

James Buzard

“The Country of the Plague”:

Anticulture and Autoethnography in Dickens’s 1850s

This short paper proposes to consider the transition from *Bleak House* (1852-53) to *Little Dorrit* (1856-57) as a phase of particular significance in Dickens’s debate with himself over the claims, benefits, and pitfalls of national and wider forms of belonging. I elide *Hard Times* because it seems to me that with the composition of *Bleak House* Dickens had definitively arrived at the conviction that the twenty-number monthly novel was that one of his novelistic forms best suited to sustained exploration and testing of capacious social networks making claims upon individuals’ identification and loyalty. In *Bleak House* – as I have argued in *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* – Dickens responds to the false universalism of the Great Exhibition of 1851 by producing his most restrictively “national” of novels, programmatically and demonstratively shutting out a wider world in order to produce an image of Britain that negatively foreshadows the kind of autarkic, autotelic fantasies of single cultures associated with the classic functionalist ethnography of the early twentieth century, as practiced by such luminaries as Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas. “Negatively” is key here, since as I see it anticipations of ethnography in nineteenth-century British (autoethnographic<sup>1</sup>) fiction typically involve representation of the nation as “a form of *anticulture* whose features define by opposition the ideals [later] attributed to genuine cultures” (Buzard, *Disorienting* 21). Whereas the fast-disappearing genuine

culture of ethnographic literature was credited with the integrated totality of “a sturdy plant growth, each remotest leaf and twig of which is organically fed by the sap at the core” (Sapir 90-93), Britain’s culture vouchsafed in *Bleak House* and exemplified in the tentacular Court of Chancery presents “a state of disastrous and inescapable interconnection,” “a culture-like vision of social totality that is simply marked with a minus sign” (Buzard, *Disorienting* 21).

In *Little Dorrit* – as Amanda Anderson has argued in *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* – Dickens seemed ready to question the cordoned-off, airtight container of the single British nation he had labored to render across the twenty numbers of *Bleak House*, and to embark upon exploration of the possibilities of a productive cosmopolitanism. I am impressed and mainly convinced by Anderson’s deft argument, but I miss in it the function of the anticultural as a catalyst of ethnographic imagination, and what seems most important to me in the transition Dickens was making from the one colossal novel of the 1850s to the other is his increased interest in problematizing the linked questions of whether a novel passionately concerned with Britain’s national wellbeing needed to be exclusively national in focus, whether the audience consuming his serialized work over a considerable duration should be thought of as a concrete instantiation of the nation itself, and whether “being” national had to mean not being anything else, or anything broader. In *Little Dorrit*, or so I think, Dickens feels his way toward an understanding of what we might call the ecology of local, national, and cosmopolitan identities – a sense of the interdependence of each category upon the others, if each is to have any vital or meaningful embodiment. (He might have learned much in this regard from Charlotte Brontë, whose novels had conducted a

prolonged experimentation in just such an ecology of identity categories [see Buzard, *Disorienting* chs. 6-10].) The category of the anticultural continued to operate in his imagination, for with it he could generate images of *mere* locality, nationality, and cosmopolitanism, conditions uninflected by engagement with the other-than-themselves, against which to gesture toward desired states in which the local, the national, and the universal might achieve symbiosis. To move from *Bleak House* to *Little Dorrit* is to watch Dickens shift his perspective from the deep inside of a particular national community to the wide outside in relation to which that community has its distinctive being – in other words to trace the characteristically autoethnographic movement he also enacted within single works. Where the earlier novel emphasized the definiteness of Britain’s place in the world and the impermeability of its boundaries, the later one pushes so far in the opposite direction that the questions of where the national *is*, and of what separates one place and culture from another, become illuminatingly unanswerable.

In the second chapter of *Little Dorrit*, Arthur Clennam employs a tidy syllogism in attempting to reconcile the restless Mr. Meagles to the fact of their ship being quarantined off Marseilles. To the news that “we shall be out to-day,” Meagles retorts, “Out to-day! ... It’s almost an aggravation of the enormity, that we shall be out to-day. Out! What have we ever been in for?” Acknowledging that there may be “no very strong reason” for their temporary incarceration, Clennam then adds, “But as we come from the East, and as the East is the country of the plague – ” He leaves the conclusion for Meagles to fill in (Dickens, *Little* 30).

Throughout his fiction, Dickens is abidingly interested in boundaries and their role in the making and maintenance of both stories and of sense. Personal names, codes

of behavior, class demarcations, gender norms, communal identities, national frontiers, all are grasped as limits enabling our navigation of a world whose inherent tendency appears to be hostile or at least indifferent to them – a demythologized world of matter tending to relapse into undifferentiatedness and entropy, nowhere more memorably rendered than in the ever-rising mud of the London streets in *Bleak House*. Against the backdrop of a universe in which (again from *Bleak House*) “the death of the sun” seems the only imaginable terminus, each tiny, provisional victory in the struggle to *clear a space* so that one might gain a foothold on it, might assert something of it and so build an edifice of discourse upon it - the type of this activity is Jo the crossing-sweeper’s daily labor – each imposition of a boundary seems heroic, and the sum total of such efforts is the similarly heroic construction of human Culture. As I have argued in *Disorienting Fiction*, the autoethnographic labor performed by Dickens’ fiction is predicated on the conviction that “there can *be* no Civilization, no capital-C Culture, except in the form of ethnographic or small-c cultures, those expandable but finally closed circles of duty that Dickens sees as furnishing the largest aggregates capable of profitably distracting us from our coming aggregation in mud” (Buzard, *Disorienting* 136). I go on to argue there that “Dickens handles the nation in *Bleak House* as the largest organizable space in an entropic universe,” the largest imaginable culture (Buzard, *Disorienting* 116). Yet partly because of the force exerted over his imagination by the prospect of a nontranscendent, merely material universe, Dickens always manages to express the merely provisional nature of culture’s accomplishments, the Sisyphean nature of the work it takes to achieve them, sometimes the exhaustion that comes from contemplating the necessity of beginning that work all over again each day. And sometimes he can even seem to take a

mordant Dionysian joy in undermining the principle of demarcation and individuation he otherwise practices and celebrates (see, e.g., Buzard, “Enumeration”).

Organized around an ambitious national allegory and jealously protective of national integrity, *Bleak House* constitutes, among other things, a massive response to the facile internationalism (and self-congratulatory chauvinism) loudly voiced on the occasion of the Great Exhibition of 1851. Beginning with “LONDON,” it is the most determinedly centralized of Dickens’s novels, more deliberately devoted than any of the others to the task, not just of reforming the national culture, but more fundamentally of *defining it* by rigorous exclusion of all that is not it. That which lies beyond the nation’s meaning-making web is presented as devoid of consequence, as a space where meanings degenerate into nonsense – as indeed they are always threatening to do at home, and are prevented from doing so only by daily devotion to Esther Summerson’s Carlylean ethic of the “circle of duty.” The extra-national in *Bleak House* is registered as an amorphous non-place aptly named by the nonsensical label “Borriboola-Gha.” It is an anomic domain in which appetite trumps self-mastering will (fittingly, the Borriboolan chief sells all of Mrs. Jellyby’s immigrants for rum). The novel’s criminalization of the lone foreigner prominent among its characters – Hortense, who hails from a France associated solely with the bloodlust of the Reign of Terror – seems in keeping with its pursuit of a new Britishness that is, necessarily, multicultural (English, Scottish, and Welsh, each of these involved in the marriage of Esther Summerson and Alan Woodcourt) but that forswears allegiances or ideals reaching beyond the island nation and that stops short of any claims to universality. If industrial superiority and expanding colonies *encouraged* the nineteenth-century British to universalize themselves and their way of life, seeing the

latter as simply equivalent to globally-exportable Civilization itself, novels like *Bleak House* imagined a necessarily demarcated, territorially restricted British culture that turned away from the vertiginous prospect of a Britishness that might just go and be *anywhere*. Such novels understood and acted upon the logic of Caddy Jellyby's petulant, significant phrase, "Anywhere's Nowhere" (Dickens, *Bleak* 59).

In *Little Dorrit*, signs that we may be involved in a reexamination or qualified auto-critique of the earlier novel's defensive nationalism are plentiful from the start. Arthur Clennam's confident and (in more than one sense) *orienting* assertion that "the East is the country of the plague" is, of course, not permitted to stand for long. By the next chapter we are looking, through the eyes of the returned Clennam, at a London (his long-lost "Home," as the chapter-title tells us) that looks "as if the Plague were in the city and the dead-carts were going round," a London where "the ugly South Sea gods in the British Museum might have supposed themselves at home again" (Dickens, *Little* 41). The temporary prison of quarantine at Marseilles, a point of contact between West and East, has given way in the British metropolis to what seems a more lasting condition of collective, national self-incarceration of body and spirit, a condition typified (of course) by Mrs. Clennam's self-incurred paralysis and confinement to her room. Dickens selected China as the place where the newly returned Clennam has spent his last two decades for reasons identical to those that would cause John Stuart Mill to remark, a couple of years later in *On Liberty*, that in "the East" "the despotism of custom is complete" (Mill 86; see also Anderson 72 n. 20). Yet Mill and Dickens before him plainly discerned, and wrote out of the fear of, the creeping paralysis of custom spreading throughout their own society. The Britain of *Little Dorrit*, centered on its various prisons

(the Clennam house, the Marshalsea, the Circumlocution Office), furnishes just the kind of “vision of anticulture” I describe in *Disorienting Fiction*, the protoethnographic rendering of a society that travesties in anticipation those positive portrayals of integrated, self-consistent “genuine cultures” found in classic twentieth-century ethnographies. And Clennam brings into the novel the returnee’s perspective (a degraded or travesty version, to be sure) that I have linked to the “inside-out” autoethnographic effort of many nineteenth-century narrators. Yet from the start of *Little Dorrit* Dickens seems determined to confound the orienting – and conversely the *Occidentalizing* – energy that informs Clennam’s facile definition “the East is the country of the plague.” He seems to want to shove us out the door of our too-comfortable categorical confinements – including, now, national ones – just as he shoves Mr. Dorrit out upon the world in the second half of the novel. For if the plague is here as well as there, if conceptual no less than medical quarantine proves futile, then what is the point of saying that its “country” is either here or there? And if the country of the plague is *everywhere* ....

And what we encounter first of all in *Little Dorrit* might suggest that the novel has aims more or less complementary to those of *Bleak House*. Where that work began with fog, here we begin with a sunlight that lets us see all too well. It is neither the warm, forgiving “summer sun” of *Bleak House*’s Esther, the merciful light she casts on the otherwise forgotten and devalued British souls who come within her purview, nor the “cold sunlight” of that novel’s third-person narrator, which penetrates and exposes to damning view all otherwise neglected corners of Britain’s nationwide moral community. In *Bleak House*, the lights furnished by these two narrators complement each other and

share the burden providing such provisional illumination amidst the fog as a national culture can manage; together they assemble that constitutively divided position of insider's outsideness that enables the autoethnographic perspective. In *Little Dorrit*, however, we confront the "universal stare" of a "blazing" Mediterranean sun, beneath which the port of Marseilles lies "burning" (Dickens, *Little* 15). To hazard the street is "to plunge into a fiery river, and swim for life to the nearest strip of shade" (Dickens, *Little* 16). "Blinds, shutters, curtains, awnings" – inadequate boundaries – "were all closed and drawn to keep out the stare. Grant it but a chink or a keyhole and it shot in like a white-hot arrow. The churches were the freest from it" (Dickens, *Little* 16). The depiction evokes a nightmare version of Plato's Sun, an insistent, unforgiving knowledge that bleaches out differences, obliterates categories, and makes everyone scurry back into their caves of illusion: the comfortably incarcerating holding pens of customary mentality, of received ideas, of creed, race, and nation. This, Dickens appears to suggest, is what the actual "view from nowhere" would be like, the perspective on human affairs that lies completely outside the domain of human culture altogether, rather than the autoethnographically productive, self-estranged gaze of *insider's outsideness* (Buzard, *Disorienting* 12). The London foot-passengers of *Bleak House's* first chapter, who battle each other amidst the rising mud for footholds in the street, have been replaced here by a hybrid population of "Hindoos, Russians, Chinese, Spaniards, Portuguese, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Genoese, Neapolitans, Venetians, Greeks, Turks, descendants from all the builders of Babel, come to trade at Marseilles." One notes here how the list replicates that Dickensian pattern in which boundaries get erected only to fall before the force of some inescapable undermining power: the specification of identities gives way to the



generic label that subsumes them all (“descendants from all the builders of Babel”), and what gets emphasized is the common, the least-common-denominator purpose that accounts for their presence on this site (“come to trade”). All “[seek] the shade alike – taking refuge in any hiding-place from a sea too intensely blue to be looked at, and a sky of purple, set with one great flaming jewel of fire” (Dickens, *Little* 15). Into one such hiding-place, behind one set of protective, delimiting boundaries we dive: into the jail cell shared by Rigaud and Cavalletto, where we find, again in anticipatory travesty of ethnography’s culture, an anticultural uniformity, a single animating spirit suffusing the whole space: “[a] prison taint was on every thing there. The imprisoned air, the imprisoned light, the imprisoned damp, the imprisoned men, were all deteriorated by confinement” (Dickens, *Little* 16). The varieties of outsidership and insidership on offer in this novel, it appears, are equally intolerable, each the ruinous travesty of a desired condition – mobility and rootedness, traveling and dwelling – that each seems destined to become without the positive sustaining pressure of its dialectical opposite.

Dickens proceeds to draw a boundary line down the middle of this apparently self-consistent domain, an internal division that Phiz’s illustration captures well. To the left, by the barred window (and thrusting his arm through it) stands the malevolent Rigaud, looking out at the sunlight; to the right, against a stone archway, sits the more benign Cavalletto. The former, of course, understands and professes himself to be “a cosmopolitan gentleman,” a “citizen of the world” who “own[s] no particular country” (Dickens, *Little* 23); and his doing so inaugurates the novel’s critique of conventional, self-congratulatory cosmopolitanism. Less importunate of notice is the fact that he shares his quarters with a man whose every action declares him to be his opposite, the citizen of

one country. “In his submission, in his lightness, in his good humour, in his short-lived passion, in his easy contentment with hard bread and hard stones, in his ready sleep, in his fits and starts altogether,” Cavalletto reveals himself to be “a true son of the land that gave him birth” (Dickens, *Little* 28). We need not condone the Italian stereotypes Dickens trades in here, but we should consider what is at stake in his employment of them and more particularly in this pairing of cosmopolitan and indigenous characters at the outset of *Little Dorrit*. It seems appropriate, of course, that Rigaud stares out the window and almost appears to be trying to pull himself through it, while Cavalletto sits contentedly enough within the recesses of the chamber. Cosmopolitan self-justification has typically depicted one’s native culture as a prison in which the mind and soul are “fettered at every turn by chains of custom,” “bound by customs regulating the conduct of daily life in all its details” (see Buzard, *Disorienting* 108); the cosmopolitan narrative has tended to be about a one-way journey out of confinement and into the clear ether of free rational discourse. The criticism it has attracted has for its part tended to regard such a journey as entailing betrayal of communal values, to take “citizen of the world” as a contradiction in terms, to attach to the noun “cosmopolite” the adjective “rootless.” This criticism holds that, set free from the pervasive, unwritten social “law” of the single culture, that animating spirit which leaves nothing, not even the most seemingly “spontaneous and motiveless phenomena ... untouched on the score of remoteness or complexity, of minuteness or triviality,” people do not rise up to higher levels of reason and impartiality; they lose all direction save that of self-interest and degenerate into ambulatory appetites. The first thing we see Rigaud doing in this novel is “waiting to be fed” (Dickens, *Little* 16). He is the villainous variation of a model whose first

instantiation in Dickens's oeuvre was in comic guise: the roving, appetitive, name-changing Jingle of *Pickwick Papers*, the unhouseable figure from "No Hall, Nowhere" (Dickens, *Pickwick* 584).

In contrast, Cavalletto, as national or cultural insider, is identified in *Little Dorrit*'s first chapter as someone always, essentially situated in time and place. "I always know what the hour is, and where I am," he tells Rigaud, and he displays his unerring grasp of location by mapping the Mediterranean surroundings (in ever-widening scope) on the floor of the cell.

"I was brought in here at night, and out of a boat, but I know where I am. See here! Marseilles Harbor;" on his knees on the pavement, mapping it all out with a swarthy forefinger; "Toulon (where the galleys are), Spain over there, Algiers over *there*. Creeping away to the left here, Nice. Round by the Cornice to Genoa. Genoa Mole and Harbor. Quarantine Ground. City there; terrace-gardens blushing with the bella donna. Here, Porto Fino. Stand out for Leghorn. Out again for Civita Vecchia. So away to – hey! there's no room for Naples;" he had got to the wall by this time; "but it's all one; it's in there!" (LD 18)

This expanding view he then reverses, zeroing back in upon the central point.

"Judge if I come back from Naples as I went! See here, my master! Civita Vecchia, Leghorn, Porto Fino, Genoa, Cornice, Off Nice (which is in there), Marseilles, you and me." (LD 19)

However well traveled, Cavalletto shows himself here the very master of local knowledge. He already contains the potential to embody that synthesis of insideness and outsideness Dickens ultimately seeks to envision, suggesting in his imaginary journey beyond the cell walls that it is only the insider who can purposefully or valuably go out, only the one who dwells *someplace* who can have an experience worth the name of “travel” (as opposed, say, to vagrancy or vagabondage). As if to remind us of the essentially utopian character of that “culture” imagined in Victorian novels, Dickens begins with this figure whose national homeland, Italy, does not yet exist (in 1856-57) in politically realized form.

In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens has dropped the double narration of *Bleak House*, that potent device by means of which he gave formal weight to the autoethnographic tension between insider’s and outsider’s views in the representation of cultures; but in the later novel he has chosen to begin in such a manner as to make plain his continuing absorption by the ideas associated with cultural insideness and outsideness. The yoking together of Rigaud and Cavalletto in a confined space (so good an idea that Dickens repeats it later in the novel in the shared bedroom of an inn called the Break of Day) is Dickens’s manner of staging that zero-sum game that has been played at least since the Enlightenment, between the self-promotional rhetorics of cosmopolitanism and local knowledge, travel and placed-ness, each asserting its virtues at the other’s expense. The walls will come down, of course, just as the walls of the Clennam house will ultimately collapse. Both characters move beyond the Marseilles prison, both foreigners penetrate Britain and become involved in the “British” plot surrounding the Clennam family secret. Throughout that plot, *Little Dorrit* conducts an inquiry into the possibilities of some other

than tendentiously differential relationship between the ideals of cosmopolitanism and national belonging. “We have not given enough attention to the ecology of cultures,” T.S. Eliot wrote more than half a century ago, in the 1949 lecture series *The Idea of a Christian Society* (*Christianity* 131): a hundred years before Eliot, Dickens was giving studious attention to the matter, attempting to think his way beyond the false dichotomy of the home and the world. That dichotomy continues to confound us, to the extent that we persist in asking such wrong questions as “is the Victorian novel nationalistic, or cosmopolitan?” As I have argued elsewhere, “*culture* as English novels develop it cannot be described as descending exclusively from *either* side of the great Liberal / Antiliberal antinomy of modern Europe: neither ‘French’ free-ranging skeptical rationalism nor ‘German’ rooted romantic nationalism, the evocations of English or British culture in the Victorian novel seek the utopian synthesis of these conditions” (*Disorienting* 50). In the figures of Rigaud, the man of no country who acknowledges no allegiance to anything beyond his own venality, and of Arthur Clennam, the hapless protagonist who seems to have fallen between the two stools, failing to be *either* a vigorous man of the world or a sturdy patriot, Dickens presents us with counterexamples of his ideal, the condition of a subject whose recognition of the claims of national culture might draw vitality from an offsetting recognition of nationality’s place in a world system in which the national – however tempting the subjects of imperial Britain might find it to think otherwise – could not be everywhere. Amy Dorrit’s travels in Italy seem to involve training in the development of just such a viewpoint, and her cosmopolitan experiences go with her when she joins her husband at the novel’s end in going “down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness” amidst the “usual uproar” of their national anticulture (LD

859, 860).

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Louise Pratt is often credited with introducing the term "autoethnography" into critical discourse: see her *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), but also my essay "On Auto-Ethnographic Authority," *Yale Journal of Criticism* (Spring 2003), 61-91.