to pay money that he is not able to pay, and often in Dickens has no earthly idea of how to pay. The debtor’s infatuation with language, then, seems the necessary consequence of his lethargic reliance on it to the detriment of any lucrative action. From a narrative perspective, if the deputy registered a literary fear of indirectness, the debtor registers the opposite fear of ineffective verbosity. The political novelist has to hope that his words will lead to social action, and the sense that an overuse of language is a form of inaction would demand that lengthy speeches or narratorial intrusions be strictly curtailed. Lest we think this a minor concern in the Dickens universe, let us remember that Dickens defines social good by this opposition: “[Jaryndice] remarked that there are two classes of charitable people; one, people who did a little and made a great deal of noise; the other, people who did a great deal and made no noise at all” (ch. 8). Any survey of Dickens’ debtors, preachers and silent benefactors would show that John Jaryndice would have made a very good Dickens scholar.

Dickens is deeply invested in exploring the relationship between debt and language, and perhaps no where more prominently than with the Ur-debtor, Mr. Micawber. Consider how he ties the financial crisis Micawber undergoes with his literary penchant for verbosity: “[his] affairs… were very much involved by reason of a certain ‘Deed’, of which I used to hear a great deal, and which I suppose now to

⁴⁸ A methodological side-point: I consider my Dickensian research scientific in the sense that it allows me to make predictions about characters based on partial evidence. Thus, I predicted Mr. Swiveller’s debts based on Chesterton’s reading of Swiveller’s passion for language. Similarly, I predicted a link between Gowan and political institutions based on his artistic tendencies and Dickens’ overall concern with the overlap. Making prediction on unread or partially forgotten novels is crucial evidence of the soundness of a theoretical abstract model such as this one.
⁴⁹ Though it must be confessed that Dickens’ father was infamously wordy, this would account better for debtors carved in his father’s image, like Micawber or Mr. Dorrit, than those whose origin is quite different, like Swiveller or Skimpole.
have been a former composition with his creditors” (11). It is as though Micawber contracted his extraordinary debts for the sake of creating a “composition,” so he may talk about them “a great deal.” That “deed” is a pun on the inactivity of the wordy man seems the final nail in Micawber’s overly linguistic financial coffin. Throughout David Copperfield, Micawber’s verbosity seems to replace any other form of activity. It is no wonder, then, that his tremendous usefulness to the plot (exposing Uriah Heep’s schemes) comes at a verbal cost. Thus, Micawber’s wife, on his transformation from wordy debtor to a silently productive person:

You will picture to yourself, my dear Mr. Copperfield, what the poignancy of my feelings must be, when I inform you that Mr. Micawber is entirely changed. He is reserved. He is secret. His life is a mystery to the partner of his joys and sorrows… (42).

There is, then, a sense in Micawber’s character that speech nullifies action, and vice versa. An opposition between words and deeds, however, is hardly an ideal setting for overt verbal intervention, as it seems Dickens, too, is precluded by this principle from making too much noise. How is a writer, after all, to write effectively for social good in a world where the most effective social change is achieved with no words at all? 50 Throughout Dickens’ fiction, he must thread his social vision very carefully, lest he be associated with a deputizing capitalist on the one hand, or a bloviating debtor on the other. The fact that the deputies often collect from the debtors does much to suggest the solution we have seen – a constant battle between the opposing strategies of novelistic influence that never really has a decisive winner.

“Impossible to Convey”

As deputy hiding behind his characters tears Dickens between resembling a debtor whose words disable action and a “screwer by deputy,” so his educational efforts are torn between verbal language and the

50 Even the most useful of Dickensian debtors, Micawber, does most of his work by turning improbably away from speech: “Mr. Micawber is entirely changed. He is reserved. He is secret. His life is [for the first time] a mystery to the partner of his joys and sorrows…” (42).
body, the two central mediums of communication. We have seen that language becomes more reliable as bodies and their silent communication become less reliable in the later fiction, but this, too, is more a difference of degree than of type. Throughout Dickens' fiction, both explicit language and implicit physical communication can be misused, misconstrued, or simply misunderstood. The penultimate section of this chapter will show how consistently Dickens problematizes the means of communication available to him.

The best form of evidence for Dickens’ attitude towards communication and its mediums is a word that combines the two, a word that can roughly be defined as “communication through a particular medium.” That word is “convey,” and in Dickens it is used equally in the physical sense, of moving people by some vehicular medium, as it is in the metaphorical sense, of “moving” messages via different modes of communication. The fact that the word “conveyance” was far more popular in Dickens’ time than ours only strengthens the association between communication and its means. It should come as no surprise, then, that many instances of a communicative “convey” reveal an attitude towards the medium with which the message is communicated. That attitude, no matter where you go in Dickens, contains some level of ambiguity towards its mediums of communication, the verbal, the gestural, and the written.

Consider the following passage from Martin Chuzzlewit: Old Chuzzlewit is revealing his true feelings towards his grandson and haranguing Pecksniff after hundreds of pages of appearing to be under his thrall. In the process, he reveals the text’s inherent ambivalence towards its own methods of communication:

'Observe!' said Martin, looking round. 'I put myself in that man's hands on terms as mean and base, and as degrading to himself, as I could render them in words. I stated them at length to him—syllable by syllable, as coarsely as I could, and with as much offence, and with as plain an exposition of my contempt, as words—not looks and manner merely—could convey. If I had only called the angry blood into his face, I would have wavered in my purpose…If he had offered me one word of remonstrance, in favour of the grandson whom he supposed I had disinherited…But not a word, not a word. (ch. 52)
There is a layering of ambiguities here. To begin with, the phrase “as plain an exposition of my contempt as words… could convey” suggests both that words can communicate plainly and that they are somehow insufficient, that they can only reach an approximation of meaning. Similarly, Chuzzlewit’s insistence on the extensiveness of his language, “at length…syllable by syllable, coarsely as I could…” suggests both a reliance on language and a lack of faith in it: Chuzzlewit assumes that his contempt is clear at the same time that his recourse to excessive repetition implies an insecurity about that clarity.

Things become more dizzyingly ambivalent when you consider that Chuzzlewit is describing an elaborate act of deception as the clearest act of communication available to him. What is perhaps most extraordinary, what Chuzzlewit was looking for, as a sign of human decency in Pecksniff, was some bodily or verbal sign of shame, the “blood rushing into his face” or “a word of remonstrance.” To derive meaning from the facial expression of a known hypocrite or the words of a known liar implies a belief in language at its most vulnerable. Words, then, and the bodies that communicate them, are paradoxically most to be relied upon when they are used to deceive a person who is himself of dubious integrity.

*David Copperfield* is a novel similarly torn between a joy in the implicit communicability of language and a sense of its insufficiency. On the one hand, over a third of that novel’s 30 instances of “describe” are negative, expressing the limits of David’s narratorial powers. On the other hand, one of the novel’s most memorable love-stories is enacted through a purposefully laconic use of language, as the ever-fond “Barkis is willing” suggests the perfect communicability of words by its very brevity. As with *Martin Chuzzlewit*, this ambivalence tends to converge around the word “convey.” Consider the following passage, where a hesitant David tells us he cannot “convey” his experience of time, only to convey it at great length:

The length of those five days[of house arrest] I can convey no idea of to any one. They occupy the place of years in my remembrance. The way in which I listened to all the incidents of the house that made themselves audible to me; … to any laughing, whistling, or singing, outside, which seemed more dismal than anything else to me in my solitude and disgrace-- the depressed dreams
and nightmares I had… --all this appears to have gone round and round for years instead of days, it is so vividly and strongly stamped on my remembrance. (ch. 4)

It is a shame that one cannot quote even half of this second sentence, in all likelihood the longest of all of Dickens’ sentences, without risking the impatience of one’s most generous readers. Even with this heavily truncated quote, what is clear is that the very moment that life seems too miserable for language is the moment David comes up with multiple linguistic solutions to capture it. Semantically, the sheer ferocity of words seems more than apt to describe, by its very length, “the length of time” that David supposedly cannot describe. Syntactically, the interminability of this 233-word-sentence, with its host of subordinate clauses, colons, dashes, and temporal shifts, gives one a visceral feeling of how slowly time goes. The reader can no more get out of this sentence than David can get out of his house, and in the anticipation of its ending the reading experience is as slowed as David’s experience of his imprisonment. Whether or not this linguistic virtuosity is sufficient, we are told that it isn’t, and must feel that it is.

Indeed, David’s hesitant reliance on language seems at once to drive language to exceeding brevity and excessive length, suggesting both comfort with its function and an imminent fear of its dysfunction. Thus, when Mr. Waterbrook asserts that he will “throw something” in David’s friend’s way, David focuses on one word, which “conveys” so much more, and yet not quite enough, of Waterbrook’s meaning:

I was much impressed by the extremely comfortable and satisfied manner in which Mr. Waterbrook delivered himself of this little word 'Yes', every now and then. There was wonderful expression in it. It completely conveyed the idea of a man who had been born, not to say with a silver spoon, but with a scaling-ladder, and had gone on mounting all the heights of life one after another, until now he looked, from the top of the fortifications, with the eye of a philosopher and a patron, on the people down in the trenches. (ch. 25)

Seemingly, this passage is far more comfortable with verbal language than the previous one, the very word “yes” conveying perfectly coherent meaning, with a “wonderful expression in it.” But looking more
closely, one realizes that it is not the word, but “the extremely comfortable and satisfied manner in which” it is conveyed, that is so meaningful to David. Verbal language, then, becomes “completely” reliable at its most brief by virtue of the elaborate meaning of unspoken language – words are perfectly coherent because so much wordless meaning is brought into their articulation. This attitude to the verbal is problematic for a writer, however, as he cannot voice the non-verbal except by a lengthy turn to the verbal. Thus, the unwritten “manner” can only be articulated through extensive writing, and indeed the result is that the profound brevity of the “yes” paradoxically leads to a stumbling five-line sentence, itself not very confident about language as a medium. Not only is the whole sentence a metaphor, itself an admission of literal language’s defeat, but even that metaphor needs to work its way through meaning by trial and error: “a man who had been born, not to say with a silver spoon, but on a scaling ladder…” The seven commas of the sentence, too, highlight the deep contrast between Waterbrook’s “comfortable and satisfied manner” and David’s self-doubting, delayed manner of depicting it. “A picture is worth a thousand words” is hardly a comforting maxim for one who relies on words to paint pictures with.

“Understand some one else”

Pictures are even harder to verbalize when you cannot see. Bleak House and Little Dorrit open on a scene of obstructed vision, the first that of a crippling fog, the second of a blinding sun. But this does not mean a complete turn from sight, for it is ironically through those very emblems of blindness that Dickens shows his contempt for the social conditions of the city and the prisons they enshroud. Communication in these novels, similarly, vacillates between implicit understanding and a desperate failing effort at conveying meaning. Consider the following dialogue between Esther and Richard about the growing conflict between Richard and Jaryndice. Fittingly, the tense conversation centers on understanding:

I put my veil up, but not quite.

"Always the same dear girl!" said Richard just as heartily as before. I put up my veil altogether….

"My love," said Richard, "there is no one with whom I have a greater wish to talk than you, for I want you to understand me."
"And I want you, Richard," said I, shaking my head, "to understand some one else." "Since you refer so immediately to John Jarndyce," said Richard, "--I suppose you mean him?"

"Of course I do."

"Then I may say at once that I am glad of it, because it is on that subject that I am anxious to be understood. By you, mind--you, my dear! I am not accountable to Mr. Jarndyce or Mr. Anybody."

I was pained to find him taking this tone, and he observed it.

"Well, well, my dear," said Richard, "we won't go into that now. I want to appear quietly in your country-house here, with you under my arm, and give my charming cousin a surprise. I suppose your loyalty to John Jarndyce will allow that?"

"My dear Richard," I returned, "you know you would be heartily welcome at his house--your home, if you will but consider it so; and you are as heartily welcome here!"

"Spoken like the best of little women!" cried Richard gaily. (ch. 38)

Here we see another side of the problem of language, the side of social manners, which require tiptoeing and sugarcoating phrases that inherently damage both trust and clarity. The very first line, “always the same dear girl,” referring to Esther’s disfigured looks, is a patent falsehood, even if a kind one, and bodes ill for a conversation in which both parties are hoping to speak plainly and make themselves understood. The conversation itself does not fair much better, as Richard wants to be understood, Esther wants Jarndice understood, and the exchange alternates between clarity and confusion: the statement “since you refer so immediately to Jarndice… I suppose you mean him?” assumes that Richard understood the politely vicarious “somebody else” at the same time that he requires clarification. Then, Richard “observe[s]” Esther’s pain, but again this implicit communication only leads to further distrust and confusion: “we won’t go into that now.” Esther tells him as directly, as repetitively as possible, that no one wishes him harm, but he closes the dialogue in much the same way he started, with words of praise that actually convey discomfort and distrust: “spoken like the best of little women!” Politeness turns the clearest words into an act of social decorum, no less a problem for the novelist than for his characters, as he, too, must communicate vicariously and make sure he is understood without violating social and artistic decorum.
“Trick of his Evil Eyes”

The speech of both novelist and characters is bound by the rules of good manners, then, and this inevitably leads to a reliance on gestural language. As we have seen, however, the body is no less a problem of language than the solution to it. Bodies are very communicative at the same time that they can lead to endless misunderstandings and manipulations. Indeed, at the heart of Little Dorrit’s love-plot is Clennam’s inability to read Little Dorrit’s unspoken signs of love, patently obvious to the reader of the novel. Fittingly, Clennam himself is not able to communicate wordlessly the selfless support for Pet and Gowan’s romance that he wishes to convey:

To Mr Henry Gowan, as the time approached, Clennam tried to convey by all quiet and unpretending means, that he was frankly and disinterestedly desirous of tendering him any friendship he would accept. Mr Gowan treated him in return with his usual ease, and with his usual show of confidence, which was no confidence at all. (bk. 1, ch. 34)

In the space that social decorum creates for the body, then, the potential for manipulation and misconstrual is immense. Not only does Gowan distrust these “quiet and unpretending means” of showing favor, but his distrust manifests ironically in a false “show of confidence,” suggesting that communicative gestures are no more to be relied on than words.

Indeed, part of the tragedy of Little Dorrit’s world, and Dickens’ more broadly, is that the villainous are greater masters of the gestural than the virtuous characters of the novel. Like Uriah Heep, Pecksniff, and Tulkinghorn, Blandois has a more expressive face than any other character in the novel. What makes him so dangerous, in fact, is that much of his power is exerted with no words at all, by an almost mystical manipulation of the gestural:

To both of them, Blandois behaved in exactly the same manner; and to both of them his manner had uniformly something in it, which they both knew to be different from his bearing towards others. The

We can trace this, with the help of Juliet John, to Dickens’ theatrical influences, as the Victorian stage liked its villains to be extremely evocative in their body-language. Thus, John writes: “Melodramatic aesthetics offered Dickens a specific set of characteristics fundamental to his anti-intellectual marginalization of ‘psychology’ and interiority…. Most importantly, melodrama depends on… an unrivalled ‘ostension’ or objectification in its modes of representation” (8-9).
difference was too minute in its expression to be perceived by others, but they knew it to be there. A mere trick of his evil eyes, a mere turn of his smooth white hand, a mere hair's-breadth of addition to the fall of his nose and the rise of the moustache in the most frequent movement of his face, conveyed to both of them, equally, a swagger personal to themselves. It was as if he had said, 'I have a secret power in this quarter. I know what I know.' … The two had not been together five minutes, and the peculiar manner seemed to convey to them, 'You were going to talk about me. Ha! Behold me here to prevent it!' (bk. 2, ch. 7)

Can you imagine a virtuous Dickensian character having such “minute expression” in the “trick” of “his eyes,” the “turn” of “his smooth hand”? It does not bode well for the gestural that it is most communicative – speaking in complete sentences, in fact, only in Blandois’ case – in the hands of a blackmailing murderer.

“I Protest Against It!”

It is true, the virtuous have recourse to the verbal, particularly in the style of plain speech. But such style of communication is even more problematic in the context of social decorum. Consider Frederick Dorrit’s lengthy speech against his family’s treatment of Little Dorrit. Surely, Frederick voices many readers’ disgust with the Dorrits’ faux-aristocratic condescension towards Amy, and he even mobilizes, for the first and last time, a forceful body language to convey it. Yet his speech is utterly ineffectual, to the point of antagonizing the very people it seeks to convince:

'BROTHER!' said the old man, conveying a surprising energy into his trembling voice, 'I protest against it! I love you; you know I love you dearly…. But, brother, brother, brother, I protest against it!' It was extraordinary to see of what a burst of earnestness such a decrepit man was capable. His eyes became bright, his grey hair rose on his head, markings of purpose on his brow and face which had faded from them for five-and-twenty years, started out again….

'My dear Frederick!' exclaimed Mr Dorrit faintly. 'What is wrong? What is the matter?'

'HOW DARE YOU,' said the old man, turning round on Fanny, 'HOW DARE YOU DO IT? HAVE YOU NO MEMORY? HAVE YOU NO HEART?'

'UNCLE!' cried Fanny, affrighted and bursting into tears, 'WHY DO YOU ATTACK ME IN THIS CRUEL MANNER? WHAT HAVE I DONE?'

'DONE?' returned the old man, pointing to her sister's place, 'WHERE'S YOUR AFFECTIONATE INVALUABLE FRIEND? WHERE'S YOUR DEVOTED GUARDIAN? …. HOW DARE YOU SET UP SUPERIORITY AGAINST ALL THESE CHARACTERS COMBINED IN YOUR SISTER?....
'I love Amy,' cried Miss Fanny…’ I don't deserve to be so treated. I am as grateful to Amy, and as fond of Amy, as it's possible for any human being to be.’ …

'Brother, I protest against pride. I protest against ingratitude…’ As his hand went up above his head and came down on the table, it might have been a blacksmith's. After a few moments' silence, it had relaxed into its usual weak condition. He went round to his brother…and said, in a softened voice, 'William, my dear, I felt obliged to say it; forgive me, for I felt obliged to say it!'  (bk. 2, ch. 5)

Frederick’s physical shriveling into his “usual weak condition” is symbolic of the rhetorical weakness of his bodily gestures even at their most intense. Frederick does even more with his body than Blandois, and says much more -- over a dozen repetitions have been omitted from the original quote, and still the speech is exceedingly recursive – but to no avail. In turn, the apology with which he ends this awkward scene is an admission of the rhetorical defeat of verbal language – Frederick has used rhetorical questions, metaphors, repetitions, and has even put oratorical energy into his voice. But ultimately, he has achieved nothing more than fatigue and the anger of his fictional audience.

“Parting Company with My Readers”

Yet, how much of an analogy is there between Frederick Dorrit and Charles Dickens? Both face the challenge of expressing moral indignation, neither seems comfortable with the mediums they have for its expression, nor is either able to resist the moral temptation of direct, vocal intervention. But Dickens is never quite so enfeebled as Frederick, never as apologetic for thumping the table with his blacksmith narratorial hand. Still, one sees in his extra-textual remarks a growing antagonism towards his readers that echoes Frederick’s mixed sentiment of love and protest. From *Pickwick Papers*, where the prefaces are celebratory of a perfect accord with his readers, Dickens moves in *Nicholas Nickleby and Oliver Twist* to defending his novels from objections before comfortably asserting his confidence in his reading public. *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*’s prefaces as well as *Our Mutual Friend*’s conclusion “in lieu of a preface,” by contrast, end on a threatening note of departure. In the first two cases, Dickens’ claim that he has “never had so many readers” seems undercut by the uncertainty of “may we meet again!” In the
latter, the sense of an impending separation from his audience is even more pronounced, as Dickens fictionalizes an accident with his characters. “I remember I can never be much nearer parting company with my readers for ever, than I was then...” Dickens says, at once suggesting his growing impatience with and affection for the readers he spent his career lecturing and beguiling into self-improvement.

There is more of Frederick’s fatigue in these words than ever before in Dickens’ meta-commentary. But the artistic accomplishments we saw in the last two chapters suggest that Dickens has managed to be far more compelling, artistically and educationally, than his pedagogical characters ever could be.

Still, there is a greater lesson to be learned here about the insurmountable obstacles facing a political or educational novelist. Dickens was widely considered one of the most loved novelists of his time (if not the most), was arguably the greatest master of the English language the period has seen, and yet he antagonized much of his audience, and registered deep ambivalence towards his practices. When such a master is not content with his solutions, perhaps the problem is too great to resolve. There is a saying in Hebrew: “if the cedars have caught fire, what will the hyssops say?” Dickens is the cedar of didactic fiction, and his novels often seem in flames. What will the hyssops, the industrial novelists, say? This will be the subject of the next chapter.

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“What I want to know is about Esther”: Politics as the Industrial Novel’s Auto-Immune Disease

The genre of the industrial novel has consistently drawn two central criticisms from its theorists: politically, it has been read as a genre purporting to espouse working-class causes but ending by endorsing the middle-class values of its middle-class writers unable to free themselves from “the more limiting aspects of [their] class-position” (Kettle 165). Or, as Raymond Williams put it: “[r]ecognition of evil [in the social-problem novels] was balanced by fear of becoming involved.
Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal” (109). From such critiques Deidre David naturally concludes that “we should look less to [industrial novels] for solutions of social problems” and start looking at them “as part of such problems” (6- emphasis in the original). Thus, a 2013 Victorian Studies article on the genre opens with the calm assertion: “[i]ndustrial novels famously fail to offer political solutions to proletarian suffering” (Lewis 243).

Artistically, social-problem novels have been accused of being “abstract” and “propagandist” (Kettle 165), their characters “reduce[d] to a schema” (Lucas 143), their resolutions “implausible” (David 6), their plots “halting” at best (Lucas 142). Even Louis Cazamian, the genre’s academic godfather and the most ardent supporter of its artistic merits, admits that “[a]esthetic criticism would find rich food for thought here in the great problem of the compatibility of didactic and artistic intentions” (10 - my emphasis). While the Holy Trinity of this genre’s feminist criticism, Gallagher-Bodenheimer-Schor, all have mounted defenses of the genre’s literary value, those too tend to acknowledge the inevitable formal problems it created. 53 I will be similarly empathetic to the value of formal tensions in the novel, I do not intend to contest its narrative and political dilemmas. On the contrary, those form the premise of

52 For a wonderful survey of the criticism that has followed Williams’ lead, see Bodenheimer’s Politics of Story, 6.

53 We have seen in the intro Gallagher acknowledging these problems in her analysis of Disraeli. Indeed, all three feminist critics tend to read formal fissures as ideologically and therefore artistically productive, but nevertheless return to them as fissures. Thus, Schor, arguably the most affectionate reader of Gaskell’s fiction, consistently returns to a theme of struggle and narrative problems in her purposeful valorization of Gaskell’s career. Methodologically, Schor says her investment is in “moments where narrative ceases to cohere and fictional forms begin to crack.” The narrative experimentation of the female novelist, throughout Schor’s account, is the story of the “difficult evolution of the woman novelist,” writing against patriarchal plots that “limit our ability to describe [the world]” (5). Mary Barton, more particularly, is a novel “important for its imperfections,” a novel that “does pose problems of form and narrative” (15). It register a “struggle for adequate language throughout,” and in its turn to a maternal political solution faces “the difficulty” to “avoid setting up yet another structure of authority” (15, 36). The chapter ends on the note of the formal problem of the genre par excellence, “the tension between [Gaskell’s] ‘huge project’… and the ‘treble’ of her voice” (44). If the best empathetic scholar of the genre’s work repeats so often the main story of artistic and political dilemmas, it is perhaps ultimately more reified than contested.
this chapter.

I would, however, contend with the implicit assumption that these novelists were not aware of the problems facing their fiction. As the intro has shown, any move towards politicizing fiction would have involved the Victorian novelist in a host of conundrums, from the accusation of inartistic didacticism\textsuperscript{54}, through attacks on their pretending to intellectual knowledge beyond their ken, to moral objections to the insidiousness of presenting an idea under the guise of fiction. Indeed, one could account for the shift in industrial fiction towards the personal solely on the basis of anticipating such objections – after all, love stories run far less risk of seeming overly intellectual, preaching to readers, or insinuating political views. But this would ultimately be too close to the analysis of the previous chapters to provide fresh interest. Therefore, I’d like to treat these novelists’ disclaimers against political discourse as the starting point of the chapter rather than its end point. Knowing that such disclaimers are inevitable in Victorian fiction, we can now ask: what exactly triggers them? How much political thought is too much for the novelist to let stand? Do different kinds of politics receive different license from their authors? When are certain disclaimers preferred to others, when can political intervention do without them, and why? These will be the questions of this chapter. Broadly speaking, the answer that emerges is this: politics are the novel’s autoimmune disease; they make it treat its own organs as threatening foreign objects, and attack them.

The triggers for the novel's auto-immune reactions are primarily what we would expect: preaching, sermons, treatises, political causes, systematic reasoning, doctrine, and the abstraction

\textsuperscript{54} Here, as in many other places of the dissertation, I must acknowledge that political discourse is not all didactic, nor didactic discourse all political. Still, I maintain that the terms have some exchange currency, since every act of turning to the political \textit{risks} the accusation of didacticism, be its content as non-moralizing and open-ended as it may. Conversely, one might even speculate that the purest didacticism \textit{always} exists as mere expression of opinion to those who voice lit. To return to our foreign exchange metaphor, the terms, much like currencies, need not be equivalent to allow for conceptual trade; it is sufficient that we can assume some readers would willingly take one concept for the other to establish their interchangeable nature. Far from a perfect solution, this, but it is the best I have come up with, after five years of definitional struggles.
of theory -- all the elements of a novel that its more story-driven components tend to resist. What we would call the symptomatic response of these novels, the disclaimer, resembles in type the distancing devices we have seen in the Dickens chapters: explicit and implicit apologies, thematized readerly discomfort, narrative disruption, and a variety of embedding syntactic and literary devices. Positively, these novels often move to educational environments that are less symptomatic, like religious discourse articulated by effeminate characters whose lack of authority inoculates their message from the charge of didacticism. Yet more positively, novels like *North and South* and *Sybil* attempt to immune themselves via a literal embrace of the political, putting passion at the heart of their politics and eroticizing educational debates. What this decision risks, however, is a novel like *Shirley*, wherein the erotics of education become their own purpose, and the novel, like a Dickensian preacher, luxuriates in didacticism for the sake of its aesthetic pleasures independent of content.

Before we move to the analysis itself, a structural disclaimer – I have opted in what follows for more individual than broad-genre claims: it seems to me that the best criticism of the genre (from Williams, through Schor, to Bodenheimer) has followed this path of localized readings, and for good reason – there is something in the individual novelist’s struggles, in their false-starts and internal critique, that is best dissected in isolation. The broad scheme has been given here, but the individual efforts are too diverse, indeed too innovative, to be treated as part of a collective throughout.55

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55 At some point, the reader may well ask – what of Dickens and Eliot, and their industrial novels? Dickens I believe I cannot write another word about without risking the righteous wrath of those who have had to endure close to a hundred pages of my analysis of him. George Eliot seems out of place to me in this analysis; historically, her novel is well outside the period when the overwhelming majority of the novels of the genre were produced. Artistically, be her genius what it may, Eliot’s *Felix Holt* does not do much with regards to didacticism that we haven’t seen, or in a way that strikes me as particularly significant. Political speeches are cut off, you have a parody of the over-abstraction of didactic characters in the reverend Rufus Lyon, whose passion for debate is only equaled by the
Lord Ellerton’s Reforms, at a Fifth Remove

An expert in Victorian fiction would be hard pressed to find a more severe allergic reaction than that of Alton Locke to Lord Ellerton’s reforms, many of which are politically innocuous changes towards greater collaboration between masters and men that the novel eventually endorses. The novel’s first act of removal from Lord Ellerton is making the reforms syntactically difficult to swallow by combining all of them into a single unfinished sentence that is only interrupted by the novel’s second act of removal. Here is the sentence of social reform, a sentence of dizzying semantic and syntactic complexity that could have easily been broken up into 20 sentences:

His very personal appearance had been enough to captivate my fancy; and then they went on to talk of his magnificent philanthropic schemes, and his deep sense, of the high duties of a landlord; and how, finding himself, at his father's death, the possessor of two vast but neglected estates, he had sold one in order to be able to do justice to the other, instead of laying house to house, and field to field, like most of his comppeers, "till he stood alone in the land, and there was no place left;" and how he had lowered his rents, even though it had forced him to put down the ancestral pack of hounds, and live in a corner of the old castle; and how he was draining, claying, breaking up old moorlands, and building churches, and endowing schools, and improving cottages; and how he was expelling the old ignorant bankrupt race of farmers, and advertising everywhere for men of capital, and science, and character, who would have courage to cultivate flax and silk, and try every species of experiment; and how he had one scientific farmer after another, staying in his house as a friend; and how he had numbers of his books rebound in plain covers, that he might lend them to every one on his estate who wished to read them; and how he had thrown open his picture gallery, not only to the inhabitants of the neighbouring town, but what (strange to say) seemed to strike the party as still more remarkable, to the labourers of his own village; and how he was at that moment busy transforming an old unoccupied manor-house into a great associate farm, in which all the labourers were to live under one roof, with a common kitchen and dining-hall, clerks and superintendents, whom they were to choose, subject only to his approval, and all of them, from the least to the greatest, have their own interest in the farm, and be paid by percentage on the profits; and how he had one of the first political economists of the day staying with him, in order to work out for him tables of proportionate remuneration, applicable to such an agricultural establishment; and how, too, he was giving the spade-
labour system a fair-trial, by laying out small cottage-farms, on rocky knolls and sides of
grens, too steep to be cultivated by the plough; and was locating on them the most
intelligent artisans whom he could draft from the manufacturing town hard by— (ch.25)

Granted, there is some empathy for Ellerton even here. There is a sense of the magnitude of the
problems one has to face when one sets out on the path of social change. There is affection to
how selfless the good Lord is. There is even, I would concede, an identification between the
narrator and his subject – just as Ellerton works interminably for the social good, so the novelist
works extraordinarily hard to craft a sentence that suits his proportions.

And yet, for all that, I suspect few readers would enjoy this literally interminable 419-
word, 37-clause sentence, the most convoluted of Kingsley sentences. Further, it seems we are
not meant to – social reform wreaks such havoc with the novel’s discursive system, Alton Locke
is showing us here, that we end up incapable of reading or writing a single sentence about it. We
are drowning in every systematic change under the sun, from profit-sharing, through
unionization and educational reform, to such esoteric solutions as the “spade-labour system”,
which teeters on the edge of a Jellyby parody on philanthropy. Even book covers have to be re-
formed (“rebound”), itself a comment on how the novel will have had to reshape itself to meet
Lord Ellerton’s proportions. Alton Locke clearly admires Lord Ellerton, but Alton Locke treats
his systematic political approach to social issues as a dangerous foreign object. Indeed, Alton
interrupts himself, suggesting at once that there might never have been an end to the sentence
once the reformer has become its subject matter, and that the novel has more pressing concerns:

And at that notion, my brain grew giddy with the hope of seeing myself one day in one of
those same cottages, tilling the earth, under God's sky, and perhaps—. And then a whole
cloud-world of love, freedom, fame, simple, graceful country luxury steamed up across my
brain, to end—not, like the man's in the "Arabian Nights," in my kicking over the tray of
China, which formed the base-point of my inverted pyramid of hope—but in my finding the contents of my plate deposited in my lap, while I was gazing fixedly at Lillian.

Alton’s dizzy reaction to the final subordinate clause resembles the readers’ dizzy reaction to the previous sentence, but the system is not content with that demonstration of its confusion by political reform. Rather, that interruption, a classic novelistic turn from social change to personal ambition, is itself interrupted by a yet more novelistic turn towards romantic fantasies, the subject matter Victorians most associated with their novels. In sum, what we have here is sensible social reform first turned into farce by mixing it with all possible ideas of social change, then turned into personal ambition, itself turned into love-interest.

The novelist is now thrice removed from the allergic content, but he continues to attack it, much as a patient with an auto-immune reaction can remain symptomatic long after the allergen has been removed. Stage IV: impugn Lord Ellerton’s impeccable ethos, still looming over the system despite his reforms’ indigestible content: Alton tells us that he was just as impressed with Lady Ellerton, who helps her husband with his reforms, “aiding, encouraging, originating” his every move (ch.25). He naturally concludes that Lady Ellerton “cares so much for the people,” but his beloved Lillian quickly tarnishes that unblemished reformer, implicitly shadowing the Ellertons’ entire project: “[r]eally! One feels inclined sometimes to wish that she cared for anything besides them.” Not only does the novel move away from the political grammatically, then, but it suggests a moral failing is behind the entire enterprise, much the same criticism Dickens would level at his Mrs. Jellyby, and her ilk. Put differently, just as the Ellertons’ systematic reasoning puts them beyond the pale of novelistic discourse, their emotional concentration on political issues makes them unable to care for individuals, that unit of empathy the Victorian novel was renowned for.
Stage V of a disease is implicitly death, and Lord Ellerton is no exception. The final act of removal of this threatening ideal of reform is killing him, a chapter after his introduction, through an improbable horse accident usually preserved for novelistic villains like Drummle. If the novel were to support social reform, this plotting maneuver suggests, that reform will be a narratively hard-fought one, filled with auto-immune reactions and symptomatic story-telling.

“Skip this Chapter”

Lord Ellerton is an extreme case of the novel’s hostility towards its political content, but he is hardly an exceptional one. Chapter ten, titled “how Folks turn Chartists,” opens with the recommendation that “those who read my story only for amusement, I advise to skip this chapter.” Alton’s book of social poetry, a metonym for the novel itself, fares yet worse in its political venture, as its social cause is not even allowed the contentious space of the Chartist episodes. “I am… very much pleased with your performance,” tells Alton one of his benefactors, only to add: “if it should be in our power to assist your prospects… you must give up, once and for all, the bitter tone against the higher classes, which I am sorry to see in your MSS” (ch. 13). Alton deeply resents this censorship, but still rewrites the book in the apolitical pastoral style. His motivation for this choice is a replica of the plot-structure choice of industrial novels which so many 20th century critics have objected to: “love soon silenced conscience” (ch. 13).

“Thou Self-Satisfied Mammon”

But if love silences Alton’s poetic conscience, his novelistic conscience continues to make claims on his narrative, claims which inevitably force him into all manners of awkwardness. The foremost and most prevalent among these is Alton’s antagonistic attitude towards his readers. Of
the 47 direct addresses to the reader in the novel, Alton positions himself in an adversarial relationship with his readers 35 times. The purest hostility, naturally, arises out of the text’s political content. Note the contemptuous tone of the following Chartist passage:

But nine-tenths of the improvement has been owing, not to the masters, but to the men themselves; and who among them, my aristocratic readers, do you think, have been the great preachers and practisers of temperance, thrift, charity, self-respect, and education. Who?—shriek not in your Belgravian saloons—the Chartists; the communist Chartists: upon whom you and your venal press heap every kind of cowardly execration and ribald slander. (ch.2)

It could be argued that many readers would not associate themselves with the Belgravian Saloons, yet less with the aristocracy. Yet, the views ascribed to the aristocracy here could easily apply to most middle-class readers, few of whom would have as much sympathy for the Chartist cause as Alton does here. Regardless of whether the reader would think himself an “aristocratic reader,” the act of reading the novel and being addressed by its author implicates all readers, as the all-encompassing second person “you” syntactically obscures distinctions between groups of readers. Indeed, as the novel progresses, it becomes virtually impossible for readers to not think themselves the target of Alton’s vitriol. From the more exclusive category of “aristocratic” we move to the more inclusive and damning category of “gentle reader,” strongly implying that Alton condemns any reader who considers himself a gentleman:

And here let me ask you, gentle reader, who are just now considering me ungentle, virulent, and noisy, did you ever, for one day in your whole life, literally, involuntarily, and in spite of all your endeavours, longings, and hungerings, not get enough to eat? If you ever have, it must have taught you several things. (ch. 20)

By now, if you have never starved before reading this novel, you are accused of being judgmental and myopic. Intriguingly, both passages create the dialectic of judgment that we have
seen Dickens utilize in his diatribes against preachers. Alton gives himself license to criticize readers for criticizing him, to slander them, if you will, for their “ribald slander,” and execrate them for their “cowardly execrations.” This dialectic is even more pronounced when you consider the immediate context of the “gentle reader” passage. Just before this adversarial address, Alton had attacked “gentlemen” who did very little for their workers and yet “did not see the causes of [the workers’] distrust,” going so far as to imply afterlife retribution: “it is past our power to show you. We must leave it to God.” Then, in the classical novelistic disclaimer, Alton stops himself with an abrupt “to return to my own story.” But he cannot stay with his own story for more than three lines before defending himself from a potential attack from his readers for his noisiness. Reverse the order of the paragraphs, and this dizzying turn would make sense: the reader finds Alton offensively didactic, so Alton didactically condemns the reader for his own judgment, before acquiescing and returning to the story. But as the narrative stands, Alton already made the disclaiming move away from the original didactic passage, only to return to a yet more didactic harangue of practically all his readers a moment later. Why?

Primarily, I would suggest, Kingsley does this in order to call our attention to the awkwardness of the novel’s struggle with its social criticism, and the political problem of a smooth narrative progression. The more organic linear order would have implied a harmonic, if hierarchical, co-existence between the story and its social purpose: the social purpose would have the didactic asides while the story remains autonomous from moral and political judgment. What is more, the reader would have been assured that the story takes precedence over Alton’s vitriol – it is what needs to be returned to, after all. The social critique would have been contained by this abrupt return to the story, and such containment is beneath a narrator so
socially committed as to berate his readers dozens of times. Narrative harmony is a political luxury Alton will rarely afford us.

Indeed, of the industrial novels we study, *Alton Locke* is the least willing to disengage from its political subject matter, Alton Locke the least willing to abstain from voicing his opinions. Alton’s final attack on the reader is perhaps the most damning, certainly the most comprehensive. Again, the reader is supposed to be judging Alton for his Chartist sympathies, and is therefore judged in kind:

> We should have known that [Christianity would solve all problems] before the tenth of April? Most true, *reader*—but wrath is blindness. You too surely have read more wisdom than you have practised yet; seeing that you have your Bible, and perhaps, too, Mill's "Political Economy." Have you perused therein the priceless Chapter "On the Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes"? If not, let me give you the reference—vol. ii, p. 315, of the Second Edition. Read it, *thou self-satisfied Mammon*, and perpend; for it is both a prophecy and a doom! (ch. 32)

From “aristocratic,” through “gentle” to the all-encompassing unmodified “reader,” the novel gives us less and less space to hide from its wrath. Even within this passage, the antagonism towards the reader rapidly accelerates, mimicking the process of the novel more broadly. At first, Alton concedes to a rather benign “you should have known” from the reader. One line later, he mildly accuses the reader of some hypocrisy, and yet worse, of heretically worshipping Mill as a potential bible. Several lines later, the implicit heresy becomes explicit, as Alton calls the reader a “self-satisfied Mammon,” and threatens him with “doom.” I believe *Alton Locke* is the only novel in history to damn its general readership to hell.

“The Go on, go on,” – Lady Ellerton’s Didactic Redemption
But if there is something artistically problematic about damning your readers to hell, there is something liberating about that stance, as well. Once you’ve declared war on your readers, you have less need to consider and integrate their potential aversion to your didactic intervention. As a result, *Alton Locke* is the only novel of this dissertation to have unabashed, unequivocal excitement towards a speech. Lady Ellerton is the speaker, and she is well-suited to speak of salvation and God’s purpose, having just revealed herself the anonymous savior of Alton throughout the novel. The speech begins like many others in the novel, filled with proclamations about God’s role in society. It even pauses, to allow for that distancing maneuver we have seen so often. But instead, something else happens:

Yes. But [the Charter’s death] is because Liberty is God's beloved child, that He will not have her purity sullied by the touch of the profane. Because He loves the people, He will allow none but Himself to lead the people. Because He loves the people, He will teach the people by afflictions. And even now, while all this madness has been destroying itself, He has been hiding you in His secret place from the strife of tongues, *that you may have to look for a state founded on better things than acts of parliament, social contracts, and abstract rights—* a city whose foundations are in the eternal promises, whose builder and maker is God."

She paused.—"Go on, go on," cried Crossthwaite and I in the same breath.

"That state, that city, Jesus said, was come—was now within us, had we eyes to see. And it is come. Call it the church, the gospel, civilization, freedom, democracy, association, what you will—I shall call it by the name by which my Master spoke of it… (ch. 37)

And the text continues much in this vein, for pages upon pages. The allergen of didacticism is clearly here, but the allergic reaction is not. On the contrary, didacticism is embraced as an exciting form of narrative, Crossthwaite and Alton responding to a pause much as Pickwickian characters would respond to a pause in a horror story. Such a narrative anomaly, to me, demands more than one explanation, and there are at least three reasons I can think of for how it has been enabled. The first we have already suggested -- the separation from the reader allows Kingsley to model his own form of reader-response and create his own narrative conventions. This speech comes after so much hostility towards the novel’s supposed readers that imagining an alternative
readership becomes much easier, a readership that would respond to a speech with delight rather than aversion.

The second reason is the gender of the speaker. It is no coincidence that Lord Ellerton is the most problematic didactic figure, Lady Ellerton (once dissociated from her husband) the least problematic. Nor is it a coincidence that most industrial novels center on female heroines; as sites of education, women are much less authoritative for Victorians, and therefore are ironically allowed more authority by the novelist. Put differently, if Lady Ellerton were a male preacher, her authoritative position might overwhelm the novelistic system. But female wisdom in Victorian times is inherently unassuming, by virtue of being female, and therefore at less risk of being or appearing condescending, judgmental, or preachy. Indeed, part of why the novel is so comfortable with Lady Ellerton is because Alton contrasts her influence with the uselessness of normative figures of religious authority: “she made me feel – would that His ministers had made me feel it before, since they say they believe it – that [God] had passed victorious…” (ch. 36). In fact, at the point of the speech above the text has already prepared us explicitly to accept female authority as the only possible site of incontrovertible didacticism: “O, Woman! Woman! only true missionary of civilization and brother… is it in thy power, and perhaps in thine only… to preach deliverance to the captives?” (ch. 25)

So the allergy is overcome partially by a figure of little presupposed authority, partially by antagonism towards the reader. The final piece of this puzzle, I would suggest, is the content of the didactic intervention: Christianity, written by an Anglican minister, is hardly as controversial as the Charter, and the less controversial the content, the less didactic it would appear. After all, part of the problem of preaching is that you assume you know better than your readers, but if you speak of commonly shared knowledge, that problem can be far less severe,
since you are imparting knowledge they already possess. Thus, while it is true that the novel attacks religious preachers throughout, it is much more comfortable with its religious than its political discourse. In fact, Lady Ellerton’s speech above succeeds because it opposes political keywords as much as it embraces religious ones: through God, church and gospel, Lady Ellerton teaches us, you may look to things “better than acts of parliament, social contracts, and abstract rights.” If you are a Victorian reader, Christianity is an easier pill to swallow than (radical) acts of parliament, and a woman speaking religious sentiments you are likely to agree with is hardly as challenging as a male preacher like Kingsley preaching political action you are not.

**What about Esther?**

*Mary Barton* is in many ways more respectful of novel conventions than *Alton Locke*. Instead of Kingsley’s attacks on would-be readers, Gaskell opens with the famous self-deprecating remark: “I know nothing of political economy, or the theories of trade. I have tried to write truthfully; and if my accounts agree or clash with any system, the agreement or disagreement is unintentional.” Unlike *Alton Locke*, *Mary Barton* fulfills the promise of its love-plot with Mary’s marriage, whereas Alton could not possibly marry the religious Lady Ellerton, nor the fickle Lillian. Finally, *Mary Barton*’s notorious plot-shift from poverty to high-seas chase and romance, irritating to most scholars of the novel, appears to prioritize Victorian narrative interest over political content. And yet, for all those differences these novels follow a similar arc in their relationship to didacticism, disavowing male-centric social didacticism in favor of reconciliation with their educational goals via the milder authority of a diffident, femininely

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56 Then again, we must acknowledge the feminist argument that Mary’s plot is itself no less political (Schor 14-21). The argument is cogent, but I fear it does not account well for another shift in narrative focus, not from John to his daughter, but from a story of poverty, class-tensions, etc… to a thrilling detective plot. Anyone not convinced of that shift partially submerging the political can explore the disappearance of financial terms and poverty-laden deaths from the later parts of the novel. I have often wondered how Mary can afford to do all the traveling she does, in fact, given the tremendous scarcity of resources of the first part of the book.
coded Christianity.

The arc opens with Mary Barton’s most political and didactic character, John Barton. Raymond Williams has famously claimed that Barton “put himself beyond the range of [Gaskell’s] sympathy” by murdering Carson, which inevitable creates a shift in narrative focus after the act (96). From our perspective, however, Barton commits a far earlier narrative crime against the novelistic system, by espousing a social cause in didactic discourse:

"Thou never could abide the gentlefolk," said Wilson, half amused at his friend's vehemence.

“And what good have they ever done me that I should like them?” asked Barton, the latent fire lighting up his eye: and bursting forth, he continued, "If I am sick, do they come and nurse me? If my child lies dying (as poor Tom lay, with his white wan lips quivering, for want of better food than I could give him), does the rich man bring the wine or broth that might save his life?....No, I tell you, it's the poor, and the poor only, as does such things for the poor. Don't think to come over me with th' old tale, that the rich know nought of the trials of the poor. I say, if they don't know, they ought to know. We're their slaves as long as we can work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows; and yet we are to live as separate as if we were in two worlds; ay, as separate as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf betwixt us: but I know who was best off then,” and he wound off his speech with a low chuckle that had no mirth in it. (ch.1)

There is something to be said for Schor’s view that there is “more at stake” in Barton’s “reasoned arguments for work, for reform, for individual autonomy” than in the feminine and milder version of the novel’s politics (36). The novel clearly valorizes John Barton’s deep empathy and struggle for his family and fellow workers, if not his political violence. Yet, while there is affection for the early protagonist, there is far less empathy for his didactic discourse.57

Thus, Wilson’s reaction to this speech epitomizes the novel’s attitude to John Barton’s turn towards didactic social discourse: “all that may well be true, but what I want to know now is about Esther...” Indeed, the novel implies discomfort with Barton’s speech even before this

57 This is Schor’s argument as well: “In Mary Barton, what characters crave is what Gaskell calls ‘heart’s piety,’ a language apart from what they term “speechifying” – public, political language – that would be a speech powerful enough to convert...” (18).
implicit disclaimer, if only by calling it a “speech” in the first place, a rather damning epithet for a dialogue among neighbors. Moreover, while Wilson was initially “half-amused,” Barton himself has no pleasure or “mirth” in his speech, whose final bitter “chuckle” seems to demand from its readers the contradictory reaction of both humor and suffering. Finally, while the use of Biblical discourse will later be the solution to the novel’s educational woes, at this point it is far too judgmental and politically divisive to not overwhelm the discursive system: between Barton moralizing over what the rich “ought to know” and his use of the Lazarus story to imply damnation for the entire master class, the novel cannot let such a didactic intervention stand, and the disclaimer indeed seems inevitable.

There is even implicit judgment on Barton’s (mis)use of language in Gaskell’s punctuation: his dying son, Tom, becomes of parenthetical concern (literally put in parenthesis in this speech) to Barton’s social ire against the rich. It is fitting that a primarily domestic form like the Victorian novel should consistently make its political figures bad parents; if the novel were not to point out this neglect on the part of the parents, it would risk participating on a literary level in such a neglect. In fact, to follow its political issues the novel often has to neglect its home thematically much as its political figures neglect their homes physically and psychologically. One might say, then, that the novel form is projecting its parental guilt onto the characters that most keep it away from its own domestic duties.

“Not Much Chance of Telling All You Say”

The novel is hostile towards Barton, then, well before he ever commits a crime. But its hostility is more systematic than personal, more in reaction to the authoritative and sweeping logic of Barton’s discourse than to Barton’s social woes, which Gaskell is very sympathetic towards. Indeed, Gaskell targets the systematic reasoning of political discourse very directly through an
ingenious parody of social reform. Like Kingsley, Gaskell signals the danger of incorporating political advocacy into novels by lumping a host of heterogeneous reform acts together. Unlike Kingsley, however, Gaskell does not turn social reform into a grammatical nightmare; rather, in a more Dickensian vain, Gaskell plays with the potential comedy of novels turning fully political. Thus, when John Barton becomes an official delegate of the Chartist petition, he “might be said to hold a levee, so many neighbours came dropping in” (8). Each neighbor then voices an idea for social reform, from allowing children to work in factories again, through a Luddite call to “break the machines,” to shorter hours and free-trade. By the time the parody is done, Barton himself is overwhelmed, and says: “I’m afeard, neighbors…I’ve not much chance of telling [parliament] all you say” (8).

The parody achieves a multiplicity of contradictory effects: on the one hand, the reader is assured this or that particular social reform are beyond the range of the novel’s scope of interest. On the other hand, while parliament will not hear all of these heterogeneous ideas, we do get to hear them, which suggests that the novel does have more space for political reforms than a Chartist delegation, be that space as parodic as it may. On the one hand, the novel is showing us that political reasoning is a constant threat by virtue of its systematic, abstract reasoning: allow but one idea of social reform in, and a host of others will follow. On the other hand, all these political ideas are shown to be extremely personal and individual in origin: Mrs. Davenport wants child labor reinstated because her child is fast becoming a rascal on the streets of Manchester; a Lancashire weaver wants shirts to be made of calico because of stories his mother told him as a child; and the man who wants shorter hours is naturally a “shivering” weakling. Finally, on the one hand the novel is signifying artistic disinterest in social reform; none of these solutions are of any concern even to Barton, who just wants to tell
parliament about the general distresses of the poor. On the other hand, there is real comedic pleasure and artistic lingering in the very device aimed to show the irrelevance of political discourse to the novel. A disclaimer is inherently a contradictory device, but how much more contradictory when it is a literary disclaimer that is itself a source of literary pleasure.

“As Mothers We Teach Best”

But like Kingsley, Gaskell is not content with parodying political discourse. Rather, the latter chapters of the novel are dedicated to elucidating the educational social meaning of the text. It may seem strange to say that Gaskell, too, turns to female authority when the dialogue structuring the novel’s didacticism is between three men. Yet, Job Legh, the voice of authority in this dialogue, achieves this authority by repeating the diffident disclaimers of the female narrator prefacing the novel. Like the narrator, Job prefaces his social statements with self-effacing remarks on his intellectual abilities and intentions: “I’m not given to Political Economy, I know that much. I’m wanting in learning, I’m aware…. Of course it would take a deal more wisdom and thought than me, or any other man has, to settle out of hand how this is to be done… I’m not learned enough to argue” (37). All these statements tie him inextricably to the diffident female narrator, and suggest that the novel’s domestic scenes between Job and Mary have partly served to feminize the reluctant preacher. Indeed, Hillary Schor uses Job as her ultimate example for the analysis titling this section: “the scene where Job Legh carries his dead daughter’s child… wearing a woman’s nightcap to try to calm the baby’s screams, suggests that it as mothers that we will love, teach, travel best” (35).

Answer to God
That said, Job’s social speeches at the end of *Mary Barton* have too much weight for the novel to use only one means of discrediting him. Therefore, Job is also treated to more traditional counter-didactic devaluations of his authority. First, Gaskell gives him a scholastic obsession with insects that renders him unintelligible to Mary, and thus distances him from the reader: “[Mary] was not prepared for the technical names that Job Legh pattered on her ear, on which they fell like hail on a skylight; and the strange *language only bewildered* her more than ever” (5). Then, during the portentous dialogue Job’s educational weakness gets reiterated, as both narrator and Carson deflate his rhetorical power: “Job looked and felt very sorrowful at the *want of power in his words,*” the narrator says of Job’s lengthiest speech, a want of power Carson immediately echoes: “I fear, Legh, neither you nor I have convinced each other, as to the… *want of power in the masters* to remedy the evils men complain of” (37). Not only is Legh’s speech unconvincing, but there is a sense of tragic failure here in the echo between Job’s rhetorical incompetence and the masters’ social failings. If only Job could use language effectively, this repetition suggests, Carson would treat his workers effectively. But neither can – a sad picture for both novelistic education and social reform.

Fortunately, *Mary Barton,* like *Alton Locke,* has recourse to the unifying language of God. Thus, over the course of the dialogue Job shifts the emphasis of his discourse to a metaphysical resolution and moral language, suggesting again that novels are more comfortable moralizing over morality than they are politics:

The masters has it on their own conscience,—you have it on yours, sir [Carson], to *answer for to God whether you’ve done,* and are doing all in your power to lighten the evils that seem always to hang on the trades by which you make your fortunes…

I’m an old man, and may never see you again; but I’ll *pray for you,* and think on you and your trials…and ask God to bless you now and for evermore. Amen.
Yes, the masters still need to do better by the workers, but the reasoning is moral, and implicitly, so is the solution; if they don’t, God will judge them. Being generous to Gaskell, we might say the ideal here is of God bringing about a more egalitarian social system through moral conversion. Less generously, we can read this as a gesture of resignation, of Gaskell implying that only the afterlife can offer a moral solution to these social indignities. Be our mood of reading what it may, the novel embraces this turn, as Mr. Carson finds Job’s prayers more compelling than his political reasoning, and ends up reforming his practices and improving labor conditions across Manchester by the end of the chapter. Yet, there is something anti-novelistic even in these reforms, as Carson enacts them with “short sentences,” implying that the novel cannot embrace social changes without sacrificing some of its form, and that Legh’s lengthy sentences can at best achieve a vicarious influence, much like the novel’s.

“You Feel Deeply – for the People!”

Thus far, we have mostly dealt with negative attempts to incorporate political discourse into the novel – be they deprecating remarks on characters articulating a social message, a narrative move away from the political, a parodic caricature of reform, or overt apologies to the reader. But novels have more positive ways of folding educational meaning into their scenes than such acts of removal imply. More than anything, novels have romantic plots with which to make social reform empathetic, emotional, and even erotic. While the two novels above mostly use their romances to move away from the political, *Sybil* and *North and South* make a hearty effort to combine them. It is not only that the marriages these novels build towards are far more politically consequential, uniting different social classes in a way Mary and Jem’s marriage or Alton’s platonic friendship with Lady Ellerton never could. Rather, and more importantly, the
protagonists’ love story is politically painted in a profound way; Sybil and Egremont, Margaret and Thornton love each other because of their political conviction, rather than in spite of it. 58

As a result of this shift towards eroticized politics, we get dialogues that try to mix the sentimental and the social rather than use the former as a digressive reaction against the latter. Mary Barton, or Alton’s initial love interest, Lillian, don’t care much for or about politics. Their affection, subsequently, is rather detached from the social issues of the novel -- hence the infamously incongruent two plots of Mary Barton, and the fragmented, frequently tangential plot of Alton Locke. Sybil, on the other hand, starts out caring for nothing but social causes, having her heart “concentrated on the Church and the People” (bk 3; ch.6). To fall in love with her is inevitably intertwined, then, with a passionate empathy for her causes. Indeed, Egremont’s love is explicitly tied to Sybil’s social discourse:

the form of Sybil Gerard was stamped on his brain…. Who was this girl, unlike all women whom he had yet encountered, who spoke with such sweet seriousness of things of such vast import… and with a kind of mournful majesty bewailed the degradation of her race? (Bk 2; Ch. 16)

Disraeli’s infamous writing defects notwithstanding, there are great benefits to this artistic choice. First, instead of apologizing for the political Disraeli renders it poetic, as the alliterative S of “such sweet seriousness” ties Sybil’s singing to her political vision. Second, whereas many Victorian novels would treat ideological characters as tedious, this choice of idealizing ideology allows the novel to marry its traditional plot with its social one, a position unavailable to a non-political (Jem) or unlovable (Alton) protagonist. Third, and most importantly, by making

58 If this suggests a problem with our hypothesis that political discourse is the novel’s auto-immune disease, I would argue that the medical analogy needs to be expanded rather than modified by these novels. One of the theories of the prevalence of allergies in developed countries, after all, is that these allergies are a product of overly hygienic modern living. Early exposure to allergens, this theory continues, would do a lot to mitigate their impact. Similarly, I would argue, these novels try to preempt the allergic reaction via more organic exposure to political discourse.
political discourse passionate and empathetic Disraeli resets the terms by which we evaluate characters. As we have seen in previous chapters, Victorians often criticized social novelists for their abstracting away from individual characters, turning them from people into mouthpieces. But here, it is the very act of becoming a political mouthpiece that paradoxically individuates Sybil for Egremont, as she is “unlike all women he had yet encountered” precisely in being so committed to “things of such vast import.”

In a way, the genius of Disraeli here is in playing two criticisms of the social novelist off of each other: on the one hand, the novelist’s over-abstraction was deemed too general to allow for individual characters. On the other hand, as an idealizing process abstract characters were deemed too improbable. Disraeli takes up the second criticism to overturn the first: yes, Sybil is highly unlikely, this passage (and virtually every passage of the novel) shows and concedes. But in that improbability she is unique, unlike anyone else rather than a pure type representing everyone else. In the process, political discourse, like Sybil, becomes an individuating aesthetic paradoxically by defying what Realism suggests is a likely individual.

THE RICH AND THE POOR

Having a more affectionate attitude towards didactic content also allows for more educational clarity, at least in terms of individual dialogues. It is hard to know, after all, what Mary Barton would like us to learn from John Barton’s tirades, what Alton Locke would like us to learn from Alton Locke’s tirades, since Gaskell and Kingsley do so much to discredit or move away from their protagonists’ speeches as soon as they appear. Less hard with Gerard’s famous monologue on the eternal divide between “THE RICH AND THE POOR,” punctuated as it is by Sybil’s irresistible singing (bk 2; ch. 5). Consider the following dialogue between Sybil and Egremont,
where the love Egremont and Victorian readers (ideally) feel for Sybil sanctifies her political speeches:

"Yes; it was the greatest of the Northern Houses. But they told me the people were most wretched round the Abbey; nor do I think there is any other cause for their misery, than the hard hearts of the family that have got the lands."

"You feel deeply for the people!" said Egremont looking at her earnestly.

Sybil returned him a glance expressive of some astonishment, and then said, "And do not you? Your presence here assures me of it."

"I humbly follow one who would comfort the unhappy." ....

"There is no merit in my conduct, for there is no sacrifice. When I remember what this English [working] people once was; the truest, the freest, and the bravest, the best-natured and the best-looking, the happiest and most religious race upon the surface of this globe; and think of them now, with all their crimes and all their slavish sufferings, their soured spirits and their stunted forms; their lives without enjoyment and their deaths without hope; I may well feel for them, even if I were not the daughter of their blood."

And that blood mantled to her cheek as she ceased to speak, and her dark eye gleamed with emotion, and an expression of pride and courage hovered on her brow. Egremont caught her glance and withdrew his own; his heart was troubled. (bk 2; ch. 14)

To be sure, we can find conceptual problems in this dialogue, as well. We can read Egremont’s “troubled heart” as troubled by Sybil’s views; we can read Sybil’s commentary on the working poor’s criminality as rather discordant with her identification as a “daughter of their blood”; finally, we can suggest that Egremont’s reaction, “you feel deeply for the people!”, moves us away from the social to the personal, rather than integrating them both.

Still, I think the educational clarity of this dialogue is far stronger than that of the novels not eroticizing politics. I believe the more plausible reading of Egremont’s “troubled heart” is that it’s troubled by heightened awareness of the miseries of the working class. More importantly, the narrator does not remove us from Sybil’s speech, itself a reification of Gerard’s
earlier speeches. Rather, he fully embraces Sybil as a speaker, giving her words the visceral passion of a mantled cheek and a gleaming eye, suggesting she is at her most exciting as well as most lovable when she expresses her deep “feelings for the people.” Finally, while we can read “feeling deeply for the people” as a dismissive reframing of the political as pure sentimentalism, a matter of womanly feelings rather than manly intellect, I think the more plausible reading is one more empathetic to Disraeli’s narratorial efforts. That is, I believe Disraeli is showing us here that social ideas are not merely abstract intellectual exercises removing us from the very people we seek to conceptualize. Rather, ideas are the expression of deep emotion, and thereby become an organic feature of novel writing rather than a foreign element causing allergic reactions. To use a foreigner’s immigration metaphor, in effect what Disraeli’s political dialogues do is naturalize social discourse in the country of the novel.

“Something Larger and Grander”

_North and South_ follows Sybil’s lead in using political discourse to drive romantic interest, thereby eroticizing and aestheticizing what Victorian novels often deprecate. Indeed, like Sybil, Margaret is individuated through her political interests:

> It was rather dull for Margaret after dinner. She was glad when the gentlemen came… because she could listen to something larger and grander than the petty interests which the ladies had been talking about. (ch. 20)

Margaret is unlike the other women, precisely like Sybil, because she cares about “larger and grander” issues. Her passion for Thornton, too, is pedagogically and politically motivated:

> “Margaret thought she had never seen him to so much advantage” when she listens to Thornton make his political “opponents yield” to his arguments (ch. 20). It should come as no surprise, then, that their passion for each other builds through dialogues on the proper relationship
between masters and men. As Margaret tells Thornton, for instance, that she “heard that it was considered to the advantage of the masters to have ignorant workmen,” she parenthetically introduces a rival lover, Captain Lennox, into her report. Thornton’s jealous contemplation of Lennox “prevents him from responding for a moment,” giving the reader a sense that the love triangle is just as important to this dialogue as the political debate (15). This interweaving of ideological exchange with narrative passion continues throughout. While Thornton defends himself from an implicit attack on his lack of religion, the narrator’s description establishes the romantic resonance of this defense: “he was speaking in a subdued voice, as if to her alone. She did not wish to be so exclusively addressed” (15). Thornton argues his case “eagerly,” Margaret rebuffs it “coldly,” anticipating the “icy tone” with which she will reject his initial marriage proposal, and giving a flirtatious zest to their ideological differences (15, 24). Indeed, Margaret rejects Thornton in terms which very much reject the readerly experience of the text’s romantic politics: “you seem to fancy that my conduct of yesterday [standing between Thornton and the mob],” Margaret says to both Thornton and the reader, “was a personal act between you and me…” (24). The eventual marriage between the two, in turn, vindicates the reading experience the narrator has put so much effort to create: the social debates of North and South very much are personal acts, and become exciting precisely by being personal.

“Life Diluted into Words”

Yet, even with this sustained effort at political eroticism, Gaskell never quite settles into her didactic social project the way Disraeli does. Rather, like Dickens her political interventions are strewn with disavowals of the power of language and her protagonists’ authority. Thus, before Margaret fully engages in these romantic political debates, she repeats Job Legh’s and the Mary Barton narrator’s disclaimers almost verbatim: “I know so little about strikes, and rate of wages,
and capital, and labour, that I had better not talk to a political economist like you” (ch. 15). Thornton, for his part, does know a fair bit about economic theory, but still curiously mixes it with an attack on the weakness of language, didactic and abstract language in particular. Thus, as he tries to explain his position, he weaves in a novelist’s view of the relative weakness of political discourse compared to personal narratives: “his words were but a poor and quibbling answer…. He could best illustrate what he wanted to say by telling them something of his own life…” (10). Indeed, his laissez-faire policies themselves become inextricably linked to a counter-didactic sentiment: he does not want to enact non-factory reforms, he says, because that would be too much like lecturing workers on how to live their lives: “I can fancy no degradation greater than that of having another man perpetually advising and lecturing me [as a worker], or even planning too closely in any way about my actions” (15).

It even seems at times that Thornton is more concerned with the aesthetic problem of lecturing than he is with the political problems he is addressing: my workers will improve their lives by my example rather than by conversation, he says, and much like a novel critic, contrasts narrative with speechifying: the “straightforward honesty of my hands… goes farther than a whole course of lectures on “Honesty is the Best Policy” – life diluted into words” (15). Gaskell is clearly more ambivalent towards didactic discourse than these statements would imply – there are, after all, countless political speeches in the text running side by side with the personal stories Thornton calls “life.” But putting them at the very heart of the debate suggests just how uncomfortable Gaskell was even with the more organic romantic solution to the problem of didacticism.

“Tutor and then Husband”
In sum, then, there is not one winning strategy to incorporate social messages into Victorian fiction, no device that suffices on its own. A disavowal of authority is crucial, but alongside it an insistence on returning to authoritative discourse seems just as necessary, and the two cannot smoothly merge, even as they come close when the novelist uses her love-plots to motivate her political ones. Still, *Sybil* and *North and South* suggest that the path of divorcing the romantic from the social plot makes less sense than a steamy political eroticism. Why, then, did *Mary Barton* and *Alton Locke* not use this strategy? One answer, I suggest, lies in a fifth industrial novel, Charlotte Bronte’s *Shirley*. That novel shows us that eroticizing didacticism risks turning the novel into a Dickensian caricature of the preacher, lecturing simply for the pleasure of hearing his own voice. That is, when you eroticize educational discourse, you may avoid the problem of integrating two divergent plots, but you simultaneously run into the problem of enjoying political discourse for the sake of the erotic contrast it creates. Worse, you risk falling in love with didacticism independently of its content. This is what happens to Bronte’s *Shirley*, a novel that dissolves its social issues into a pedantic eroticism of teaching for teaching’s sake. This, we are about to see, not only disengages the text from the political, it makes romance painfully pedagogical.

We can see this danger in the plot of *Shirley*, which moves from a more political, initial effort at an erotics of education, to a purely pedagogical, almost sadistic romance. Thus, the novel begins with Caroline teaching her cousin and ultimate husband, Robert Moore, to be a better master, by reading Shakespeare. Moore then raises the inevitable question about didactic fiction: “[read Shakespeare] with a view to improving myself? Is it to operate like a sermon?” To which Caroline responds with the common defense of the novel’s didactic province, “it is to stir you, to give you new sensations, make you feel…not only your virtues, but your vicious,
perverse points” (6). After a lengthy Socratic dialogue on the analogy between Moore’s attitude and Coriolanus’, Caroline concludes by tying her political message to the pending romantic relationship: “I know it would be better for you to be loved by your workmen than to be hated by them, and I am sure your kindness is more likely to win their regard than your pride. If you were proud to me and Hortense, should we love you?“ Behaving well towards your workers, Caroline implies, will not only make them love you, but increase my love for you. Robert dismisses this line of reasoning in a way that suggests how little educational value the novel finds in such an exchange: “Now, Lina, I’ve had my lesson both in languages end ethics, with a touch of politics; now it is your turn” (6). In fact, Bronte has little patience for this love plot, giving Caroline a debilitating illness for large portions of the novel, shooting Robert and moving the narrative to another romance altogether.

This romance is between Shirley Keeldar and Robert’s brother, Louis Moore, her childhood tutor. While this relationship has some social resonance – Louis sorely feels that his poverty disqualifies him from marrying the wealthy Shirley – it is mostly focused on delving into the romantic potential of education. The result, I believe by the narrative’s own terms, is somewhat disturbing. To begin with, Louis Moore’s didactic nature presents him as an objectionable protagonist and lover, with the novel defining him much in the terms that reviews would use to rebuke educational characters: “the daughters [of the house of Sympson] saw in him an abstraction, not a man” (26). This view is only exacerbated by Louise’s abstract, pedantic and condescending courtship of Shirley, which he frames no less didactically than this: “to such a [wife] as this I should like to be first tutor and then husband. I would teach her my language, my habits and my principles, and then I would reward her with my love.” The authoritarian tone of molding a wife in his own image and condescension of seeing his own love
as a “reward” both draw a sardonic reaction from Shirley, and I suspect many readers: “[r]eward her, lord of the creation, reward her!” (36). The danger of a moralizing romance then comes to the foreground when Louis reframes Shirley’s assertion of independence as a moral duty. Your wife will be rewarded “If she willed it,” Shirley proposes. “And she should will it” rebuts Louis, showing us the domineering potential of moral discourse.

Even though Shirley ultimately yields, the extensive dialogue consistently problematizes Louis’ efforts of melding tutoring and marriage. During the chapter, Louis brings up abstraction twice, as if to remind us of the tedium of his own style: the romantic resolution is described as a rejection of the abstract: “since that day I abhorred Solitude. Cold abstraction, fleshless skeleton…” More strangely still, Louis describes his romantic style and character as antithetical to abstraction, capping a monologue of abstract values with: “I am not a poet; I cannot live with abstractions.” I will not subject my reader to a lengthy Louis monologue, but suffice it to say this disavowal of the abstract forces the reader to be aware of how often Louis recurs to abstraction in his pedagogical view of love. Here are some of the abstract nouns he uses, in chapter 36 alone, to describe his affections (mostly capitalized): “Liberty, Nature, Solitude, Fate, Celibacy, Temper, Conformity, Harmony, Haughtiness, Virtues,” etc… To which Shirley herself responds, albeit with consistent scorn, with a host of her own, suggesting that indeed Louis has taught her his language: “pride, humility, compulsion, celibacy, fate,” etc…

The narrative indulges in this didactic erotica for too many pages to consider it entirely unpleasant to Bronte, but it also forcefully suggests how awful a pedagogical romance might be:

"You might have the satisfaction of leading him to a higher standard, of improving his tastes.”
"Leading and improving! teaching and tutoring! bearing and forbearing! Pah! my husband is not to be my baby. I am not to set him his daily lesson and see that he learns it, and give him a sugar-plum if he is good, and a patient, pensive, pathetic lecture if he is bad. But it is like a
tutor to talk of the "satisfaction of teaching."... Improving a husband! No. I shall insist upon my husband improving me, or else we part.” (36)

Granted, Shirley ends the monologue on a note of approval towards didactic marriage, so long as the model for such didacticism is a patriarchal one. Still, the bulk of the speech leaves one wondering as to the value of such a marriage even in a traditional setting: after all, does the reader want wives to be their husbands’ “babies,” to be set daily lectures and treated to sugar-plums when they are good? Indeed, Louis’ view of marriage suggests how slippery the didactic slope of romance is: a wife, to him, is “something to tame first, and teach afterwards; to break in, and then to fondle” (36). This viewpoint makes some sense in a Victorian pedagogical context -- though contemporary culture has bequeathed such didactic methods to the drill sergeant – but introduce it as a model of marriage and it becomes disturbing. Shirley’s assent to the marriage, saying “my master,” is in “a low voice,” suggesting that this is a rather demeaning and dangerous romantic project. Her request that Louis promise “never to tyrannize” is a natural concern with a suitor who expresses so much pleasure at the prospect of bringing his pupil-wife to submission. Be the romantic value of turning marriage didactic what it may, its dangers are very clear.

A Bit too much

Where does this analysis leave us, what does it do to our understanding of Industrial fiction, or more broadly the relationship between political educational content and the Victorian novel? First, I would suggest, the preceding chapter and dissertation have shown us how formally productive the struggle with didacticism has been for the Victorian novel. However little pleasure there may be in Lord Ellerton’s interminable sentence, it is a literary innovation which would never have happened if it weren’t for the perceived difficulty of bringing the political into the fictional. The Jellyby parodies, the diffident didacticism of Gaskell characters, the putative
rejection of language, even the erotics of pedagogy – all the host of techniques of engagement and disavowal we have covered here are a sign of tremendous literary resourcefulness in the face of an ultimately insoluble problem. Critics often express displeasure with novelists for not doing political fiction well – we have seen that these novelists anticipate that objection, and do whatever they can to convince readers that their social commitments do not blind them to their artistic ones.

Yet, for all the literary innovation this has created, Victorian readers, novelists, and now Victorian scholarship, all tend to agree that the solutions, as diverse as they are, are often unsatisfying; the fiction seems to halt, life seems “diluted into words,” and the disclaimers qualify the explicit meaning of the texts. As scholars, we are either not quite certain how far we are to take a novel’s social engagement, or even (more often, I would say) precisely what that engagement is. Perhaps just as unfortunate, what I see as literary innovation and a sign of resourcefulness can easily be seen as inorganic fragmented narrative construction, wavering educational positions, even the novelist’s cowardice. Thus, the period’s best fictional minds can look feeble and meandering, neither sure of their views nor of their art.

Perhaps the problem, however, is not with the novelists, but with their form, and with our expectations of it. We seem to ask novels to excite our interest without distracting us from their values, to involve us in personal empathy for characters while creating them to embody general social truths, to tell us what they think without much direct narrative intrusion, and to mediate language, imagination and artistic convention without much lost in translation. We ask of Victorians what they asked of their own novelists, and what these novelists asked of themselves. The Victorians’ conclusion, the conclusion of this dissertation, is that perhaps we have asked for a bit too much.
“Boring – you have to Trump it up!”: The Problem of Didacticism
Post 1900
“Father McKenzie
Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear.
No one comes near.” “Eleanor Rigby,” The Beatles.

This dissertation has picked the Victorians as its object of study partly for necessity -- one cannot properly contextualize centuries and continents of attacks on educational and political content in the space of a booklet -- and partly because Victorian culture was the least likely to have such strong resistance to a mode it has come to be known for. But of the countless readers of this indelible document, few surely will ask: “What of the rest? What happens, for instance, after the Victorians?” The answer of this epilogue? Whether you are reading George Orwell or Ralph Ellison, watching Aaron Sorkin or John Oliver, the results will be staggeringly similar to what you’ve encountered in this dissertation. Go where you may, art tends to be ambivalent towards its educational role, both drawn to it and, more importantly for our purposes, drawn towards its disavowal.

“Please Skip”

In the last chapter we pointed out Charles Kingsley’s call for his readers to skip the Chartist chapters if they are more invested in the amusing parts of the tale (be those what they may). Intriguingly, George Orwell and John Oliver take up this very strategy, albeit in different veins. In Orwell’s Homage to Catalonia, the emphasis again lies with the reader’s interest: “if you are not interested in the horrors of party politics, please skip; I am trying to keep the political parts of this narrative in separate chapters for precisely this reason” (5). With John Oliver, viewers are “frankly excused” from watching an episode on “Abortion Laws” if they are “in the nineteen percent” who believe abortion should always be illegal. It seems at first a case of banishing a type of viewership for its political views, but Oliver too uses the device as he calls upon these viewers to “rejoin us at 11:29, because once I’m done talking about this, we will all be watching a bucket of sloths, and I promise you, it is violently delightful.”
Like a Victorian novelist, Oliver is torn between his antagonism to part of his audience and a desire to educate them (or, more cynically, retain them financially). Thus, he welcomes those viewers back at 11:29 with the promised bucket of sloths, only to add: “but quick question: what the fuck is wrong with you?!?!” This, in turn, creates a yet stronger need for disavowal, and reincarnation of the dialectic we’ve followed: the delightful sloths enable the ultra-didactic judgmental moment, but that moment in its overwhelming didacticism requires the counter-didactic apology to broaden:

I know this story has not been the ideal way for anyone to go to sleep on a Sunday night, but we thought that this was something you should really know about. And the only way that I can make it right is to give you the absolutely ideal way to go to sleep – an actual sloth in a nightcap!

Now, not only is the entire audience assumed to be opposed to the educational content, but there is a sense of moral as well as artistic wrongdoing in the apology. Whereas the earlier recommendation to skip the political section was itself more accusatory than accommodating, in this case it is Oliver, rather than his audience, that is in the wrong, needing to “make it right” by producing a live sloth. Ironically, so long as the skipping device was adhered to, it seemed the segment could continue without causing the inner conflict we have called counter-didacticism. But the moralizing extreme produces an aestheticizing extreme, and in the process suggests no audience is above resenting the comedian for delving into the political.

While such direct offers to abandon a text are rare, I would suggest apologetic gestures frequently imply the same process for their audience. That is, when a writer apologizes for his writing, this serves, like the offer to skip, to excuse the reader from re-engaging with the writing at a later date, or engaging with similar writing later on. Thus, the skipping device is far less rare than its explicit instantiations, and for good reason, as the offer to skip a text accomplishes a host of contradictory tasks simultaneously. On the one hand, it isolates certain audiences from others, making one group more invested by removing the other from the process. On the other, it unites the various groups of the audience, consolidating them around the parts skipped to – something particularly useful when those parts themselves contain
educational content, as we have seen with Oliver and Kingsley (and is well known to any reader of Orwell).

Similarly, on the one hand the skipping device devalues the political content – it can be skipped over, after all. On the other hand, it trumpets that content’s significance – however uninteresting /disturbing to some, this material is too crucial to ignore, or else it would have been deleted. Or, as Orwell puts it, directly after the proposal to skip ahead: “at the same time it would be quite impossible to write about the Spanish War from a purely military angle. It was above all a political war.” Lastly, this device allows the writer to be simultaneously considerate and hostile towards his audience: considerate, because he allows us to move past what we find uncomfortable; hostile, because he seems to deem our interests beneath his own. This ultimately puts writing itself in the paradoxical state didactic art often finds itself; appealing to the very readers it is trying to admonish. Indeed, the mode of didacticism itself becomes an object of deep ambivalence in the act of skipping, gratuitous to some, yet necessary to the author.

“You Made Ma Cry!”

Reading its preface, you would think that Invisible Man would be immune to the counter-didactic maneuvering Victorian novelists were so preoccupied with. The novel, Ellison tells us, was created as a corrective to the lack of “intellectual depth” of “most protagonists of Afro-American fiction (not to mention the black characters in fiction written by whites” (xix). Moreover, the concept of black invisibility at the heart of the novel came about as a criticism of the “bland assertions of sociologists” that “Afro-American difficulties sprang from our ‘high visibility’ “ (xv). Yet, despite this explicit social purpose coupled with a literary investment in intellectualizing black characters, the novel itself shows just as much resistance to its intellectual social project as a Victorian novel. In fact, the counter-didactic devices are eerily similar to the ones we’ve seen throughout this dissertation.

From the very first page, we have a disclaimer against overt social criticism. After an opening paragraph that very much condemns white racial blindness, the eponymous invisible man clarifies,
somewhat confusingly: “I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen.” Several lines later, the pain of racism is ever at the forefront, but with it also the counter-didactic sense that explicit criticism, even violence, are not the way to convince or reach the audience you most want to change: “you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And alas, it’s seldom successful.” Before the novel has even started, then, we have a Gaskell-like disavowal of political protest, followed by a more broadly Victorian resistance to the usefulness of explicit moralizing, for what is “cursing” and “swearing” if not an explicit moral reproach?

Two pages later, the invisible man gets hit, much like Dickens’ Pickwickian scientist, for his persistent intellectual abstraction. He asks a woman: “what is freedom?” and at first receives a mixed, hesitant answer. But his intellectual eagerness, Ellison’s eagerness for his protagonist to be intellectual, makes him keep asking, until the woman responds as a typical novelistic character might: “leave me ‘lone, boy; my head aches!” The narrator finds his own intellectualism dizzying, further distancing the narrative from its own interests, and is then made dizzier by “a big fellow” striking him “with his fist.” The reason for this violence? Asking too many abstract questions: “You made Ma cry…Asking her them questions…. Git outa here, and stay, and next time you got questions like that, ask yourself!” Much as “git outa here, and stay” form a dialectic, the narrator is constantly ejected from his own narrative, only to stay all the longer by the very devices of removal. After all, the act of violence by which the woman’s son disables intellectual questions is the same one that demands them, ending with more didactic license to turn novelistic dialogue into an authoritative monologue: “ask yourself.”

The ambivalent turn to the reader, half-apologetic half-attacking, is also well within the counter-didactic dialectic. Like Kingsley, Ellison presupposes an explicitly hostile readership to his near-murder of a white man blind to his existence: “I can hear you say, ‘what a horrible, irresponsible bastard!” Like Kingsley, he first responds by acquiescing to the readers’ complaint (“you’re right. I leap to agree with you.”) then turns to blaming them: “but to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?” (prologue). Ultimately, the prologue’s didactic dialectic resolves itself, much as it
tends to do, paradoxically, turning towards and away from the reader, towards and away from taking responsibility for racial violence. Thus, after attacking the reader, Ellison returns to agreeing with him, but the second time it is an ironic reversal of the first agreement: “Yes, yes, yes! Let me agree with you, I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society.” Now the irresponsibility is not an apology for violence, but an apology for not committing greater violence. Naturally, this needs to be qualified, and the turn to an uncertain question and a cajoling tone reestablishes the tenuous balance between the narrator’s rage and his need to appeal, however critically, to his (probably) white readership: “But what did I do to be so blue? Bear with me.”

Of course, this is not nearly an exhaustive reading of the novel’s treatment of its social issues, nor is it meant to be. The point is to point the reader to the fertile methodological grounds of the counter-didactic dialectic, to show its potential for more contemporary texts. In that vein, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, too, registers a hauntingly familiar discomfort with its political aims. Reading Wright’s famous introduction to the novel, “How ‘Bigger’ was Born,” you immediately get a blueprint of the challenges facing a socially committed novelist. The first line of the introduction proposes the primary problem for such a novelist, the problem of authority: “I am not so pretentious as to imagine that it is possible for me to completely account for my own book” is a strikingly diffident pose with which to open an explanation of the text’s origins. It speaks to the almost archetypal anxiety on the part of the educational novelist that he cannot fully convey a message, or worse, that he cannot even know what that message is, once the forces of narrative and imagination enter the field.

This may sound like a problem the novelist faces independently of any social aims he might have, but it quickly becomes apparent this this social lens exacerbates the more abstract problem of the communicative capacity of novels. Thus, what Wright calls “an imaginative novel” quickly turns closer to what we see as a social novel, “a merging of two extremes; an intensely intimate expression… couched in terms of the most objective and commonly known events. [Such a novel] is at once something private and something public by its very nature.” The novelist has difficulty claiming authority for his novel’s
message, this suggests, because the social or “public” aspect of the form collapses into its “intimate” or “private” narrative lens. Put differently, the challenge of integrating social events and opinions with novelistic loyalty to individual psychology muddies the waters to the extent that the novelist is compelled to open with a disavowal of authority over the text.

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the disavowal of novelistic authority often turns into a disavowal of language; with *Invisible Man*, we see this in the failed efforts at communication, both between characters and with the reader. Still on the first page of Wright’s introduction, we see a more traditional frustration with the limits of language. Much like Dickens’ repeated references to things “impossible to describe,” Wright claims that “there is always something just beyond the tip of the tongue that could explain it all. Usually, [the author] ends by discussing something far afield…” Again, common among social novelists, this failure of language and narrative authority results in a break from the reader similar to the one we just discussed with Ellison: thus, the tangential effort of the novelist at a self-explanation is “an act which incites skepticism and suspicion in those anxious for a straight-out explanation.” Thus, the collapse of the private and public collapses the authority of the novelist, whose attack on language in turn creates an unbridgeable gap with the readers who rely on his mastery of it for the novel to be legible in the first place. A genuinely dialectical mess.

So much for the introduction’s explicit aesthetic and political problems with the project – but what of the novel itself? Here, I would suggest the dissertation would offer a different hermeneutics through which to understand the text’s main plot. At the heart of the text’s meaning is the question of Bigger’s accidental murder of Mary Dalton, a white communist who reaches out to him in the name of proletariat solidarity transcending racial divides. This murder is itself something of a misunderstanding, and as such all too fittingly maps unto a host of allegorical readings. It could symbolize the impossibility of eliminating race as a social marker in favor of class; the challenge of convincing people of an abstract truth too far removed from their personal experience; perhaps even a gendered critique of the all-too-Victorian philosophy of resolving social problems through white female empathy. My dissertation would
add another interpretation – the murder is a symbol of a novelistic form ever wary of intellectual intruders, yet another case of violence against a character whose ideological background threatens to overwhelm the novelistic system, much as the lawyer’s speech ending the novel does. Or, as Wright puts it in the introduction:

Another thought kept me from writing. What would my own white and black comrades in the Communist party say? This thought was the most bewildering of all. How could I create such complex arid wide schemes of associational thought and feeling, such filigreed webs of dreams and politics, without being mistaken for a "smuggler of reaction," "an ideological confusionist," or "an individualistic and dangerous element?"

To have given Mary Dalton a more empathetic plot, I would suggest, would have made the risk of “being mistaken” for an ideologue a near certainty. The murder need not only symbolize the novel system’s aversion to explicit ideology, didacticism, politics, what have you. But the literary history of the novel this dissertation has proposed would suggest that it is at least a part of that over-determined murder’s meaning. Reading so many political novelists reacting in such similar ways to the presence of ideological and educational characters, you come to expect violence.

**Let Sorkin be Sorkin**

Part of the great charm of his writing is that, like Dickens, Aaron Sorkin is one of the rare writers to realize that they might know something better than anybody else, and that at the same time it is shameful to know better, or think yourself better. The title of this section comes from the title of a *West Wing* episode (Sorkin’s flagship show), “Let Bartlett be Bartlett,” where the theme of the episode is that the president won’t say what’s on his mind, won’t be himself, because he’s afraid it would cost him votes. This is, to varying degrees, the central tension of all Sorkin shows – the other three replace “votes” with

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59 Perhaps “ever wary” is a bit too strong, but it is telling that the novelist arguably most comfortable with intellectualizing fiction, Dostoyevsky, is famous for a novel in which pure intellectualism leads to a horrid murder, *Crime and Punishment*. I would suggest Zosima’s post-mortem stench in *The Brothers Karamazov*, too, is an act of distancing from an otherwise idyllic intellectual figure. The same argument can be made for Lucien’s short-lived foray into the thick of the idyllic Parisian intelligentsia in *Lost Illusions*. It is an incredible dozen pages that depict the dialogues of that sacred society of Daniel d’Arthez, but one feels the novelistic sword on its throat from the very first.
“viewers,” but the dilemma still remains: do you speak out despite having an audience that wants you to “dumb it down,” do you write in the Sorkin style when you know you’ll be accused of preachiness, self-righteousness, snobbishness, what have you?

Sorkin and Dickens classically solve this by acknowledging the pain they might be causing – every Sorkin West Wing episode⁶⁰ has characters bored with each other, as Sorkin suspects some of the audience would be with him – and then forging ahead. In Dickens’ case, it is frequently a narratorial intrusion or extended satire that is enabled by the apology. For Sorkin, most shows center around the characters deciding to go for broke, and speechify unapologetically despite the impending consequences.

Intriguingly, Sorkin’s career path, too, mimics Dickens’, with increasing political vitriol and explicit didacticism as we move from the early, far more humorous writing of Sports Night, to the deeply sermonic and often bitter utopian vision of The Newsroom. Like the Victorians’ reaction to Dickens, Sorkin’s contemporaries (most prominently Vox’s Culture Editor Todd Vanderwerff⁶¹) grew more contentious in their reviews as his materials turned less ambivalently and more directly political. But then again, The West Wing, overtly the more political show, was a commercial and critical blockbuster, while The Newsroom gets hard to watch at times even if you’re a diehard Sorkin fan like the writer of these lines. It is hard to isolate why that is. But part of the answer, to me, is the extraordinary engagement with counter-didactic devices of arguably the only outrageously successful didactic show.

Take a perfectly average West Wing episode, “The Women of Qumar,” (season 3, episode 9), for example. It is astounding how much educational content gets smuggled into this episode: watching it, you learn (among other things!) about women’s rights under Sharia Law, global sex trafficking, unfunded

⁶⁰ Lamentably, he stopped writing the show after the fourth season.
⁶¹ A host of reviews of a similar tenor are widely available online. There is a wide consensus that The Newsroom is a failed show precisely in its preachy politicizing of a news show, filled with the Victorian objections to didactic literature: unfairly smuggling ideas into art (“Sorkin writes up one argument after another for himself to win”), overly sermonizing and tedious monologues, overly idealized characters, writing outside his form’s professional limits (“The newsroom’s chief problem as a drama is that it is, well, an editorial”) etc. Wanderwurf’s episode-by-episode reviews in the A.V. Club are the most nuanced and canonical version of this widespread internet critique, but he still articulates the dominant aesthetic of, well, perhaps any time: “Daniel is one of my least favorite kinds of characters on television, the one-episode guest star who exists solely to teach one of the main characters a lesson.”
mandates, World War 2, state and national seat belt laws, the financials of the beef industry, the doctrine of sovereign immunity, the clean water act, and even the historical event prompting the phrase “red-tape.” That an episode devoted to so much educational content does not make for exceedingly tedious television is an artistic wonder the likes of which we may never see again.

The wonder is achieved through a tour de force of the techniques we have seen throughout this dissertation. As the president teaches other characters about various esoteric facts of history, those characters respond with characteristic rejection of his didacticism: “I’m sorry, I wasn’t listening…” rebuts one. “Am I being punished for something?” is another’s reaction. When the president himself improbably needs to learn what unfunded mandates are, he quickly turns the federal/state issue into a personal conflict, and literally shuts the conversation down: “figure out how much this is gonna cost, then tell him to sit down and shut up.” Sex trafficking, the ultimate issue of this episode, is spiced up, in the Victorian novelist’s favorite mode, by a romance between a political aid (Josh) and his future lover and political semi-rival (Amy). This romance itself is a dizzying display of the counter-didactic style’s frequent vacillations between the public and private spheres. On the one hand, you have an articulate debate on the tensions between international diplomacy and efforts to limit sex trafficking. On the other, you have a conversation about Amy’s balloon animals, Josh’s fear of feminist art, and various sexually charged acting mannerisms that climax in Amy throwing a water balloon at Josh’s head.

But then, if some of the hallmark techniques of counter-didacticism seem to harmonize educational and narrative choices, as a mode the counter-didactic is inherently uncomfortable and self-conflicted. Even the Amy-Josh romance, which builds on the political tension sexually as it builds on the romantic tension educationally, ends up showing over and over the problematic nature of such a smooth integration of the erotic and the political. The president’s educational forays in this episode, too, are not

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62 Two episodes later, we are made aware of the awkwardness of the resolution by a plot-arch where Josh searches for political conflict in order to date Amy. Ultimately, the ploy works, but not without some readerly disgust on Amy’s part at the nakedness of the artistic device: “is it possible you are so addled that you’ve constructed some nonsense problem so that you’d have an excuse to see me?” When she kisses him, it is after making the classical disavowal of language didactic artists are so drawn to: “you know, not so much for you with the talking.” The fact
sufficiently entertained through boredom and a change of subject. Rather, he comes to be explicitly criticized for the inhumanity of his abstraction: as an aid asks him for help with a particular veteran’s wheelchair problem, he waxes philosophical on Medicaid and the history of “red-tape,” entirely forgetting the issue at hand and dismissing the aid without solving it. Then another character explicitly admonishes him for his abstraction, and he apologizes repeatedly. Add to this characters telling C.J. to stop talking about the women of Qumar, and a political debate ending on the bitter note: “ah, the rare valid point,” and you end up with arguably the greatest Hollywood artist of counter-didacticism not resting on the laurels of his devices. Didactic disavowal giveth, and didactic disavowal taketh away.

Unfortunately, at times counter-didactic disclaimers are not enough to excuse the author from overwhelming his show with sermonizing. This is the case with The Newsroom, where the sermonic is attacked from the first episode, but the political vitriol and moralizing tone still dominates throughout. It is not enough that from the first episode the lead character tells her co-star/lover contemptuously: “you know what you left out of your sermon?” and he himself refers to his opening speech as “a bad reaction to vertigo medicine.” The show has to genuinely let those speeches go for the stories to breath. In The West Wing Sorkin made a valiant effort to prove his classical novelistic disclaimer (repeated in practically every interview when he is asked): “I am not writing politically, I write characters that happen to have political views.” The Newsroom retains the device, but loses its spirit; whereas the extraordinarily successful show introduced both sides of the political equation as intelligent and well-meaning, this one accords its Republican voices neither. A key scene of The West Wing had its star democratic speech-

that the show had to wait for Sorkin to leave before it had anything resembling a lasting romance suggests just how difficult the two modes were to reconcile. Amy and Josh never end up in a real relationship because politics always gets in the way, a good meta-allegory for the show’s own romantic woes.

As Huffington Post’s Maureen Ryan articulates perhaps the most unanimous view of a show on television (certainly, of any of the shows I follow): “The Newsroom doesn’t work in part because it is never content to make a point: It feels the need to hit the audience over the head with each point, gild the point, outline it in neon and then underline it fifty times with thick sharpie.” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maureen-ryan/the-newsroom-review-aaron-sorkin-hbo_b_1609544.html)

This despite the fact that Sorkin made his hero, Will Mcavoy, a putative Republican, in large part because Will extraordinarily holds no recognizable Republican views. The show itself debunks this when Will is repeatedly attacked for being a RHINO (Republican in Name Only). The question a minor character asks Will: “do you call yourself a Republican so that you can make a claim to credibility when you attack the GOP?” very much unveils
writer “whooped” by a novice Republican; no scene of The Newsroom has its star proven wrong, and even in the exceptional case that a political antagonist momentarily silences Will for his bullying style, the interview ends with the character having to admit he is wrong. Thus, season 1 episode 6, after Will’s co-anchor begs him to verbally “stop hitting” his debating victim, that person yells: “shut up! How dare you reduce me to the color of my skin, or my sexual orientation…” In The West Wing, this would have carried the point, but here the protagonist’s authority is not allowed one precious moment of wavering. So, in a scene that probably should have ended with Will flummoxed at his own insensitivity, we end with Mcavoy forcing a gay Santorum supporter to confess that Santorum does not think he is qualified to teach because he is gay. In the four seasons Sorkin wrote his political blockbuster, the Democratic protagonists are shown to be wrong, uncertain, and confused on dozens of occasions. In three failed seasons of the Newsroom, Mcavoy does not lose a single argument or show any ideological frailty, and herein lies the artistic challenge of the show.

**Attack the Oil! Donald Trump as an Aesthetic Experience**

But the greatest danger of the mix of politics and art is never really bad art. When art is overly political, at worse you end up with boring drama. No, the greatest danger, Dickens teaches us, is when the political turns novelistic, when you have a candidate move from a career in Reality T.V. directly to the presidential nomination. Donald Trump is now the Republican nominee. Since we haven’t had an election where a major party nominee lost by more than 5 points in several decades, and General Election polls have him practically tied with Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump is almost as likely to be the next president of the United States as he is not. All the pundits, left and right, have been puzzled by these facts; how does a man who suggests banning Muslims, avoiding Mexican immigrants because they are rapists, and all but

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Sorkin’s strategy in choosing Mcavoy’s political affiliation. Will’s answer further underscores the problem, identifying as “Republican ideas” generic value statements it is hard to associate with a party line: “I call myself a Republican because I believe in market solutions and keeping our country safe.” This then gives him yet another opportunity to villainize his party: “problem is now I have to be homophobic. I have to count the number of times people go to church, I have to deny facts…”

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heckles any political figure that comes across his radar, how is such a man winning, how can such a man possibly win?

The general thesis, that he is winning because he appeals to the darkest recesses of the human psyche, our xenophobic, misogynist, fascist instincts, is at best partially true. Partially true because he is hardly the first to do so, and in fact is not even unique in doing so this Republican primary. Instead, I’d like to propose a radically different thesis, the thesis that The Donald is winning not because his voters are racists and misinformed – though they often are – but rather, because he is something of a literary genius, or at least an idiot savant. Since Shakespeare I do not think we have had native users of the English language take such licentious freedoms with it, and this is why he is winning. He is winning as a novelist rather than a politician, and his popularity is aesthetic rather than ideological. “I know the words, I have the best words,” Trump said, like the sublime fiction writer that he is. In many ways, he is right.

What are these “best words,” what are the aesthetic principles by which we might be electing the next president? First, our love for the unique and unknown. To quote Goethe, stories are good insofar as they deal with the “unheard of.” Donald Trump achieves a literal version of this by uttering sentences that no one has ever heard the likes of, partly because they transcend grammar, partly because they transcend common sense, and partly because they transcend the common meaning of words, in effect making them entirely new. Consider the quote titling this section, alongside a couple of other quotes I particularly love:

“We gotta attack the oil!”

“I own the water. “

“I am so much – so much.”

Partly, we see here language yielding to Trump’s unique vision — like all great artists, Trump is
a visionary, and in his vision his grandeur eliminates the distinction between fluid natural resources, like water and oil, and concrete property that you can attack and own. Suppose that Trump said “Syria’s Oil,” “Iran’s oil,” somebody’s oil, and he might still be a politician articulating a foreign policy. But he sees oil as The Oil, a definite article malleable to his will. Narcissism is hardly a nuance in politics, but the English language has never seen such an artist of narcissism. Compare the last quote with a more mundane, banal version of narcissism: “I am so much better at running a country than they are.” Any of Trump’s opponents could utter such a sentence. But none of them has the novelistic narcissistic greatness to see that they are so much of so many different things, so great in every possible respect that the sentence really need not have the object. If Trump were a literary character, we would study him for ages as one of the best articulated characters; I suspect the media’s obsession with him is precisely that. So far, we as consumers, the press as producer and seller of news, have had to settle for people confining themselves to the politically plausible. With Donald Trump, we finally can enjoy a political character, whose eccentricity can only be matched by the finest of Dickensian caricatures, if those.

But Trump’s novelistic appeal is far greater than his marvelous enslavement of the English language. On the contrary, Trump combines the best of both schools of the novel’s aesthetics, the Idealist (exceptional, eccentric characters) school of literature and the Realist. Realism, more than anything else, is infatuated with sincerity and authenticity, with a sense that we must present things as we see them. “He speaks his mind,” countless voters have said in praise of Trump, as if no candidate has ever spoken anything akin to his mind before. But consider the art of The Donald, and you will find that it is more sincere than anything we have seen in politics, at least

65 For a very nice piece on just how successful Trump has been in dominating the public interest, see fivethirtyeight’s “How Trump Hacked the Media” (http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-donald-trump-hacked-the-media/)
by one major measuring-stick of authenticity. Normally, by speaking of their values and positions politicians regularly risk their every statement looking like it caters to voters, and is thus disingenuous. Enter Trump, with statements that could never be made to curry favor with any political group, and you have a diabolic form of authenticity: Be it “Would you look at that face? Who’s gonna vote for that face?”; or the bar-crawl worthy “he’s a pussy. He’s lucky he’s got big ears to cover all his sweat – never seen anyone sweat so much in my life”; or that ultimate gesture towards his previous role in WWE: “I’d like to punch him in the face.” Nearly every speech contains a statement no one would expect anyone to make unless they are truly thinking it. Trump’s near-manic stream-of-consciousness thus gives viewers a dizzying sense that here is not a politician framing his words, not even a person trying to communicate, but a mind openly pouring its thoughts with no filter whatsoever. It will not take long before Trump is studied in the tradition of Joyce and Woolf.

In the process of turning an aesthetic experience into a presidential campaign, Trump is overcoming, albeit in narcissistic form, the greatest challenge facing the political novelist, of making the abstract concrete, taking ideas from the realm of the intellect to the realm of the senses. In politics, regular politicians usually try to achieve a détente between policy and personality by alternating between value statements and personal anecdotes: “I know how important unions are, and I will fight for unions; my gremma was a union worker, my grandfather laid sheet metal…” But Trump’s art possessing the unique vision that all problems will be solved by his greatness and will, he is capable of mingling the concrete with the abstract in a way seldom seen before:

“We [e.g. I] will build a wall, and the Mexicans and Canadians are gonna pay for it. We’re gonna get our workers back, and China is going to pay for it.”
Practically every Republican wants to build a fence/wall, and most Americans want the more vague “secure borders,” but only a narcissistic visionary can conceive of making another country pay for it without so much as consulting its heads of state. During a recent debate, Trump was asked how he would make Mexico pay when its former president lampooned this absurdity. To many, this obstacle of common sense would be insurmountable. But not to the novelist, who did not just repeat his statement, but added a literary flare: “I’ll make them pay for the wall, and you know what? The Wall just got ten feet taller!”

Immigration policy is an issue of tremendous complexity, but to the man who thinks he owns the world’s most common natural resource it is a mere matter of strength of will. It is extraordinarily hard to see how immigration reform will fix illegal immigration, but introduce to the mind a leader who is larger than nations and the most abstract policy becomes extremely concrete. Pundits say Trump lacks policy substance, and while they are correct on a political level, on a literary level Trump is nothing but substance, and the easiest substance to comprehend, his own flesh. He is so much.

“Boring – You’ve Got to Trump it Up!”

According to my research, the most common measuring stick Victorians used for their novelists’ abilities was their commercial success. In this sense, Trump is likely the most successful politician in American history, commanding unprecedented media attention and ratings. But

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66 Trollope’s autobiographical concession to Dickens’ quality based on the size of his audience is not merely the most prominent example of this. It is an example whose tone suggests the centrality of that view. Any brief survey of Victorian reviews will find that opinion echoed, though of course with some characteristic ambivalence, across the genre.

67 The most consolidated piece of evidence for this is an article by fivethirtyeight titled “How Trump Hacked the Media” (http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-donald-trump-hacked-the-media/). The sheer percentage of Trump top News Headlines are staggering. When Fox recently thanked Trump for “bestowing” a town-hall appearance on the channel, that deferential tone was well-placed. (http://deadline.com/2016/04/donald-trump-town-hall-greta-van-susteren-megyn-kelly-fox-special-1201744459/). Even the most liberally coded media, MSNBC, has fallen amorous with Trump’s entertainment value; as a reporter on the Trump campaign for that channel recently said: “when we
Trump is a novelist in a deeper sense, too; he has a novelist’s disdain for the boredom of political discourse, and a novelist’s joy in entertaining masses without strict regard to the factual or real. Consider the following quote, in which Trump admits to his own narratorial flexibility as well as a counter-didactic rejection of the pedantry of politics: “at some point I’m gonna be so presidential you people will be so bored, and I’ll come back as a presidential person and instead of ten thousand people I’ll have a hundred and fifty, but they’ll say: “but boy, he really looks presidential.” His campaign explicitly states, in response to this comment, that like a narrator Trump is merely “projecting an image for a purpose and you’ll see a different guy when he needs to be.” 68 Judged by political standards, there is something horrifying to a president equating “presidential” with “boring” and openly admitting to saying things he would not necessarily believe. Judged by novelistic standards, this is precisely what we have seen throughout the dissertation, only moved to an entirely different arena. When Trump is asked about his misogynist statements, he defends his practice as one of “entertainment,” just as many a fiction writer would. It is hard to gauge what a general election battle between a politician and a novelist will look like, but what is obvious from the last year or so is that the novelist will command our (media) attention with outrageous plot-twists, a new prose style and a fine-tuned sense of our guilty reading pleasures.

Just how comprehensive is Trump’s victory as a novelist over political discourse? I believe a Colbert-Stewart December 2015 sketch answers that question with less irony than might be expected. 69In the sketch, Jon Stewart crashes a Colbert monologue to talk about a bill reauthorizing health benefits for 9/11 first-aid respondents. As Stewart starts talking through the

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68 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4cMbPTjuOA
69 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHHQ9WdFekc
bill, Colbert interrupts him with the traditional takedown of political discourse: “Boring!... that’s got no zazz.” Colbert then proceeds to treat Trump as the standard bearer of his aversion to the dryness of political discourse.

No one is going to listen to you, unless you, I don’t know how to put this – Trump it up a little bit. You gotta Trump it up! Face it, Jon, the media won’t pay attention to anything, it won’t pay attention to anything at all, unless you are Donald Trump. [pulling out an orange wig] I keep one by in case I ever have anything important to say. Do you want the attention or not, Jon?

Stewart then goes through several iterations until he manages a good Trump impersonation, and indeed sounds most entertaining when he does so. Why is this dissertation important, a reader may well ask? Because understanding the novelistic aversion to dry didactic discourse might be the key to explaining the most inexplicable of American political success stories.
Works Cited


