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THE RECIRCULATION PLOT:  
OBJECTS, NARRATIVE, AND THE SECOND-ORDER ECONOMIES  
OF VICTORIAN FICTION

by

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A dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School–New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Literatures in English

Written under the direction of

Professor John Kucich

And approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

October, 2015

## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

The Recirculation Plot:  
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This dissertation explores the many second-order economies of nineteenth-century Britain—salvage, recycling, black markets, and imperial plunder—and their relationship to the history of plot design in the Victorian novel. Paradoxically, in the era that saw the rise of the industrially produced commodity, stolen and recycled objects were topics of enormous fascination in economic and sociological writing, particularly for the ways in which the materials circulated, transformed, and resurfaced. This project argues that novelists from the 1830s to 1860s, including Edward Bulwer, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Wilkie Collins, drew on these second-order economies to construct increasingly intricate and sensational plots based on materials' circular mobility and patterns of narrative reappearance. The recirculation plot thus contributed to English fiction's development from the loosely plotted, improvisational forms of the Romantic era to the tightly planned novels of the Victorian era. Along the way, these object-based strategies elicited voluble debates about realism, plausibility, and the reading experience of fiction.

This project establishes plot as a medium for seeing the relationship between the material history of reusability and the formal history of narrative design. It thus

demonstrates how thing theory and narratology are mutually illuminating methodologies. Moreover, it uses archival research to challenge the critical tendency to see recuperation as tainted by the stigma of filth.

Chapter 1 argues the Newgate crime novels of the 1830s exploited melodramatic coincidence to imagine urban interconnectedness via the convergence of stolen property and its dispossessed owner. Chapter 2 claims the overpopulated character economy of Dickens's *Bleak House* mimics how rag and paper rubbish undergoes covert shifts in value and visibility across time, a phenomenon that sustains the mechanics of surprise and suspense in his multiplot novels more generally. Chapter 3 demonstrates Gaskell's ambivalence toward the sensationalism of recirculation mechanics; in *Mary Barton* she employs the device with skepticism, while in *Cranford* she converts recurrence into an accumulative structure attuned to the rhythms of domestic handicraft and recycling. Chapter 4 argues that in *The Moonstone* Collins reformats diamond narratives of global dispossession and reappearance within the narratological extravagance specific to the sensation novel genre of the 1860s.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If we're being honest—and at this point, we might as well—the ideas in this dissertation originated at the J. T. Knight scrap metal yard in Columbus, Georgia, where I spent my teenage summers sorting metals for recycling. It struck me that the aluminum cans I processed and sent to the melting plant in May had a decent chance of returning to my sorting bin by August, with a new label and set of fingerprints surely, but perhaps made of the same base material. That, I remember thinking, was a wild idea, and for the most part my intellect stopped there and moved on, I'm sure, to the more pressing concerns of a 15-year-old boy paid under the table and in possession of a Super Nintendo. But since these acknowledgements move chronologically (not unlike this dissertation), I do want to say thanks to my coworkers and customers there—something I know I didn't do much of at the time.

It turned out that weird corner of the economy in the 1990s made a lot more sense to me after I began reading British fiction from the 1800s, and I'm happy to thank Bob Lougy for pointing me down some of the most fascinating lanes and alleys during my early years in graduate school at Penn State.

This project itself would be far inferior and—again, being honest—much less interesting if it weren't for the expert guidance, copious feedback, and good spirit of my director, John Kucich. He has consistently pushed my thinking about objects and narrative form into a higher realm of thought, and for that I'm very grateful. Along the way, he has also taught me an enormous amount about good writing.

Carolyn Williams and David Kurnick have both helped to bring these ideas into sharper focus through feedback on chapter drafts and conference talks as well as in casual

conversation. That they shared it all with great encouragement has made this whole thing much easier. I also want to thank John Plotz, who completes our committee of four and has been extremely generous with his time and expertise as an outside reader.

This is the point at which I circle back—*do you get it? Don't worry, you will soon, if you aren't already warming up your paper shredder, which, by the way, is an implement not unrelated to the topic at hand*—and thank the many other colleagues, friends, and family members who've helped me along the way.

I have so many teachers to thank: Paul Youngquist, who remains the most thrilling professor to speak about Romanticism; Rachel Teukolsky, who helped me love Carlyle; Nicholas Joukovsky, whose editorial chops are as sharp as his Stripey Jack cheeses; Billy Galperin, whose brain I'm always wishing I could borrow; Barry Qualls, whom I aspire toward as a teacher; and Dianne Sadoff, whose early feedback on these ideas first alerted me that I might be onto something.

My graduate student friends at Rutgers have seen me through. Thanks to them all, especially Alex Mazzaferro, Mimi Winnick, Anne Terrill, Caolan Madden, John Miller, Mark DiGiacomo, Sarah Goldfarb, Greg Ellerman, Naomi Levine, Brian Pietras, Fred Solinger, Matt Sherrill, Don Ramon, and Kyle McAuley.

Credit also goes to Jake Hughes, who remains one of my favorite people to talk to about literature, including but not limited to *The Princess Bride*.

Cheryl Robinson and Courtney Borack have been wonderful friends and helpers to me in my six years in the Rutgers English Department, which itself has been a wonderful place to call home. Thanks also to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies; their generous financial support for my research

has made much of this possible. I also want to acknowledge the British Library and the Lilly Library at Indiana University, where two important phases of my research occurred.

An early version of Chapter 2 was published in *ELH* by Johns Hopkins University Press: “Paper Routes: *Bleak House*, Rubbish Theory, and the Character Economy of Realism,” *ELH* 80.3 (Fall 2013): 783–810.

Since things are an important topic here, thanks also to the dollar slices from Percy’s Pizza on Bleecker Street, which kept me fed for cheap during my long days writing this at NYU’s Bobst Library, a place which deserves my appreciation for helping me work in comfort.

Luckily, I am also in possession of many wonderful friends outside of the academic world, many of whom listened to me talk about this research, but more importantly, helped me talk about something else. Extra special thanks are due to some very close friends: Wilds Ogie, Drew Schwartz, and Alex Doyne.

My family—always first-order, never second-order—has provided invaluable support along the way, despite what in retrospect seems like a violation of child labor laws at the scrap metal plant. My love to Mom, Bentley, Dad, Emily, Dick, Cynthia, Blanchette, Gary, Frank, Craig, Dave, my grandparents, and all the dogs and cats that have to put up with them.

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother Dorothy, who passed away during its writing, and to my mom. And since she always insists on saying “I love you *more*” just as I’m hanging up the phone, I’m claiming the advantage of a more permanent medium to say, I love *you* more.

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## Introduction

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### The Recirculation Plot

*“The main ingredient of the ink with which I now write  
was possibly once part of the broken hoop of an old beer barrel.”*  
—George Dodd, *Household Words*, 1852

*“I used to be a plastic bottle.”*  
—Whole Foods Tote Bag, 2011

Behind much waste is the prospect of recycling, behind much stolen property the intent to resell. Such economies, Victorian fiction teaches us, provide spectacular mechanics for narrative.

From the 1830s to 1860s, novelists in Britain developed new ways of telling stories by incorporating the erratic and wondrous objects that recirculated in economies peripheral to commodity markets. In forms ranging from resold contraband to pawned clothing to repurposed household scraps, these objects furnished authors with circuits of movement through which to construct increasingly complex and sensational plots. In the pages that follow, I ask how and why this coevolution of literary things and narrative structure occurred. How exactly did plotting change when it encountered the era’s

preoccupation with recirculation—the recursive, often covert and sometimes criminal, economic cycles of the material world? And how, moreover, did the experience of reading fiction change with it?

Readers of Victorian novels never have to look far for stolen diamonds or salvaged rubbish, but criticism of these objects has tended to concentrate on their metaphorical and ideological meanings at the expense of understanding their role in plotting. Pawned tea sets signify a loss of domestic comfort. Recycled rags highlight bourgeois anxieties about disease transmission. What this dissertation argues, however, is that our sense of recirculation's importance remains incomplete without attention to how these economic materials function in the internal architecture of plot particular to the nineteenth-century novel. I begin, then, with what at first seems like a modest claim: early- and mid-Victorian novelists were prone to using things as elaborate plot devices for coordinating character networks across time and space and creating dramatic force through repetition and reappearance. Paper valentines return as murderous pistol wadding. Stolen handkerchiefs resurface in secondhand street markets. Gabriel Betteredge, the butler and narrator of Wilkie Collins's mystery novel *The Moonstone* (1868), offers something close to a theory for this design, in fact: "Persons and Things do turn up so vexatiously in this life, and will in a manner insist on being noticed."<sup>1</sup> However, as I'll argue, the import of this pattern is anything but modest, for it is part of a historically contingent, internally intricate design that will take us from gemological manuals and urban tourist guides all the way to contemporary debates on the science and art of novel construction. Plotting is the means by which an author integrates economic pathways, each particular to an object category, into the kinetic arrangement of incidents that

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, ed. Sandra Kempt (New York: Penguin, 1998), 34.

constitutes its story. In this way, recirculating objects drive experimentation with structural form and, as we'll see, those forms' affective engagement with readers—"vexatious" being only one of many responses readers might have.

The tactics proved rousing because material flux found such a welcome home in what the realist novel was evolving into: an elaborate, tightly planned form invested in exploring characters' interaction with the vibrant world of things. Like others in their society, Victorian novelists saw energy and matter flows as circular, as part of a system based on recuperation that took place in both visible and invisible phases. The authors that this project focuses on are those who looked at this material dynamism and saw in it an inherently narrative process. Each in his or her different way, Edward Bulwer, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Wilkie Collins integrated the logic of recirculation into their storytelling fabric by way of objects that move into, out of, and back into narrative visibility, borne along through the circuits of second-order economies. The degree of integration is essential here, since these novels remain stories centered on characters, not objects. What I call "the recirculation plot" involves the narrative subordination of object circuits into the novel's greater structure so that they are visible for limited stretches or in partial ways. The scheme complemented or worked alongside Victorian authors' favorite arcs: the marriage plot, the orphan plot, and the inheritance plot. Circular object plots live within these linear character plots. Sometimes things' returns are eagerly anticipated, sometimes unforeseen. The recirculation plot amplifies the formal dynamism of novels that often are already precariously arabesque in design. Thomas Hardy, an author resistant to such elaborate plotting, characterized this form as "intricately inwrought."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Desperate Remedies* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), 1. Hardy is in fact describing his own book's plot, but *Desperate Remedies*, his first published novel, is the exception in his



Those who did practice this inwrought design worked their object narratives into the greater design by making them intermittently apparent and latent.

It's helpful to think of the recirculation plot as the partial digestion of the it-narrative into the mystery novel form. In it-narratives, the popular eighteenth-century genre, objects circulate in similarly wide and surprising ways. However, the texts are narrated *by* the actual objects, who keep the reader abreast of their perambulations in a first-person perspective. The thing, perhaps a coin or feather, is at once the protagonist, narrator, and object. However, Victorian novelists like Dickens and Collins embedded this dynamic of variable movement into their intricate structure, capitalizing, in fact, on the convoluted effect it created. By deferring or obfuscating the significance and backstories of these objects, authors learned to exploit recirculation as a potent mystery device. It's a feature that powers the plots of a wide variety of subgenres, including Newgate, industrial, domestic, sensation, and detective novels. By interweaving these circuits into their plots, novelists endowed things with the force of surprise and suspense when they return—the fundamental readerly affects of plot-driven fiction in the nineteenth century.

Here, then, is the temporal scheme shared by both recirculatory economies and a large set of Victorian novels: material transformation across time and space, structured internally by phases of recurrence that are often unpredictable for external observers. (It's an inexact homology, of course, and, as we'll see, that inexactness creates many of the most interesting textual effects.) I stipulate this as a large set rather than all because, as I've alluded to before, I'm describing novels that feature what Roland Barthes would call

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oeuvre. Looking back on his 1871 novel in a new 1889 preface, he disavowed his use of mystery devices. See Chapter 4 for more.

a highly developed “hermeneutic code,” texts structured by enigmas in the form of physical objects, which disappear and stir about in the story’s interstices, awaiting their unveiling within the linearity of narrative sequence.<sup>3</sup> Although second-order economies exist all throughout nineteenth-century fiction, they’re by no means always employed for deeply laid hermeneutical purposes. Raided strongboxes in Anthony Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871–73), secondhand stores in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), a Parliament building full of compost in William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890)—however much these economic nexuses signify in each novel’s story, they don’t propel a mystery plot. By contrast, novels using the recirculation plot are those known for more sensational incidents—*Paul Clifford*’s (1830) melodrama of highway robbery, for example, or *Bleak House*’s (1852–53) forensic mysteries concerning *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*. To design these types of novels, authors exploited and modernized a family of plot devices that, by their nature, expressed partly invisible or surprising relationships: the gothic recurrence of buried histories, the coincidental meetings of melodrama, the intersecting but circumscribed perspectives of multiplot narration, and the forensic speculation of detective fiction.

This dissertation grew from two linked observations gathered from historical research: on the one hand, I realized nineteenth-century literary writing *needed* certain objects to tell the stories it wanted to, and on the other, I discovered the era’s nonliterary writing described recirculation in terms that were already plotted. In economic and sociological texts, *there is already a narrative formalism at work*. The kinetics of plotting

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<sup>3</sup> See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). About this code’s relation to temporality, Barthes writes, “[H]ermeneutic terms structure the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution. . . . The variety of these terms (their inventive range) attests to the considerable labor the discourse must accomplish if it hopes to *arrest* the enigma, to keep it open” (75–76).

hums within. These second-order economies—covert, changeable, and wondrous—possess an inherent intrigue. The imaginative play exists across a wide variety of historical sources, finding its way even into the most technical accounts. Take, for example, P. L. Simmonds’s *Waste Products and Undeveloped Substances* (1862), a landmark manual of industrial chemistry that describes the process by which clothing deteriorates across time into rags, and then, via industrial reconstitution, is recycled into fresh paper. Amidst the scientific detail, Simmonds indulges in a widespread trope in economic writing on recirculation: he reorients the point of view from an omniscient scientific one to a limited human one, thereby making the material cycle visible only in certain stages. The empirical thus becomes extraordinary. “What a singular history we have here!” he writes. “The ball-dress of a lady drops into the rag-basket, and reappears as a *billet-doux* [love letter]; disappears again to reappear once more in the drawing-room of the nursery, as a workbox or a doll.”<sup>4</sup> Now reframed in a perspective resembling that of a mystery novel, rags’ disappearances and reappearances in different forms take on fresh narrative verve, emerging unexpectedly in new social contexts.

Although the last fifty years have given us many historicist perspectives for analyzing materiality’s relation to literature, I found none of these could fully account for what was happening with this shape-shifting doll. Moreover—and more to the point—I found none could explain why these “singular histories” were so prevalent in Victorian novels. To explain recirculation as both a historical and formal phenomenon, we’ll first need to move away from criticism’s prevailing fixation on reading recuperation in terms of filth, and thus mainly in terms of the ideologies of class and transgression that

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<sup>4</sup> P. L. Simmonds, *Waste Products and Undeveloped Substances: or, Hints for Enterprise in Neglected Fields* (London: Robert Hardwicke, 1862), 7.

accompany it. We'll also need to reorient the recent work in Victorian thing theory, which has succeeded in unearthing complex object histories but too often stops short of showing their relevance to narrative form. This project aims to do just that.

My license for these methodological demands comes from what Victorian writing itself has left us. When historical documents provide literature with “context” about a second-order economy, part of that is its kinetic logic. By examining this inbuilt narrativity—the formal sequences that structure how things move through a particular economy—we gain a more insightful and historicized sense of plot devices. As a unit of literary study, the plot device has long been saddled by unflattering associations—as the crutch of mediocre writers, the focus of lowbrow readers, or the specialty of an outdated brand of structuralism. If this project indulges at times in close analyses of such devices, it's because they illuminate widespread experimentation with circular plotting, as well as voluble conversation by contemporary readers on its merits. Second-order economies provide a window into the psychic experience, then and now, of reading fiction in the golden age of the highly plotted novel.<sup>5</sup> As we'll see, this is also a window onto a vigorous but understudied debate among novelists and critics about the role of objects in storytelling and, more broadly, the uses and abuses of plot.

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To understand the recirculation plot, we first need to understand the historical meaning of *recirculation* (the process), along with the linked idea of a *second-order economy* (the system). The two concepts shine light on important distinctions within

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<sup>5</sup> This evaluation of plotted fiction's historical zenith is not quite a critical truism, but it almost is. Regardless, Peter Brooks provides one of the persuasive arguments for this thesis of plotting's golden age, which featured a rigorous exploration of plot's frontiers and its potential to articulate psychic meaning through design. See Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984).

Victorian economics as well as recent trends in literary criticism. First of all, a definition: recirculation identifies the process by which an object moves through an economic channel that is, or promises to be, recursive, circular, or metamorphic. This final quality—the reconstitution of old materials into new forms—describes what we now call recycling, although this term emerged only in the twentieth century and did so in the context of the environmentalist movement.<sup>6</sup> I will nevertheless use it at times, with unbashful anachronism. The goal here is not a positivist account of economic discourse, but a sense of the narrative processes embedded in these discourses. I instate recirculation as the master term for similar reasons. I use it not because it was particularly common in the era—it existed, but Victorians tended to use more specific words like reconversion, remanufacture, and reuse—but because its capaciousness allows us to see the fundamental principles of movement that animate a variety of economies. The group includes black markets, imperial plunder, barter, secondhand trade, pawning, rubbish salvage, and industrial recycling. Analyzing these topics individually would indeed produce a more in-depth historicist study than my own, but the approach would be limited in its ability to address large questions of literary history and form.

With that said, these various recirculatory economies do share a set of essential characteristics in Victorian Britain. First, they throw into question the idea of stable possession and physical form by emphasizing the frequency and unpredictability of change. Second, they draw attention to the subjective ways in which humans experience objective movement, such as the nostalgia for lost things or the feverish curiosity of tracking their fate. Finally, they serve as material links between disparate social groups

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<sup>6</sup> The *OED* cites the first use of “recycle” as 1925. It evolves alongside the environmentalist movement, whereas nineteenth-century recycling practices are entrepreneurial, part of good business.

who otherwise remain separate—a butcher and barrister, for instance, the former using the discarded litigation notes of the latter to wrap up a lamb shank.

All of these economies are second-order in the sense that they're peripheral to, resistant to, or only partly integrated with the normative consumerism at the heart of nineteenth-century market culture (that is, the first-order economy). The logic of capitalist mass production is linear, structured around the production-consumption dyad. Its general line follows the sequence from industrial manufacture to commercial sale to human consumption and, finally, either to obsolescence or permanent ownership. Second-order economies don't hew to this linearity. Their process is recirculatory. Second-order doesn't necessarily mean entirely separate from the conventional market economy of consumerist Britain, though. Some objects, like secondhand goods, likely originated as commodities; others may swerve into a market economy after longer periods of underground trade. Many influential texts document this overlap. Even in landmark entrepreneurial studies of capitalist production, including Charles Babbage's *The Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* (1832), readers encounter discussions of the many things that "have not yet completed their useful course"—one example being worn-out saucepans which manufacturers can convert to black dye for calico cotton.<sup>7</sup> Other texts capture recirculation as more alien and disruptive to the middle-class economy. The most detailed of these is Henry Mayhew's four-volume study of the streets, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861), which devotes hundreds of pages to not only the city's secondhand salesmen but its criminal classes. Here, Mayhew chronicles the "extensive machineries for the receiving of stolen property," prior to its being

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* (London: Charles Knight, 1832), 10.

unloaded at pawnshops or, if sterling silver, its being melted down and resold to unscrupulous jewelers.<sup>8</sup> Second-order economies intersected with first-order commodity markets in many ways, but they remained distinctive enough to be their own sources of fascination—to economists and sociologists, of course, but equally to novelists.

Recognizing Victorian culture's own extensive categories of circular economies opens up new terrain for the literary analysis of objects, which, up to this point, has been dominated by studies of commodity culture. There exists a long line of historical and literary criticism that has placed the shiny, fetishized commodity at the center of Victorians' lived experience. And surely, given the output of factories, the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the efflorescence of advertising, it's not unreasonable for Thomas Richards to describe the manufactured commodity as "the centerpiece of everyday life, and the focal point of all representation, the dead center of the modern world."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a large set of literary critics working in a materialist tradition—including the likes of Jeff Nunokawa, Andrew Miller, and Catherine Gallagher—have succeeded in tracking the commodity's invasive presence into the formal and ideological curvatures of Victorian fiction.<sup>10</sup> In Miller's account, for example, "the Victorian novel provides us with the most graphic and enduring images of the power of commodities to

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols. (New York: Dover, 1968), 4:373.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), 1. See also Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> See Jeff Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994); Andrew Miller, *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995); and Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).

To this list, which necessarily remains selective, I would also add Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Modern Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), a book more on the history of subjectivity than on literature itself; and Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008).

affect the varied activities and attitudes of individual and social experience.”<sup>11</sup> Studies in this tradition find their payoff by focusing intently on topics like window shopping, consumer desire, and alienated labor. But that focus has tended to flatten out the vibrancy and complexity of recirculation.

Those studies that have looked deeply into this world have generally fixated on one particular aspect of it: the filth that sometimes accompanies recirculation. Book titles tell the story in miniature: *History of Shit*, *Dirty Old London*, *Filth*, *Cleansing the City*.<sup>12</sup> Critics of the novel have been particularly fascinated by how dirt and disease act as tropes for codifying or challenging class and gender boundaries, a phenomenon especially prevalent in urban fiction. The interest exists in a variety of literary methodologies, from psychoanalysis to New Historicism to studies of the grotesque inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>13</sup> For example, within this third methodology is Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s celebrated study, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), which reads Victorian debates on sanitation and circulation in terms of class formation: “The bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as ‘low’—as dirty, repulsive, noisy,

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<sup>11</sup> Miller, *Novels behind Glass*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> See Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Lee Jackson, *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2014); William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, eds. *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2005); Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> This line of criticism owes inspiration to theorists who connect filth to the emotion of disgust and the state of abjection. See especially Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982); and Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1985). New Historicist work on filth owes its most significant debt to Michel Foucault’s analyses of state ideologies concerning public health. See Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1831–67* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995) for an example of this approach to Victorian filth and class. See also Ellen Handy, “Dust Piles and Damp Pavements: Excrement, Repression, and the Victorian City in Photography and Literature,” in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 111–33.



contaminating.”<sup>14</sup> In these traditions, squalor either performs the ideological work of containment or symbolizes abstract qualities like deviant sexuality. Many excellent arguments have emerged, but the approach has occluded other features of waste, especially those affiliated with narrative form. One wonders whether the steady attention to filth exists because as literary critics we have the privileged disciplinary position of being able to dig into it without ever actually getting our hands dirty. When textual mediation sanitizes a taboo, critical fetishization is especially durable. Regardless, there remains a pressing need to understand literary economies that aren’t conventionally bourgeois without immediately resorting to the heuristic of squalor.

We might call this “the *Our Mutual Friend* effect.” Ask any Victorianist about reusability, and they’ll point you to Dickens’s final completed novel, one famously full of dust mounds, river cadavers, and, depending on whom you ask, human excrement.<sup>15</sup> The fact that a semi-famous dispute occurred in the 1950s and 60s about whether *Our Mutual Friend*’s dust piles contained human feces (“night soil,” euphemistically) goes a long way toward showing how attention can be attracted, almost magnetically, toward grime and dirt—often to the exclusion of more significant features.<sup>16</sup> Later critics have been more canny. In one of the best studies of filth, William Cohen and Ryan Johnson explore Victorian filth’s “double nature,” as “both dangerously polluting and bounteously providing,” hovering between the fear of contamination and the exhilaration of

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), 195.

<sup>15</sup> Michelle Allen concisely describes this truism: “*Our Mutual Friend* is a novel surely best remembered for its filth” (Allen, *Cleansing the City*, 86).

<sup>16</sup> For a review of this debate, see Harvey P. Sucksmith, “The Dust-Heaps in *Our Mutual Friend*,” *Essays in Criticism* 22.2 (1973): 206–212.

reusability.<sup>17</sup> However, once we begin to open up the category of recirculation to the many second-order economies that exist apart from the dust pile, we begin to see that while filth is indeed a complex phenomenon, its overexposure has led to the neglect of other modes. It has also produced a false equivalence between rubbish and filth that has been difficult to dislodge. What, we must ask, of recirculation's complex instantiation in Dickens's many other novels? More broadly, what of the handicrafts that women made out of household scraps in their own parlors? What of the dozens of manufacturing techniques developed in the century that found second and third lives for metal, cotton, and grain?

The often-relied-upon maxim about filth is Mary Douglas's anthropological one: "Dirt is matter out of place."<sup>18</sup> But the concept's prehistory, mostly forgotten, is in nineteenth-century recuperative economics. According to Douglas, dirt throws into relief cultural taboos and boundaries, especially those related to social rituals and physical bodies. It's a wise and portable idea that literary materialists turn to often, myself included. But it's also one with a complicated Victorian evolution worth examining. Douglas was revising an aphorism that dates back to at least the mid nineteenth century, when it was invoked, often optimistically, in reference to capitalizing on the world's material cyclicity. "I have heard it said that dirt is nothing but a thing in a wrong place," Lord Palmerston said to the Royal Agricultural Society in 1852. "[I]t is a law of nature that nothing is destroyed. Matter is decomposed, but only for the purpose of again

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<sup>17</sup> William A. Cohen, "Introduction," in Cohen and Ryan Johnson, eds., *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2005), xvii.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 44.

assuming some new form, useful for the purposes of the human race.”<sup>19</sup> The concept appears in generalist forums, too. For example, an 1859 *Chambers’s Journal* article titled “Nothing Lost” begins with Palmerston’s quote before proceeding to describe dozens of objects—glass, bones, grain, metal, cloth—that can be reutilized to “commence a new career of usefulness.”<sup>20</sup>

What do we make of the fact that Douglas’s thesis, now widely acknowledged as “the starting point for any modern theory of dirt,” appears less a starting point than an evolutionary branch of an older idea?<sup>21</sup> On one hand, Victorian second-order economies do indeed shine light on the anthropological and psychic constructs Douglas and others have flagged. These dimensions are essential to the recirculation plot. After all, objects that repeatedly pass hands are prone to accruing complex social meanings, given that their itinerant paths lead them through several phenomenal fields. On the other hand, the fact that Douglas’s maxim evolved from agricultural and entrepreneurial contexts should serve as a clarion call for questioning our own tendency to assume we accurately comprehend material objects simply because those objects still exist today. We often need to consult the archive to understand what second-order economies looked like and, most importantly, how Victorians perceived and wrote about them.

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Some nineteenth-century recirculatory patterns appear alien to us in the twenty-first century, while others seem remarkably familiar. Street scavenging has and hasn’t changed: bone-grubbers no longer gather animal bones to sell to matchstick makers

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<sup>19</sup> “The Royal Agricultural Society,” *Times* 21169 (July 16, 1852), 8.

<sup>20</sup> “Nothing Lost,” *Chambers’s Journal* 294 (Aug. 20, 1859): 118–19. Although Palmerston himself seems to have been repeating a common aphorism, this article grants him original attribution. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas cites the American psychologist William James as her inspiration.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, “Introduction,” in Cohen and Johnson, eds., *Filth*, xi.

looking for phosphorus, but canners still collect aluminum cans for scrap metal recyclers.<sup>22</sup> I doubt any readers have ever had a snuffbox swiped from their pockets, but it wouldn't be surprising if they've lost a cell phone that way. Possessions stolen today might pass through an underground fencing den similar to those of Victorian England, or they might not. They're perhaps just as likely to reappear in semi-anonymous digital marketplaces, the sort of websites to which dutiful police officers now direct you—"I'd keep an eye on eBay"—if your car radio is ever stolen. As twenty-first-century readers, we fortunately can appreciate the general contours of Victorian second-order economies; a dutiful policeman in 1840 might've advised you to check London's Fleet Street dealers to trace your filched handkerchief. We retain a readerly sensitivity, both intellectual and visceral, to surprises and contingencies when we encounter recirculation integrated into novels' plots. But there is a limit. In their details these Victorian systems remain strange, often bewildering. What, for example, is the modern equivalent of repurposing a love letter for pistol wadding? In other words, historical research remains essential for recovering the kinetic and social dynamics that authors were drawing upon during the time of composition.

This dissertation is a beneficiary of the last decade's work in what has become a household name in Victorianist circles: thing theory. The perspective helpfully justifies historicist inquiry into economic history as a fruitful starting point for understanding literary recirculation. In particular, it has usefully disrupted our protocols for interpreting the glut of objects we encounter in realist description. However, I'll show how much of

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, this aluminum can recycling economy is the subject of a recent HBO documentary: *Redemption*, dir. Jon Alpert and Matthew O'Neill, 2013.

this criticism has neglected things' deep entanglement in *narrative structure*, a dynamic that contemporary readers were much more attuned to than we are today.

Thing theory begins by recognizing the often-overlooked influence and complexity of the material world, and it does so by differentiating between objects, which passively gather meaning through a subject's use of them, and things, which have an ontological or economic agency and identity of their own. Martin Heidegger, the original thing theorist, labeled things as "self-supporting."<sup>23</sup> Recent work in sociology and political science by figures including Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett has gone so far as to posit "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."<sup>24</sup> In literary studies, thing theory received its official initiation—or at least its first rigorous theorization—through the work of the Americanist Bill Brown. Things, according to Brown and the many who've come after him, are the materials that exist outside of the subject-object relational field: objects become things when they don't work as they're supposed to, can't be read through the capitalist logic of commodification and ownership, or exist at the intersection between clear categories.<sup>25</sup>

Elaine Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things* (2006), the most influential recent study of Victorian literary things, challenges the foundational Marxian idea of commodity culture, while also proposing an unconventional strategy for making historical sense of

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger was also the most idiosyncratic. His essay "The Thing" features passages such as this one on a water jug: "The jug presences as a thing. The jug is the jug as a thing. But how does the thing presence? The thing things. Thinging gathers" (174). See Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 165–86.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2010), 6. Bruno Latour calls such things "actants." He examines how they are network agents in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> See Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996); Brown, "Thing Theory," in *Things*, ed. Brown (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), 1–21; and Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), which describes itself as "'a book about the indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like'" (13).

the surfeit of objects in realist fiction. Via painstaking archival research, Freedgood first demonstrates that generalist periodicals and books included widespread, detailed accounts of finished products' economic backstories—their raw materials, labor practices, production methods, and more. She thereby proposes that the early- and mid-Victorian era was defined less by commodity culture and its abstraction of origins and labor than by a “thing culture” of more industrial transparency and consumer curiosity.<sup>26</sup> What this means is that things in novels elicited a set of metonymic connections for the original readers that modern readers no longer have access to. Today we still pay attention to significant objects marked as metaphors for character traits or themes, but we otherwise tend to read the crowded thing world as insignificant backdrop whose function is simply to signal verisimilitude—what Roland Barthes famously called “the reality effect.”<sup>27</sup> Freedgood proposes a different way of reading these seemingly irrelevant things according to “a strong, literalizing metonymy,” which aims to understand their synchronic meanings outside of the text, thus revealing cultural knowledge lost to us but not to Victorians. We thereby gain the insight, for example, that mahogany furniture in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* points to the actual history of deforestation and slavery in the Americas, something the book never depicts outright.<sup>28</sup> The critic can then return to

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<sup>26</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 142.

<sup>27</sup> See Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 141–48. Barthes argues that the material contents of realist description “finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of ‘the real’ (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; . . . the *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity” (148).

<sup>28</sup> Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 17. For another example of this approach, see Suzanne Daly, *The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2011). About her approach, Daly writes, “Material histories give us glimpses of human histories, stories of exploitation and agency that the novels will not tell but cannot leave alone either” (5).

conventional metaphorical questions of character and theme with “a new radiance or resonance of meaning.”<sup>29</sup>

From this perspective, realism as a mode looks different, but novels as a form don't. Much thing theory stops short of asking how object histories come to bear on the narrative structures unique to novels, and moreover those unique to Victorian ones. I'm grateful for how this work has justified deep dives into the archives; I undertake similar ones in each chapter to unearth popular texts on recirculation. However, there is a great difference in how *realism* works as a descriptive aesthetic and how *novels* work as a system of temporality and incident—those plot features that make narrative fiction *narrative*. If “strong, literalizing metonymy” teaches us about novels, then it's mainly because Victorian fiction is the quintessential container for realist description. Despite thing theory's use of rhetorical terminology, it is a fundamentally historicist method of reading, not formalist.

*The Recirculation Plot* joins recent studies by John Plotz and Talia Schaffer in investigating the history of things in order to understand the history of novelistic form.<sup>30</sup> These critics assume a model of novel writing in which authors consciously work through the connections between actual things, literary things, narrative form, and readers. Critics like Plotz and Schaffer do perform careful historical research on literary objects, but on those that novels highlight as significant, not those that sit within the descriptive background. They thus combine thing theory's deep historicism with a sensitivity to the problems authors were actively working through. In these accounts, novelistic objects

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<sup>29</sup> Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> See John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008); and Talia Schaffer, *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011).

function not by obscuring history, but by infusing it into narrative. In *Portable Property* (2008) Plotz argues, “The English novel between 1830 and 1870 was defined by its obsession with objects represented as problematically endowed with sentimental and fiscal value simultaneously.” He tracks this as a particular problem with English objects circulating in imperial zones, a problem that becomes entangled with genre: “the quest was on for ways to represent the far-flung movements of household treasures as antithetical to the simple exchange of commodities.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Schaffer’s *Novel Craft* (2011) examines the relationship between the tropes of the domestic novel and the history of women’s handicrafts, including creations of paper, concluding in the case of paper that “Handicraft helps writers imagine scenes of paper production in which they work out the values governing their own text.”<sup>32</sup>

Each of my chapters undertakes similar historicist probing but progresses toward issues more focused on narrative theory. The archive on recirculatory economies reveals how texts describe objects in terms of movement, transformation, and humans’ intermittent view of them; Victorian novels incorporate these economic channels as half-buried plot strands in their arabesque curvatures of linked incidents. On a narratological level, it’s possible to historicize plot devices with a granular specificity during this zenith epoch of plot-driven fiction, including the Newgate novels of the 1830s, the entire career of Dickens, the early novels of Gaskell, and the sensation novels of the 1860s, particularly Wilkie Collins’s. Structural plot components—some inherited like narrative coincidence, some newly developed like multiplot narration—evolve during this era as novelists experimented with recirculation to coordinate causation between the world of

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<sup>31</sup> Plotz, *Portable Property*, 7, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Schaffer, *Novel Craft*, 19.



characters and objects across the temporal fabric. These objects are not static or stationary. They move about, accumulate, change functions, disappear for long stretches, and drive plots. They enable epiphanies, endanger characters, unite parents and orphans, create reversals of fortunes, and reflexively critique the very plotting that they enable. In characters and readers, they elicit horror, dread, vexation, disgust, confusion, nostalgia, yearning, relief, joy, and closure. Given this array of effects, recirculation's preeminence as a technical strategy derives from its versatility in intellectually and emotionally engaging the reader. Outlined technically, the device appears fairly straightforward: objects that move into and out of focus via recirculation channels. Considered phenomenologically, its complexity intensifies.

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Structuralist narratology—a field rarely coupled with materialist studies—furnishes a more precise language for understanding this relationship between technical design and reading phenomenology. The recirculation device is a particular version of a temporal scheme narratologists have long been interested in: the author's introduction of details whose full significance or function is deferred until their later reemergence in the narrative. It goes by several different names, including prolepsis, foreshadowing, cataphora, and enigma, but the most relevant for our purposes is the “seed,” or the author's act of “seeding.” Gerard Genette divides seeding into two different formal categories based on the reader's level of attentiveness when she first encounters a seeded detail. The first is the “advance notice,” a narrative detail whose presentation explicitly alerts the reader that it has significance and is likely to return later. For the time, though, its exact importance is left unclear. The reader's reaction to this is *anticipation* and

*suspense*, the first being an active response, the second a mental state. The advance notice creates curiosity—a speculative expectation of what the detail might do or mean based on limited clues.<sup>33</sup> Its reappearance brings the resolution of this suspense. Genette’s second category is the “advance mention,” a detail whose narrative significance is unmarked at first mention. The advance mention does *not* rouse the reader’s anticipation; it appears insignificant. In the case of an object, it may appear as any other detail within a descriptive background. Thus, when the object returns, it is sudden and unexpected but nevertheless recognizable, and it therefore elicits the reader’s reaction of *surprise*, often accompanied by awe at the story’s inbuilt circularity, hitherto unperceived.<sup>34</sup>

The advance mention is especially useful for helping us see how highly deliberate plotting, narrative temporality, and reader engagement come to bear on the “seed” category, of which most recirculating objects are part. Here is Genette’s elaboration:

[T]he advance mention is thus in general, at its place in the text, only an ‘insignificant seed,’ and even an imperceptible one, whose importance as a seed will not be recognized until later, and retrospectively. But we must consider the possible (or rather the variable) narrative *competence* of the reader, arising from practice, which enables him both to decipher more and more quickly the narrative code in general or the code appropriate to a particular genre of a particular work, and also to identify the ‘seeds’ as they appear.<sup>35</sup>

By establishing a descriptive fabric early, an author has a variety of seeds that he or she can then promote to a functional status—that is, to a *plot device* integral to the chain of incidents despite first appearing as inconsequential. The return of the advance mention is

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<sup>33</sup> Some critics call advance notices “cataphors.” See, for example, Hans J. Wulff, “Suspense and the Influence of Cataphora on Viewers’ Expectations,” in *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*, ed. Peter Vorderer, Hans J. Wulff, and Mike Friedrichson (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996), 1–17.

<sup>34</sup> In his analysis of detective novel in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Tzvetan Todorov similarly differentiates between the readerly effects of curiosity and suspense. See Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 47.

<sup>35</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), 76–77.

arguably the most shocking application of recirculation. It channels a gothic energy by staging the return of the repressed (or forgotten) to activate the uncanny, seemingly supernatural energies of recurrence. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) uses it with particular flash. Halfway through the novel, Mary comes to the devastating epiphany that her father has committed murder. That epiphany arrives when she finds the paper wadding from the discharged murder weapon, a scrap ripped from a valentine card given to her many months before by her suitor Jem Wilson, and then used to transcribe a poem by her father's request. Once a romantic memento so inconsequential that she writes over it, the parchment returns as a telltale scrap, "that dread terrible piece of paper!"—charred, but bearing the recognizable writing. The reader often experiences this return in empathetic concert with the horrified character, both having been denied by the narrator foreknowledge of its return. We, like Mary, are "petrified by some horror abruptly disclosed."<sup>36</sup>

Variation exists in different readers' responses, though. Much depends on the novelist's mastery of the advance mention. (*Mary Barton* accomplishes it masterfully; *Paul Clifford* is more ham-fisted.) As Genette also notes, the reader's familiarity with the author and genre matters: the recognition experience can fall somewhere between the tremendous shock of an unforeseen epiphany and the self-congratulatory satisfaction of having predicted it all along. Experienced readers of Victorian fiction, then and now, tend to be more vigilant when encountering the chronotopes and objects through which the recirculation plot is most likely to travel: pawnshops, fencing dens, personal hoards, lending libraries, dust piles; clothing, jewelry, love letters, mementos.

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<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. Macdonald Daly (New York: Penguin, 1996), 242, 239.

Victorian novelists *actively and deliberately* manipulated this field of potential futures in which things could be backdrop (ambient description), mildly consequential (part of an episode only), or plot devices-in-waiting (the structural link between incidents). I emphasize the deliberateness for a few reasons. First, there is the question of how we as formal-historicist critics select objects upon which to dilate. When a novelist promotes an object to functional status, he or she gives us good reason to home in on it, to seek out its economic history, and to analyze how it undergirds the novel's kinetic plotting. Much work in thing theory, on the other hand, is based on intentionally tracking the things authors don't focus on. The approach reveals how meaning lurks within passing references, but it struggles with a methodological conundrum: how do we know which things to pluck from ambient description and subject to historicist interrogation? Thing theory is driven by the stimulating but impossible fantasy that, if we had time, *all* objects in a novel could be tracked into the archives for their metonymic life outside the text. (Novels wouldn't really resemble novels after this, though.) Second, I want to affirm the commonsense notion that authors exercised a degree of conscious control over their plotting and representation of materiality. Such a claim might've been dismissed as naïve during the heyday of New Historicism in the 1980s and 90s, but I take heart in the recent and various studies (sometimes under the banner of "Cultural Neoformalism" or "New Formalism") that return to questions of intention and form via a historical lens.<sup>37</sup> The premise of deliberate shaping neither implies novelists were unimpeachable craftsmen always delivering on their intention, nor argues they were free of ideological forces, some

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<sup>37</sup> One of the first and most influential studies in this vein is Susan Wolfson's *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997). She argues that romantic-era poets debated and experimented with poetic form in conscious ways that New Historicism has dismissed in its rush to political judgment.

of which were pernicious. The most convincing justification for this positions comes from the large archive of Victorian critical writing, many by authors themselves, on the work of plotting.

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Despite the abiding assumption that the early and mid Victorians either didn't theorize the novel at all or did so naïvely, a sizable body of evidence shows that there was regular debate on questions of description, plotting, and objects in narrative fiction. In fact, the narratological study of recirculation dates back at least to Edward Bulwer and his early-career writings. The most developed discussion lies in his 1838 essay "On Art in Fiction," a little-read text today despite its being "one of the most important critical documents of the period," according to Richard Stang's magisterial study of the pre-Henry James era of English novel theory.<sup>38</sup> One of the barriers to critical attention is the essay's unfamiliar rhetoric and audience: much of it reads as a prescriptive handbook for aspiring novelists, and thus much of it doesn't appear at first to be literary criticism in the way we now define it.<sup>39</sup> In the essay, Bulwer underscores the importance of preconceived design—the skeletal planning of incident and theme that must occur *before* writing the actual novel. He concludes the essay by endorsing the structural dynamic at the heart of the recirculation plot: seeding objects that can then resurface in the novel's climax ("catastrophe" is his preferred term) as unforeseen agents in the fate of the characters, which powerfully manipulates the reader's affective response:

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1959), 11.

<sup>39</sup> It assumes, that is, literary success is a matter of rigorous training rather than inherent genius. Mary Stewart Atwell studies the history of these two model of authorial process in "The Craft of Fiction: Teaching Technique, 1850–1930," PhD Dissertation, Washington University in St. Louis (2013). She writes, "it is impossible to exaggerate the originality of [Bulwer's] project. In 1838, when "On Art in Fiction" was published, very few people were talking about fiction in these terms" (80).

In [novels], it will often be highly artistical to revive for the consummating effect, many slight details—incidents the author had but dimly shadowed out—mysteries, that you had judged, till then, he had forgotten to clear up; and to bring a thousand rivulets, that had seemed merely introduced to relieve or adorn the way, into the rapid gulf which closes over all. The effect of this has a charm not derived from mere trick, but from its fidelity to the natural and lifelike order of events. What more common in the actual world than that the great crises of our fate are influenced and coloured, not so much by the incidents and persons, but *by many things of remote date, or of seeming insignificance*. The feather the eagle carelessly sheds by the wayside plumes the shaft that transfixes him.<sup>40</sup>

Bulwer argues for the versatility of novelistic description—note that he explicitly emphasizes “things” over “incidents and persons”—by highlighting how authors can revive objects to influence a character’s fate. The “charm” he speaks of is an early theorization of reader response to plot structure. (His claim about its fidelity to real life is a problem I take up in Chapter 1.) As Nicholas Dames argues, the majority of Victorian novel criticism—most of which has gone unexamined in modern criticism—focused on the relationship of narrative arrangement and reader response: “A skilled constructor of fiction will know what order of events, or what rhythm, will produce the readerly response she seeks; ‘construction’ is, therefore, a union of narrative sequence and readerly affect.”<sup>41</sup> Bulwer’s metaphor of the eagle’s molted feather reappearing to assist in its death by arrow is an allegory for the recyclical construction of the pre-conceived novel as well as its affective signature.

Furthermore, Bulwer’s discussion underscores how Victorian interpretive interests in material description differ from our own preoccupations in recent decades.

Granted, Bulwer’s “Things of remote date, or of seeming insignificance” are, in a word,

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<sup>40</sup> Edward Bulwer Lytton, “On Art in Fiction,” in *Nineteenth-Century British Novelists on the Novel*, ed. George Leonard Barnett (New York: Meredith, 1971), 108. Emphasis added. Bulwer’s essay originally appeared in two parts in the first two issues of the *Monthly Chronicle* (1:1–2 [Mar-Apr 1838]), which he edited.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Dames, “Realism and Theories of the Novel,” in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Volume 3: The Nineteenth-Century Novel, 1820–1880*, ed. John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 297.

the very things that make up Genette's advance mentions. (That alone is reason enough for this text to be canonized.) But the overwhelming majority of modern commentators on things of "seeming insignificance" in fiction engage not with Genette but with the tradition established by Barthes's essay "The Reality Effect" (1968) and the historicist revisions that ensued. Following Barthes's famous reading of Flaubert's barometer—which signifies only the generic illusion of reality, which is, after all, full of inconsequential objects—many critics have come forward to argue for the barometer's more complex meaning. Both Marxist critics and thing theorists have insisted that objects like the barometer possess a symbolic or ideological meaning. This debate centers on how objects hover on the boundary between reality effect and metaphorical object.<sup>42</sup> Yet Victorian readers were more attuned to how novelists use object plots to intentionally exploit a different boundary: the one between reality effect and functional object, the one that Bulwer highlights with the eagle's feather. Is it simply a molted feather, or will it also be a tragic implement of the bird's death? Readers in this era consumed fiction with a set of anticipations and sensitivities different than our own, or at least differently prioritized, oriented toward different thresholds. One benefit of stipulating my materials to only second-order economies is that we can identify coherent lines of development

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<sup>42</sup> Significant challenges to Barthes's notion of the reality effect include Frederic Jameson, "The Realist Floor-Plan," in *Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), 373–83, a Marxist reading of capitalist ideology inhering in bourgeois paraphernalia like barometers; and the previously mentioned thing theory arguments of Brown (*The Material Unconscious*, esp. 15–19) and Freedgood (*The Ideas in Things*, esp. 9–12).

The widespread influence of Barthes's reality effect argument has minimized his more structural (both structuralist and poststructuralist) analyses of insignificance. "The 'soul' of any function," he wrote in 1966, "is, as it were, its seedlike quality, which enables the function to inseminate the narrative with an element that will later come to maturity, on the same level, or elsewhere on another level" (244). See Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" *New Literary History* 6.2 (1975): 237–72. Later, in *S/Z*, he elaborates on the narrative "enigma" as a particular type of seed.

within a large-scale evolution of the “revived slight detail” across several decades, authors, and genres of fiction.

“On Art in Fiction” and a wide variety of other critical sources, many in periodical book reviews, influenced and recorded the novel’s development from the loosely plotted, improvisational forms of the Romantic era to the tightly planned novels of the Victorian era. Although preconceived design and what Bulwer termed “the technical arrangement of incidents” did not necessarily require a materialist circulation network, objects played an important role in many writers’ designs, beginning with the crime novels of Bulwer, Dickens, and William Harrison Ainsworth in the 1830s.<sup>43</sup> It is telling that *Paul Clifford*, one of Bulwer’s first and arguably his most influential novel, uses the rediscovery of stolen possessions, those that have disappeared in black market economies, to orchestrate the coincidences required for the exoneration of its hero. Few novelists overtly meditated on Bulwer’s techniques, although later in his life Mary Elizabeth Braddon would find in him one of the few midcentury figures willing to discuss technical craft, which they did in private correspondence, much of which is unfortunately lost.<sup>44</sup> The most outspoken early adopter of the technique is a figure sometimes overlooked for national reasons. Edgar Allen Poe read, published on, and employed Bulwer’s “preconceived design” throughout the 1840s with explicit acknowledgment to the author’s influence. Poe’s unique style was one of structural precision guided by the “seminal concept of arranging a deliberately integrated composition for giving a unified, overall impression or effect to a literary or dramatic work.”<sup>45</sup> The concept was essential

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<sup>43</sup> Bulwer Lytton, “On Art in Fiction,” 95.

<sup>44</sup> For an examination of those that remain, see Atwell, “The Craft of Fiction,” 80–93.

<sup>45</sup> Burton R. Pollin, “Bulwer-Lytton’s Influence on Poe’s Works and Ideas, Especially for an Author’s ‘Preconceived Design,’” *The Edgar Allen Poe Review* 1.1 (2000): 7.



to his innovations as the first writer of detective stories, a genre that requires the maximum degree of preconception.

But more than any other author, Charles Dickens stands as the most influential practitioner of the recirculation plot and the one who tied it to second-order economies most intimately. Dickens, an early admirer of Bulwer, would go on to use recurrent objects for a variety of plot twists and reversals of fortune, from *Oliver Twist*'s secondhand suits and pawned lockets to *Our Mutual Friend*'s dust mound siftings and lost wills. His famously involuted novels rely on wayfaring things, materials intermittently concealed by narration. (He even wrote stand-alone it-narratives, which he published in his weekly periodicals.) In many of his novels, not simply *Our Mutual Friend*, second-order economies set the fundamental conditions for his renowned use of revelation and suspense. In others, he borrows the logic of his object economies and maps them onto his character worlds, which, because of their sprawling size, come to operate as their own formal economies constituted by suspense and surprise. *Bleak House* (1852–53), the focus of Chapter 2, is the most panoramic version of this pattern. It is this plotted dynamism—what has otherwise been called Dickens's "frenetic urban melodrama," his use of the "maximum of abrupt points and perspectives"<sup>46</sup>—that comprises his originality as well as his intertextual influence on other novelists. Although Dickens himself wrote almost no explicit theory about narrative form, his management of objects, characters, and their churning interaction provides an invaluable window onto his and others' strategies for crafting narratives as symphonic wholes.

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<sup>46</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Novel Violence: A Narratology of Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 24; and Robert Caserio, *Plot, Story and the Novel: From Dickens and Poe to the Modern Period* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), 71. For a contemporary discussion of tension as a signature of Dickens's construction, see R. H. Hutton, "The Tension of Charles Dickens," *Spectator* (Sept. 16, 1872): 156.

Bulwer, Gaskell, and Collins were all part of what some refer to as the “Dickens circle.”<sup>47</sup> One way of seeing the coherence of these novelists is to recognize Dickens’s status as a professional and editorial center of gravity, though not necessarily always a welcome one. Another way is to identify how novelists adopted, modified, and in some cases subverted the recirculation plot as they developed their own unique styles and generic commitments. Bulwer, as I’ve said, influenced Dickens in this respect, but Dickens would eclipse him by midcentury. Gaskell had one of the most complex responses to Dickens’s formal influence—a dialectical one of influence and rebellion. As Chapter 3 explains, her first novel *Mary Barton*, an industrial novel–cum–murder-mystery, utilizes the advance notice trope for spectacular effect in the pistol-wadding event we examined before. But it becomes clear she did so with reluctance, finding it necessary for her forensic storyline but woefully inadequate for capturing the emotional nuances of women’s domesticity. Soon after, in *Cranford*, she would demote it to the object of parody and instead experiment with recirculation as expressing the pleasures of regular accumulation rather than abrupt spectacularity.

By contrast, Dickens’s imprint takes a more positive shape in the sensation novels of the 1860s, particularly in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*, the subject of Chapter 4. In fact, Dickens and Collins, two of the era’s greatest orchestrators of object narratives, used to discuss whether plots of surprise or plots of suspense were superior storytelling strategies. Dickens preferred surprise and using objects as advance mentions, while Collins leaned toward suspense and using them as advance notices. Collins, that is, preferred to introduce material clues *as clues*, as things to pay close attention to. Reading

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<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, J. W. T. Ley, *The Dickens Circle: A Narrative of the Novelist’s Friendships* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1919).

a novel like *The Moonstone* is an experience of protracted, mounting suspense that derives from the vagaries of recirculation. It's a useful distinction—the advance mention versus the notice—and a helpful heuristic for us, but the dichotomy ends up being too simplistic of course. Despite preferences, neither author relied on only one technique. The story of plot-driven fiction in the Victorian era is the story of hybrid styles incorporating both surprise and suspense.

In response to these practices of plotting, a reductive but powerful binary emerged in which readers grouped books into novels of plot and novels of character (also known as sensational novels and non-sensational). Because second-order economies were the materials for highly plotted incidents, they often fueled these conversations. Anthony Trollope, who admitted as a reader and writer to preferring character delineation over incident, acknowledged the label's importance to his and others' reputations, despite its oversimplification:

Among English novels of the present day, and among English novelists, a great division is made. There are sensational novels and anti-sensational, sensational novelists and anti-sensational, sensational readers and anti-sensational. The novelists who are considered to be anti-sensational are generally called realistic. I am realistic. My friend Wilkie Collins is generally supposed to be sensational. The readers who prefer the one are supposed to take delight in the elucidation of character. Those who hold by the other are charmed by the continuation and gradual development of a plot.<sup>48</sup>

This popular line of thinking had the effect of coalescing the Dickens circle despite the internal inconsistencies since novelists and critics used the binary as a mark of distinction (both difference and pride) for those *not* in it. Although the binary often collapses, Walter

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<sup>48</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 226–27. Henry James makes the same point about this oversimplification in “The Art of Fiction,” but his example of an incident is a woman standing up and looking at you: “What is an incident but the illustration of character? . . . It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look at you in a certain way.” (James, “The Art of Fiction,” *Longman's Magazine* 4.23 [Sept. 1884]: 509). Clearly, there are qualitative differences here. The issue of stratification between plot-driven and character-driven fiction is also taken up in E. S. Dallas's *The Gay Science* (1866), through an analysis of the sensation novels of the 1860s.

Scott, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Henry James, and sometimes George Eliot served as counterweights to the practitioners of the recirculation plot.

“Plot” itself was not the problem—narrative requires it, of course—so much as what many saw as the inorganic or ostentatious use of it. “Incident” became a favorite pejorative term among critics, referring to plotting that authors had enhanced artificially with melodramatic events that didn’t follow the organic evolution of character and story.<sup>49</sup> Narrative progress that was harnessed to circulating objects was for the most part grouped in with this category of artificial incident, even if it did derive from what Bulwer would defend as a legitimate “thing of remote date” which the author had carefully seeded. Over and over again, recirculation opened up thorny questions of realism and probability. Those with a preference for novels of character pointed to the distasteful visibility of narrative mechanics and construction. The issue was the conspicuousness of plotting not plot. Critics often disparaged plotting as lower class by likening it to a type of manual labor, in contrast to character delineation as an expression of highbrow artistry. George Henry Lewes complained of Balzac’s “scaffolding”; Trollope complained he could “never lose the taste of the construction” when reading Wilkie Collins’s books; and the critic Henry Mansel characterized Braddon as a “builder” whose “skill . . . deserves to be employed on better materials.”<sup>50</sup>

Even terms like “craft” and “craftsmanship” typically referred to the constructedness of novels, rather than their belletristic artistry and point of view, the

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<sup>49</sup> See Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England*, 129, for a discussion of “action” (plot that emerges *ab intra*) and “imported incident” (*ab extra*).

<sup>50</sup> George Henry Lewes, “Balzac and George Sand,” quoted in Atwell, “The Craft of Fiction,” 10; H. L. Mansel, “Sensation Novels,” *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863): 491; and Anthony Trollope, *Autobiography* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 257.

formal criteria later established by James and his critical champion Percy Lubbock.<sup>51</sup> “Craft” in other words shared space with synonyms like “workmanship,” “construction,” and “technical arrangement.” The accusation that the early and mid-Victorians had no theory of novelistic form derives in part because of these lexical differences. The birth of modern narrative theory emerged in an era deeply suspicious of the type of preconceived plotting Bulwer, Dickens, Collins, and others prized so highly. True artists need no blueprints, no vocational language for diagramming plot.<sup>52</sup> “To pot with plot,” E. M. Forrester says in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), referring to intricate webs of causation and connection. “[B]reak it up, boil it down . . . All that is prearranged is false.”<sup>53</sup>

The question of objects as agents repeatedly leads to these debates in the period. (It arguably still leads to them today.<sup>54</sup>) My broadest argument here is that recirculation is a privileged window onto questions of how novelists should construct stories, what role objects should have in those plots, and what readers should expect from the experience of fiction. The literary study of second-order economies is no mere micro-project, however fascinating a topic like rag recycling is on the local level of economic history. This fascination, I admit, is where I began, and it drove my working query: what set of cultural values drive these novels’ approaches to recycling? But these systems revealed themselves to also be pathways, new conduits, for giving meaningful shape to the

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<sup>51</sup> About this difference in criticism, Nicholas Dames writes “It might be said, in fact, that ‘order’—a synonym for ‘construction’—was to the Victorian period what such technical terms as ‘point of view’ and ‘distance’ were to the twentieth.” See Dames, “Realism and Theories of the Novel,” 298.

<sup>52</sup> By the mid twentieth century, structuralist narratology would embrace technical language, developing a highly schematic jargon. Its evolution doesn’t trace back to Victorian critics, though: ahistorical in nature, it suffers from an almost complete lack of awareness about nineteenth-century precursors.

<sup>53</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1927), 152.

<sup>54</sup> The elite literati’s backlash to the success of *The Goldfinch* (2013), Donna Tartt’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel demonstrates my point. For a discussion of the complaints against its use of objects and far-fetched plotting, see Evgenia Peretz, “It’s Tartt—But is it Art?” *Vanity Fair* (July 2014): n.p.

energies of modern narrative. Objects, I found, galvanize a type of energy inherent to plot and integral to its allure for readers—an energy that psychoanalytic criticism has long understood better than materialist. More than any other critic, Peter Brooks has his finger on this pulse:

If we can accept the idea of a textual energetics, we can see that in any well-plotted novel the energies released and aroused in the text, especially in its early moments, will not be lost: the text is a kind of thermodynamic plenum, obeying the law of the conservation of energy (as well, no doubt, as the law of entropy). Repetition is clearly a major operative principle of the system, shaping energy, giving it perceptible form, form that the text and the reader can work with in the construction of thematic wholes and narrative orders.<sup>55</sup>

My own sense of Victorian fiction's kineticism and laws of conservation are surely more concrete, more literal than Brooks's, even if we are after the same shaping energies. What the reader should keep in mind is that the Victorian recirculation plot organizes, materializes, and exploits the textual energetics that other narrative schemes register more in more abstract ways.

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My chapters proceed in roughly chronological order, each examining a different type of second-order economy in a set of texts linked by author or subgenre. Chapter 1 takes up the relationship between stolen goods in urban markets and the use of melodramatic coincidence in the controversial Newgate novels of the 1830s, including Bulwer's *Paul Clifford* (1830), Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), and Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1839–40). A recurring sequence is the theft of property, its fencing, resale in black markets or secondhand stores, and the original owner's reencounter with his or her possession. These novels exploited melodramatic coincidence to coordinate these

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<sup>55</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 123. For an excellent account of Victorian physics, the *actual* thermodynamic plenum, and narrative form, see Tina Young Choi, "Forms of Closure: The First Law of Thermodynamics and Victorian Narrative," *ELH* 74 (2007): 301–22.

convergences and to heighten the shocking, sensational nature of the return. By making theft a central narrative device linking beginning, middle, and end, Newgate fiction's black markets helped to usher in the post-Romantic era of the structurally unified novel. Pilfered handkerchiefs, snuff boxes, and more afford the novels an uncanny vision of social totality in which criminal and non-criminal handle the same materials despite not mingling socially. I examine London guidebooks, criminal studies, and popular ephemera to contextualize this circular logic and to show how writers were analyzing crime in terms of urban probability, a nascent discourse that sat uneasily beside melodrama. Here we find the germ of the question about recirculation plots and verisimilitude. On one hand, Newgate novels referenced actual underground urban markets to verify their plotting as plausible, but on the other, they sensationalized those acts of verification—a pattern which threw into relief the fantasies and limits of their plotting's realism.

Dickens would remain fascinated with stolen things' stories for his entire career, but he imagined the connections of disparate people and mysteries of urban life through many other recirculation modes. Chapter 2 extends the study of Dickens into his great multiplot novels of the 1850s and 60s, focusing its reading on *Bleak House* (1852–53). It is, famously, a novel about paper waste and, slightly less famously, a novel about the ragged, destitute populations of London. Through research on the contemporary process of producing new paper from old cotton rags, I first demonstrate how the novel's preoccupation with paper's many life stages reveals how its mystery plot relies on the regenerative rag-to-paper process. I then contend that Dickens models the novel's famously large character cast according to this regenerative system; he transposes his model of economic rubbish onto what I theorize as his character economy—the dynamic

organization of characters and their functions across narrative time and space. Key to *Bleak House*'s suspense and surprise patterns is the process by which destitute minor characters fall out of narrative visibility for long stretches, returning in newly transformed positions or identities. The chapter also tracks this structural pattern in *Dombey and Son* (1846–48) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), demonstrating Dickens's experimentation in his multiplot novels with his character economies, and how they often take their cues from their own recirculating materials.

In the same years that Dickens published *Bleak House*, Elizabeth Gaskell published *Cranford* (1851–53), a novel equally fixated on paper and reusability, but overtly resistant to its use in sensational plot devices. Gaskell is the subject of Chapter 3, particularly women's handicrafting and its reliance on repurposed household scraps like rubber, string, and paper. Her approach to the recirculation plot shows how she stood both within and outside the Dickens circle's literary practices. Her first novel *Mary Barton* (1848) draws on Newgate patterns by having John Barton use Mary's love letter for the pistol wadding in the novel's central incident: the murder of Henry Carson. However, she finds the device's inherent sensationalism strips away the complex sentimental dimensions of domestic life, particularly the woman's experience of it. *Cranford*, her next novel, dialectically repackages recirculation as an episodic event tied to women's accumulative rhythms of craft and needlework. I track this idea of female temporality and authorship in craft manuals and women's periodicals at mid century, which aimed to reframe the concept of repetition in an affirmative way. *Cranford* converts these principles into an accumulative structure that holds a narrative allure different than teleological narrative—the allure of familiarity, the accretion of meaning



through narrative reiteration. Recirculation thus holds a much different reward than Dickens's version, a more even-tempered one based on intrinsic charms rather than those extrinsically imposed upon narrative via authorial manipulation.

Chapter 4 returns to stolen goods, but rather than the everyday personal effects of Newgate novels, it analyzes more extravagant plunder: diamonds. As Sherlock Holmes tells us, plots of crime and dispossession follow all valuable gems: they are "a nucleus and focus of crime. Every good stone is. They are the devil's pet baits."<sup>56</sup> Because of their durability and the frequency with which they change hands (theft, inheritance, purchase, accidental loss), diamonds are a supreme emblem of inexhaustible, recursive circulation. The chapter focuses on what this means formally within the era's most elaborately plotted genre—sensation novels—specifically the genre's most elaborate depiction of diamond movement—Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868).

Contemporary gemological coverage of real diamonds' histories shows how writers framed gem circulation in terms of romance and adventures genres. *The Moonstone* reformats stories of dispossession and recurrence within the narratological contours specific to the sensation novel of the 1860s. The genre, almost by definition, relies on protracted periods of suspense based on narrative lacunae about characters' identities or current location. *The Moonstone* applies this scheme to a thing, one that's remarkably itinerant. To do so, Collins experimented with various plot techniques of withholding, including the novel's famous opium blackout, but also its multiple serial narrators and its counterplots of the stone's division and commodification. Despite its popular success, many critics appraised the novel as a tipping point in the sensation novel's gimmicky

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<sup>56</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and the Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 145.

machinery. *The Moonstone*'s use of the recirculation plot thus stoked the fire of a wider mid-Victorian debate about fiction's overreliance on objects, as well as the use and abuses of narrative mechanics.

If, in the 1830s, Bulwer's concept of preconceived design seemed a fresh, generative approach to fiction, by the end of the 1860s authors' executions of it left many readers exasperated and with a sense that it had been pushed to its breaking point. Sensation fiction was the nineteenth-century zenith of elaborate, involuted plot design. The new school of domestic fiction, led by Eliot, James, and Hardy, shifted narrative emphasis to the deeper exploration of character interiority that stands as the hallmark of psychological realism. The transition was by no means absolute or quick—recirculation plots do not disappear—but the shift is substantial. It's telling that late-nineteenth-century critics can claim, for example, that in the new school, "the moving accident is certainly not its trade; and it prefers to avoid all manners of catastrophes."<sup>57</sup> In domestic realism, the world of things became less a medium for generating incidents than a philosophical subject of inquiry in its own right. The recirculation plot became marginalized from the canonical strain of British realism that extended through late-Victorian and modernist fiction, its authors united by a distrust of object plotting's ability, however thrilling, to faithfully represent the interconnections of modern life.

Marginalized from the high canon, object plotting's afterlife instead was in genre fiction, including the adventure novels of H. Rider Haggard, the science fiction of H. G. Wells, and, most significantly, the detective stories of Arthur Conan Doyle. The scientific

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<sup>57</sup> William Dean Howells, "Henry James, Jr.," in *Critical Essays on Henry James: The Early Novels*, ed. James W. Gargano (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987), 54–55. Howells remarks further, "the stories were all told long ago; and now we want merely to know what the novelist thinks about persons and situations" (56).

hyper-focus of Sherlock Holmes rehabilitated the recirculation plot into the forensics of evidence recovery, packaged into a form much more compact and systematized than the sprawling shape of earlier novels like *The Moonstone*. In noting this genealogy, however, I also want to resist the teleology it implies. The intense critical interest in Conan Doyle and the object as empirical “clue” has overdetermined what we see as the clue’s prehistory, since too often critics begin with Doyle’s codified model and then look backward to find similar clues deployed in less methodical ways. “It’s the problem with all searches for ‘precursors’: they are *so* sloppy,” Franco Moretti writes, in a move that both recognizes and reinforces the problem. “They play and play with the device . . . but cannot figure out its unique structural function.”<sup>58</sup> But what about this play itself, the fact that authors resisted a single, stereotyped form? What about this so-called sloppiness—the innate pliability of the device, or, more accurately, group of devices? *The Recirculation Plot* contends that this variability—the fact that recurring, revelatory objects *didn’t* possess a codified function for much of the century—was responsible for a provocative series of innovations in narrative literature.

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<sup>58</sup> Franco Moretti, “The Slaughterhouse of Literature,” *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 61.1 (2000): 216n.

## Chapter One

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### Coincidence, Black Markets, and the Improbable Realism of the Newgate Novel

The hangman's noose haunts the Newgate novels of the 1830s, so much so that some took to calling the genre "the gallows school of literature."<sup>1</sup> Their criminal heroes, though sympathetically depicted, typically have their campaigns cut short when apprehended, sentenced, and hanged from the notorious "leafless tree" in public spectacles still common throughout the first four decades of the nineteenth century. Although many Newgate novels were historical—based on famous eighteenth-century criminals such as the highwayman Dick Turpin and prison-breaker Jack Sheppard—they were all tapping into contemporary unrest over capital punishment specific to the era just before and after the 1832 Reform Bill. Remarkably, the rates of hanging sentences were *increasing* in the second and third decades of the century.<sup>2</sup> But even more remarkable

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<sup>1</sup> *Fraser's Magazine* dubbed it so upon the release of William Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (21:122 [Feb. 1840]: 227).

<sup>2</sup> In 1810, for example, there were 476 death sentences handed out in English courts; in 1820, 1,236 sentences; and in 1830, 1,397. Though the majority of these sentences were commuted by the king's

was the *type* of crime behind the hangings. The majority of death sentences were not, as you might assume, legal retributions for murder or violent crime. They were punishments for offenses against private ownership laws, including burglary, machine breaking, and even petty theft. Two-thirds of the hangings from 1820–1830 were for property crimes.<sup>3</sup> Only by the end of the 30s did new statutes remove the death penalty from the majority of these offenses; consequently, the topic of state violence and stolen goods occupies a prominent place in the cultural record of this transitional decade.<sup>4</sup>

Although Newgate novels are often cited for their violence, in general it's *theft*, not murder, that drives their plots. The most popular and controversial texts—Edward Bulwer's *Paul Clifford* (1830), Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), and William Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1839–40)—devote significant attention to the crimes of and punishments for housebreaking, highway robbery, and receiving stolen goods (also known as “fencing”). The genre emerged from a broader category of popular

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prerogative of mercy, executions followed a similar pattern of increase, spiking in the 1820s. See G. R. Porter, *The Progress of the Nation, in Its Various Social and Economical Relations, from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century* (London: John Murray, 1847), 642.

<sup>3</sup> See V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770–1868* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 7. Gatrell writes, “[T]wice as many [were] hanged in London in the thirty years 1801–1830 as hanged in the fifty years 1701–50. How easily this extraordinary fact has been forgotten—that the noose was at its most active on the very eve of capital law repeals!” (7). Further statistics can be found in Louis Cazamian, *The Social Novel in England, 1830–1850: Dickens, Disraeli, Mrs. Gaskell, Kingsley*, trans. Martin Fido (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 46–47. In Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Vintage, 1977]), he acknowledges that in the transition from spectacular capital punishment to concealed prison discipline, England lagged behind the rest of Europe: “Paradoxically, England was one of the countries most loath to see the disappearance of the public execution” (14). Also of interest is Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Verso, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> In his monumental *A History of the Criminal Law of England* (3 vols. [London: Macmillan, 1883]), James Fitzjames Stephen writes memorably of this central legal disparity: “The extraordinary lenity of the English criminal law towards the most atrocious acts of criminal violence forms a remarkable contrast to its extraordinary severity with regard to offenses against property” (3:109). Many of the reforms passed in the 1830s aimed to correct this disparity. Between 1832 and 1841, capital punishment was removed from cattle-stealing, petty larceny, house-breaking, forgery, and embezzlement. After 1837, property crimes remained punishable by hanging, but only if accompanied by violence: “Burglary, when attended with violence to persons,” and “Robbery, when attended with cutting and wounding” (Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, 644.)

# THE ANNALS OF CRIME, AND New Newgate Calendar.

**No. 32.** Printed by W. Barnes, 41, Bridge-house Place, Newington Causeway. **[PRICE ONE PENNY.]**

THE LIFE, TRIAL, AND EXECUTION, OF JOSEPH POWIS, A STROLLING PLAYER,  
FOR HOUSE-BREAKING,



*Joseph Powis, a strolling Player, running away with a pair of Boots, after robbing the Larder of an Inn at Horske.*

“Believe me that there is no earthly pang  
Like man’s own conscience,  
To tell him he is guilty.”

Figure 1.1. “Joseph Powis, a trolling Player, running away with a pair of Boots, after robbing the Larder of an Inn at Horske” (1834)

writing that dramatized the vulnerability of private property. The most prominent intertext was the perennially favorite collection of criminal biographies known as the *Newgate Calendar*, which many critics accused the novelists of ransacking for source material, an accusation that led to the genre’s moniker.<sup>5</sup> The *Newgate Calendar* was

<sup>5</sup> The *Newgate Calendar*, popular throughout the eighteenth century, was expanded, illustrated, and republished in multiple editions in the early nineteenth century, including a four-volume edition by Alex Knapp and William Baldwin in 1824–28, penny weeklies like *The Annals of Crime*, and *New Newgate Calendar* in the 1830s, and a new edition in 1841 published under the pseudonym “Camden Pelham” and entitled *The Chronicles of Crime; or, The New Newgate Calendar*. See Rayner Heppenstall, *Reflections on the Newgate Calendar* (London: W. H. Allen, 1975).

stuffed full of not only murderers but also housebreakers, highwaymen, and pickpockets, all dramatically portrayed at the moment of appropriating others' property and taking flight, as one 1834 front-page illustration shows (Figure 1.1). Here, the real-life housebreaker, Joseph Powis, steals a pair of boots from an inn, the first of many burglaries that will lead him to the notorious gallows at Tyburn in London.

Events like these also fill the pages of Bulwer, Dickens, and Ainsworth, but they had the advantages of novelistic form, which allowed for narrative innovations impossible in the linear anecdotes typical of street literature. The authors drew upon the inherent sensationalism of stolen property but capitalized on the structural complexity of novels to endow those objects with more prominence and instrumentality within plotting. To do so, these novelists began by asking a simple question—the same question policemen, courts, shopkeepers, and individual victims of robbery (then or now) ask following a theft: where are those stolen possessions now?

By following stolen property into the underground world of fencing dens, pawnshops, and black markets, the Newgate novel helped usher in the post-Romantic era of the intricately plotted and structurally unified novel. The genre does more than just reflect what Keith Hollingsworth describes as “the recent developments of the trade in stolen goods, which seemed in the twenties almost to be keeping pace with legitimate commerce.”<sup>6</sup> It assimilates those illicit trade networks as plot machinery, creating covert object circuits that hold the power to reveal surprising connections between events and

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The origin of this moniker is sometimes a source of confusion, since many assume the name derives from the novels' frequent use of London's Newgate Prison as a setting. Instead, the novel's opponents gave it this pejorative name, arguing authors were merely recasting the dangerous criminals of the *Calendar* into sympathetic heroes of narrative melodramas.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel, 1830–1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens and Thackeray* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1963), 111. Hollingsworth's book remains the definitive study of the Newgate novel and its legal and cultural contexts.

characters that appear at first to be discrete. Although executed in many ways, the narrative device consists of the theft of a possession, a period of illegal processing—often rendered mysterious or unknown to the victim and reader—followed by that possession’s shocking reappearance in a secondhand or black market, sometimes on display to the original owner. Plunder, defined by portability and unpredictability, allowed novelists an uncanny vision of social totality in which criminal and non-criminal were united by their handling of the same materials. Developing these tightly knit plots required a significant degree of structural preplanning by an author, what Bulwer theorized as the “technical arrangement of incidents” in his 1838 essay “On Art in Fiction.”<sup>7</sup> In its emphasis on narrative design and the agency of things, the Newgate novel performs vital work in transforming the novel from a largely episodic form into the planned, multi-plot structural coherence of the mid-Victorian novel.

But the Newgate novels had a problem of verisimilitude. To achieve these sensational recurrences, novelists had to combine realistic materials—black market objects—with melodramatic techniques—improbable narrative coincidences. As we’ll see, *Paul Clifford*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Jack Sheppard* all grapple with the fundamental improbability of melodramatic plotting. On the one hand, second-order economies can verify coincidence: the objects themselves are referential to the material world, and early narrative hints can prepare readers for the plausibility of a future coincidental recurrence. On the other, these material verifications of a networked reality end up sensationalizing

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Bulwer, “On Art in Fiction,” in *Nineteenth-Century British Novelists on the Novel*, ed. George Leonard Barnett (New York: Meredith, 1971), 95. All future references are to this reprinting. Bulwer’s essay originally appeared in two parts in the first two issues of the *Monthly Chronicle* (1:1–2 [Mar–Apr 1838], 42–51, 138–49), which he launched and edited for a short period. The essay is also reprinted, though in an abridged form, in *Victorian Criticism of the Novel*, ed. Edwin M. Eigner and George J. Worth (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 22–38.



the act of verification itself. Beginning with Bulwer's *Paul Clifford*, the Newgate novel develops a type of realism that paradoxically draws support from melodrama, thereby establishing an aura of verisimilitude rather than a probabilistic mode of storytelling. Once *Oliver Twist* moves the genre into a dense metropolitan world, Dickens reframes the accidental convergences of narrative through contemporary discourses on criminal probability—its potential to predict property theft as well as its palpable limit. In the face of that incomprehensibility, Dickens, like many touristic writers of urban exploration, emphasized the dark humor of the populous world, particularly its capacity to return lost or thieved items back to original owners. In Oliver's case, they're the very items he wishes to discard forever. Recirculation drives the nightmare logic of Dickens's underworld via a structure of uncanny repetitions neither wholly realistic nor fantastical.

As the controversy over the Newgate novel swelled in the late 1830s, the line between recirculating objects *in* novels and the recirculating paraphernalia *around* novels begins to blur. Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* loosens the recirculation device's work within plotting and then links it to a different type of criminal object: criminal memorabilia, that is, the fetishized objects leftover from famous crimes and traded among collectors as a type of morbid commodity. A case study in mass cultural influence, the book gives birth to full-blown "Sheppard mania" in which the Newgate novel itself becomes a type of cultural crime object, yielding its own paraphernalia culture and influencing the English youth to emulate the housebreaking ways of its protagonist.<sup>8</sup> The public perception of its poisonous influence was exacerbated when a valet named B. F. Courvoisier murdered his aged employer and confessed Ainsworth's novel had led him to do so. Both Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray, author of the Newgate novel parody *Catherine* (1839–

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<sup>8</sup> Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel*, 141.

40), would then write essays on Courvoisier's hanging, further demonstrating the tangle of internal and external criminality that *Jack Sheppard* gave rise to. Within the genre's formal evolution, Ainsworth's novel is a final stage: to legitimize its sensational plotting, *Jack Sheppard* points not to realism but to reality, to the world outside its own covers.

### **Bulwer's *Paul Clifford* and the Technical Arrangement of Objects**

The Newgate novel remains an understudied subgenre that flourished in an understudied decade—a school of fiction that, not unlike the career of its founder, Edward Bulwer, was enormously popular during its time but is now generally neglected, sometimes even derided. For *Paul Clifford* the biggest impediment to serious critical appraisal may be its melodramatic excess.<sup>9</sup> Bulwer's grandiloquent language and farfetched, theatrical plotting are not only wearisome in stretches but seem at odds with its populist critique of ownership laws. But the union of melodrama's coincidences and the counter-economics of theft is exactly why the novel is so important to the formal history of narrative in the 20s and 30s. In order to explore the politics of property redistribution, Bulwer creates stories of goods stolen from the privileged and then changing hands via fencing, pawning, and further theft. He maps these object interchanges onto melodrama's favorite plot device: the coincidental reunion of two long-separated parties, which in *Paul Clifford* includes both a conventional version— orphan and parent—and an pioneering one—burglarized property and dispossessed owner. By

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Grossman makes the most persuasive case for Bulwer's formal ingenuity, although his focus is on free indirect discourse and criminal alibis. About *Paul Clifford* and Bulwer's next novel, *Eugene Aram* (1832), Grossman writes, "The linchpin of this moment in literary history was the depiction of leading criminal characters' perspectives through a novel's omniscient third-person perspective." See Grossman, *The Art of Alibi: English Law Courts and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2002), 138.

1838 he would formalize this model of object-borne, circular plotting in his landmark essay “On Art in Fiction.” Considered together, as theory and praxis, the texts illuminate a recurring issue of representation for the Newgate novel. Channeling concrete, economic objects through melodramatic narrative devices grants plot a heightened degree of plausibility, but not necessarily probability. In this way, Bulwer’s verisimilitude possesses a hybrid charm fundamental to early-Victorian realism.

To understand the formal economy of *Paul Clifford*, we first need to examine the populist philosophy of wealth redistribution that stands at the center of its social vision. The parallelism is causal, not casual: the inaugural Newgate novel is an archetypal instance of fiction’s habit of regularly molding narrative plot as *emerging from* criminal plot, “where all stories are the result of plotting, and plotting is very much machination,” as Peter Brooks writes.<sup>10</sup> After Bulwer’s career-launching silver fork novel, *Pelham, or the Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828), he turned his attention to lower social stations in *Paul Clifford*, an early social-problem novel about prisons and the inequalities of possession. Its eponymous hero is a highwayman-thief by night but fashionable man-about-town by day—a dual identity that allows Bulwer to portray upper-class activities as merely a more protected form of public swindling.<sup>11</sup> The novel develops its polemic while still retaining some of the buoyant spirit that characterized Pierce Egan’s widely read and imitated underworld romps in his urban picaresque novel, *Life in London* (1821).

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), 139.

<sup>11</sup> As Bulwer says of the moral in his 1840 Preface, “there is nothing essentially different between vulgar vice and fashionable vice,” a claim that captures the influence of William Godwin, the Romantic anti-institutionalist, author of *Caleb Williams* (1794), and one of Bulwer’s great philosophical-literary heroes. See Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Paul Clifford* (London: Routledge, 1874), viii.

On the relationship between Godwin and Bulwer, see Lawrence Poston, “Bulwer’s Godwinian Myth,” in *The Subverting Vision of Bulwer Lytton*, ed. Allan Conrad Christensen (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2004), 78–90.

Two distinct reasons, then, motivate Paul Clifford and his band of highwaymen to rob carriages: first, a jovial “love of the frolic,” and second, a rigorous populist argument that property laws function primarily to suppress the lower classes.<sup>12</sup> With the help of melodramatic binaries, Bulwer casts Paul as unequivocally sympathetic and his gang’s robberies as warranted. Robin Hood is the favorite totem of “the honest tax-gatherers,” though sometimes redistribution appears to occur only within the inner coterie (232). As for Paul’s initial descent into crime, it’s explained by bad luck, class disadvantage, and the ironies of imprisonment. Paul is mistakenly jailed for pickpocketing, then ironically criminalized while *in* prison by the anti-private property philosophies of his later accomplice, Augustus Tomlinson.

Object-based plotting gives form and force to the politics. At the center of *Paul Clifford*’s narrative system is a series of pawnshop transactions and property thefts that constitute the essential connective tissue in this novel of carefully planned, though sometimes labored, melodramatic coincidences. A brief plot summary will indicate how the convoluted, crisscrossed tangle of incidents bears the stamp of object recirculation. Stolen, resold, and rediscovered objects are the implements for unfolding the mystery of Paul’s parentage. After being raised as an orphan in a low tavern, Paul is wrongly thrown into jail for the watch theft of one Lord Brandon, a man who later turns out to be both the uncle of Paul’s love interest, Lucy Brandon, and, even later, the presiding judge over Paul’s final trial for highway robbery. Brandon, however, has a secret past. Decades earlier, he had sold off his once beloved wife, Julia, to a licentious aristocrat for money and career, but had retained custody of their infant son. Desperately seeking revenge,

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Paul Clifford* (London: Routledge, 1874), 20. All further references to the novel are from this edition and cited parenthetically by page number.

Julia joined a band of thieves and burglarized Brandon's home, stealing back her son, while others ransack the loot. Devastated, Brandon seeks out knowledge of his child's whereabouts, a desperate hunt that catches a scent only when, by coincidence, Brandon, now an eminent judge, presides over a trial for fencing that exhibits illegally pawned items that he recognizes as—wait for it—*his own possessions*, the very ones stolen from his house long ago. Coincidences then multiply. That fence, it turns out, is Dummie Dunnaker, not only one of the original burglars but an old tavern acquaintance of Paul's whom we met in the first chapter. The novel concludes with Brandon's pronouncing the death sentence on a famed highwayman named Captain Lovett, only to be interrupted at the trial's conclusion by Dummie, who passes the judge a letter reporting the man he has just condemned is actually his son Paul. Brandon commutes the sentence to transportation and dies privately of shock, short-circuited by the inconceivable ironies of these coincidences.

Admittedly, these convoluted coincidences can exasperate the reader—even the reader of a plot summary—but Bulwer's underlying strategy is fairly simple: he uses the exotic world of second-order recirculation to narrate one of melodrama's most stereotypical scripts, the orphan mystery plot, or what Gary Kelly calls the genre's "romance mysteries of social identity."<sup>13</sup> The rough conceptual equivalence between an orphan and a stolen possession makes this possible. Both are cut off from their original keepers (parents, owners), both circulate in desperate, unregulated worlds, and both can achieve restoration of identity only via forensic clues from the past. Bulwer emphasizes the functional similarity of character and object during the burglary, when he represents

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<sup>13</sup> Gary Kelly, "Introduction," *Newgate Narratives*, 6 vols., ed. Kelly (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), 1:lxv.

Paul himself as one stolen item among many. “[T]he child was gone! Several articles of property were also stolen,” our narrator reports, the juxtaposition and grammar of addition (“also”) reinforcing the point (365). A long-deferred narrative circularity generates suspense: Bulwer first separates Paul from the other burglarized goods—the boy matures in a tavern, while the materials continue flowing through pawnshops—and then, by wild coincidences typical of melodrama, brings person and possessions back together, and thereby restores familial and social identity.

Mystery plots, Bulwer recognizes, gain sensational effect when buried in and retrieved through the clandestine world of the lower classes, especially those who hoard, steal, and fence. The literary pawnshop is the chronotope of lingering and potential narrativity. In *Paul Clifford*, the site’s function lies in its natural ability to network incongruent characters via objects. Dummie Dunnaker, a rag merchant and one of the novel’s lower-class fools, acts as the essential liaison between high and low society, and between the object and character world. Dummie “seemingly enjoy[s] large connections . . . in receiving and disposing of goods as were fraudulently obtained,” and, in the backstory of Brandon’s stolen property, he sells to the pawnbroker “several items of plate, ornaments, &c” (220). While those items left the clearinghouse long ago, other, more personally meaningful items remain: an old ring, a miniature set, and a family seal, all bearing the faint mark of Brandon’s family. “The great bulk of these articles has, of course, long left the pawnbroker’s abode; but [the pawnbroker] still thought a stray trinket or two—not of sufficient worth to be re-set or remodelled, nor of sufficient fashion to find a ready sale—lingered in his drawers” (220). The final verb, “lingered”—patiently waiting for the dashed phrase to conclude—distills the notion of pawned object

as mystery plot device. Things “linger” at such shops, suspended and, for the time, anonymous, as a novel builds up its mysteries, awaiting discovery by a character and the disclosure to the reader of a veiled past.<sup>14</sup> The pawnshop, in other words, accommodates both object mobility and stasis, supplying *Paul Clifford* with both coherence and sensational effect. Bulwer’s novel holds an important, though generally unrecognized, place in the emergence of the pawnshop as one of Victorian fiction’s great structural nexuses, put to use later by Dickens in multiple novels, Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone* (1868), and George Eliot in *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

Yet another recirculation plot publicizes explicitly Bulwer’s constructive method of circular plotting. It emerges in the first chapter as a narrative seed and comes to bear fully on the plot in the penultimate chapter, decades of story time later. In the opening chapter, which features the death of the newborn Paul’s mother Julie, Dummie manages to steal old love letters between Julie and Brandon which Dummie will use, much later, to tempt Brandon with knowledge of his son. “They have come back to me after an absence of nearly twenty-five years,” Brandon exclaims, the re-receipt of the packets completing a circuit of object movement that spans nearly the entire novel (337). Dummie’s comment when he initially swipes the letters foreshadows—however ham-handedly—this plotted route: “‘I’ll take this; who knows but it may be of service—*tannies* today will be *smash* tomorrow!’” Bulwer helpfully footnotes the thief’s slang: “Meaning, what is of no value now may be precious hereafter” (18). Dummie’s reasoning

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<sup>14</sup> Regarding the pawnshop’s thematic importance to *Oliver Twist* and *Daniel Deronda*, see Elizabeth Coggin Womack, “A Pledge Out of Time: Redemption and the Literary Pawnshop,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 40 (2012): 451–67. For histories of the British pawn shop, including debates on its entanglement with criminal activity, see Kenneth Hudson, *Pawnbroking: An Aspect of British Social History* (London: Bodley Head, 1982); and Melanie Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working-Class Credit* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).

is essentially the novel's own. For the thief, he might one day get some real money of these letters (which he vaguely senses are related to scandal), and if not, a rag merchant always knows the going prices for scrap paper. Likewise, the novel might reap the narrative rewards of this early seeding of detail. The footnote is a theorization in miniature of the author's technique.

That technique would receive a full explication eight years later in Bulwer's "On Art in Fiction" (1838), a groundbreaking essay on the theory of the novel, though one rarely read today.<sup>15</sup> The essay, which we first discussed in the Introduction, is one of the earliest attempts to articulate a total theory of narrative fiction, which it does by defining the novel as a serious art form distinct from but equal to drama. Early sections revel in Bulwerian discourse on the delineation of passions, but later sections provide remarkably precise advice on how to plan the unfolding of a novel's story. In his commentary on "conception," "arrangement of incidents," "mechanism," and "catastrophe," we can sense the matured reasoning of Dummie, a technical diction that has evolved from the vocabulary of "tannies" and "smash." The result is a schematic process that will be startlingly familiar to students of the Victorian era:

In [novels], it will often be highly artistical to revive for the consummating effect, many slight details—incidents the author had but dimly shadowed out—mysteries, that you had judged, till then, he had forgotten to clear up; and to bring a thousand rivulets, that had seemed merely introduced to relieve or adorn the way, into the rapid gulf which closes over all. The effect of this has a charm not derived from mere trick, but from its fidelity to the natural and lifelike order of events. What more common in the actual world than that the great crises of our fate are influenced and coloured, not so much by the incidents and persons, but by many things of remote date, or of seeming insignificance. The feather the eagle carelessly sheds by the wayside plumes the shaft that transfixes him. In this

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Stang calls the essay "one of the most important critical documents of the period." See Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850–1870* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1959), 11.



management and combination of incidents towards the grand end, knowledge of Human Nature can alone lead the student to the knowledge of Ideal Art.<sup>16</sup>

Framed in the idiom of a novelist's handbook, Bulwer proposes a design for novel writing in which the author *must* plan out the mechanics of the resolution before commencing, since early and middle sections of the novel must be seeded with "dimly shadowed out" details that will allow for late-stage revivals. The most potent details, he claims, are not persons and incidents but *things* of remote date, like *Paul Clifford's* pawned jewels and stolen love letters. Prewriting, in other words, should begin with the end, plotting temporal and causal development with the aid of things and in the reverse order of how a reader will proceed through the finished novel.<sup>17</sup> This inverse planning process is responsible for the reader's unique experience of suspense and surprise, epiphany and epistemology. The discontinuous disarray of the real—those "rivulets"—resolves, via the author's "technical arrangement of incidents," into a closed totality of meaning—a "gulf which closes over all." I argued in my introduction that "On Art in Fiction" holds a key place in the genealogy of narrative theory, but here we need to examine its place within the literary milieu of the 1820s and 30s, its relation to stage melodrama, and its unconventional claims of realism—that is, of recirculation's "fidelity to the natural and lifelike order of events."

The great significance of Bulwer's formula for novelistic circularity is evident only when considered as a counterpoint to the colossal influence during the period of Walter Scott on the historical romance. The plots of Scott's novels, as he readily admitted

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<sup>16</sup> Bulwer, "On Art in Fiction," 108.

<sup>17</sup> Bulwer is anatomizing a temporally inverted structure much like what Gérard Genette has called "the arbitrariness of narrative," by which Genette means "the determination of means by ends and, to put it more crudely, of *causes by effects*" (Gérard Genette, "*Vraisemblance* and Motivation," trans. David Gorman, *Narrative* 9:3 (2001): 252).

in several of his own prefaces, were not conceived fully upon their commencement; he improvised them as he wrote.<sup>18</sup> As he notes in the Advertisement to *The Antiquary*, for example, “I have been more solicitous to describe manners minutely, than to arrange in any case an artificial and combined narrative.”<sup>19</sup> To Bulwer’s mind, Scott’s romances had a rambling and unconstructed quality; they emphasized picturesque scenes and regional manners at the expense of novelistic unity. Bulwer certainly admired Scott’s descriptive and sentimental powers. He simply thought him a second-rate storyteller. “His execution,” Bulwer writes, “was infinitely superior to his conception.”<sup>20</sup> Bulwer argues that, instead, by first carefully planning a story’s junctures and linkages, an author can then capitalize on the kinetic system of plot in order to intensify a text’s moral and aesthetic purpose. He chooses a jewelry metaphor: “An exquisite mechanism in the construction of the mere story, not only gives pleasure in itself, but it displays other and loftier beauties to the best advantage. It is the setting of the jewels.”<sup>21</sup> Frustrated modern readers of Bulwer often fixate first on these “loftier beauties,” finding Bulwer’s jewels—his affected prose, his metaphysical digressions, his clichéd representation of passion—not nearly so attractive as he did. For this reason, Bulwer style remains an emblem of overwrought writing.<sup>22</sup> Even Trollope shook his head, calling the style “defaced by mannerism.”<sup>23</sup> But, if we look instead to the “settings” of these dubious jewels, we see Bulwer’s more significant

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<sup>18</sup> Scott’s prefaces to *The Abbot*, *The Antiquary*, *Guy Mannering*, and *The Fortunes of Nigel*, all remark upon this improvisatory method. See Stang, *The Theory of the Novel*, 7–8.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Scott, *The Antiquary*, ed. Nicola J. Watston (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Bulwer, “On Art in Fiction,” 95.

<sup>21</sup> Bulwer, “On Art in Fiction,” 95.

<sup>22</sup> Many have come to associate Bulwer’s name with bad writing through the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, run out of the San Jose State University English Department since 1982 (<[www.bulwer-lytton.com](http://www.bulwer-lytton.com)>). Taking its inspiration from Bulwer’s grandiloquent opening to *Paul Clifford* (“It was a dark and stormy night...”), the competition challenges entrants to write the opening sentence to the worst novel imaginable. Unfortunately for Bulwer, the entries have consistently been deemed hilarious and the competition a huge success, running for over 30 years and spawning several published books.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, eds. Michael Sadleir and Frederick Page (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 251.

contribution to *technical* craftsmanship at this historical juncture in the development of the British novel.

“On Art in Fiction” also indicates just how contested the definition of novelistic verisimilitude was then. For Bulwer, tightly knit, recirculatory plotting via things “has a charm” derived from “its fidelity to the natural and lifelike order of events.” He defends the claim through his metaphor of the natural world: “The feather the eagle carelessly sheds by the wayside plumes the shaft that transfixes him.” For Scott, however, preplanned circularity, object-based or otherwise, is the very hallmark of “artificial and combined narrative.” As twenty-first century readers, our reading sentiments hew closer to Scott’s than Bulwer’s. Surely, one imagines, Bulwer’s plotting privileges effect over fidelity. But that judgment doesn’t go very far in explaining how two novelists could sincerely express such wildly different views.

But the truth claims of melodrama do. However distinctive Bulwer’s use of theft and pawning in *Paul Clifford* is, the novel is still a melodrama in outline and thus works within that genre’s parameters of causation, fate, and truth. Martin Meisel explains how in stage melodrama, eleventh-hour resolutions via wildly improbable coincidences serve to articulate the genre’s internal epistemology. They channel a category of believable truth specific to the genre, especially as stage drama: “In melodrama, the more patent and blatant the providential coincidence, the better, the more believable. Coincidence in this mode is evidence of truth, as it is of coherence in the nature of things; and coincidence creates ‘effect,’ the effect of melodrama.”<sup>24</sup> *Paul Clifford*’s resolution draws on these

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 267. See also Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1976).

patterns, but it also exploits the digressive, description-heavy qualities of the novel to ground the “truth” of coincidence in the empirical world of economic objects. What may at first seem like a *deus ex machina* resolution typical of the stage—the exonerating letter in court—is in fact the culmination of an object-based subplot. Contrast this with Douglas Jerrold’s wildly popular drama *Black Ey’d Susan* (1829), which uses a nearly identical device: a letter of naval discharge that arrives at the last minute to free the protagonist from a death sentence of treason by the British military court. This letter is unforeseeable, though—“blatant,” in Meisel’s words—not hinted at in any early detail of the play. The arrival of Dummie’s letter thus mimics the coincidental staging of melodrama but traces its origin back through Bulwer’s prearrangement of clues within the second-order economy. The text takes full advantage of the novel’s unique formal ability to *linger* in descriptive digression, to stage flashbacks, and to stretch out into subplots. As Bulwer says in “On Art in Fiction,” “in the novel you may artistically have recourse to accident for the working out of your design.”<sup>25</sup>

The epiphanic resolution is thus plausible and implausible simultaneously. By merging melodramatic plot devices with the global plotting of recirculation, Bulwer establishes not so much verisimilitude proper as an *aura of verisimilitude*. The story’s resolution no longer seems impossible, but neither does it seem probable. It is, instead, *plausible*. The letter appears to be a *deus ex machina*, but technically speaking it isn’t, on account of the trail of stolen objects that, up until the climax of the final chapters, told only an incomplete story. By exploiting pawnshops and black markets, the novel establishes a more literal meaning of what Meisel calls the “coherence in the nature of things.” In *Paul Clifford* the technical arrangement of incidents turns out to be the

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<sup>25</sup> Bulwer, “On Art in Fiction,” 103.

technical arrangement of objects. To use Bulwer's own critical terms from "On Art in Fiction," he removes the "trick" from the *deus ex machina* but keeps the "charm." He uses an object-based solution to bridge the gap between drama's and fiction's dissimilar levels of referentiality: "in prose fiction we require more of the Real than we do in drama."<sup>26</sup> When authors generically transpose melodramatic scripts into narrative fiction, then the networked object world has the potential to accredit that hybrid design with increased plausibility, though not quite the probability that comes to define realism. *Paul Clifford* isn't an unbelievable novel, but that doesn't necessarily make it a believable one.

So, two linked phenomena develop in the first Newgate novel: the use of recirculating objects as substantial plot devices, and the modernization of melodramatic coincidence into something more physically and economically credible. If Bulwer provides a blueprint in "On Art in Fiction" for framing out "artistical" and "lifelike" novels, then in *Paul Clifford* he reminds us that in the Newgate house of fiction the narrative often must travel down through the crawlspace. He uses the criminal stash of objects for the very technical purposes of incident coordination across time and space. Perhaps it's not so surprising that the term "device," which in its concrete definition means a purposeful *object* ("a mechanical contrivance"), first begins to appear in the 1830s in its now commonplace meaning of *narrative device*.<sup>27</sup> (At the decade's end, Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* will further collapse the boundary between physical and narrative tools with its prison-breaking implements.) Bulwer's theory and practice elucidate an early Victorian literary investigation into how a secular world of

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<sup>26</sup> Bulwer, "On Art in Fiction," 107.

<sup>27</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. "device." Cited is an 1836 article from the *American Quarterly Review*: "The writer . . . would beguile, amuse, or teach his cotemporaries by some winning literary device."

instrumental objects might take the “god” out of the classical “god in the machine.” The result is a marvelous verisimilitude, in which fidelity and miracle coexist.

Even though the dynamic mobility of stolen goods allows for an extraordinary result—the reduction of Paul’s capital sentence to transportation—the book ends as any good social-problem novel should: by recognizing the continuance of an unjust penal system for all those who don’t have the luxury of living in a novel. “The very worst use to which you can put a man is to hang him!” the novel concludes (538). The melodrama of recirculation is the means for establishing Paul’s exceptionality. Bulwer calls attention to its function as proletarian wish fulfillment; he ends by critiquing his novel’s own unrealistic qualities in order to make its political message more forceful and topical. The plotting thus critiques its own unrealistic qualities in order to make the novel’s political message more realistic and topical. It points outside of its covers to how the punishments for property crimes in 1830 unjustly relied on hanging people rather than addressing the circumstances that led them to theft. *Paul Clifford* is the most didactic and polemical of the Newgate novels, but, as we’ll see, its focus on the material circumstances that produce crime remains engrained in the plotting of the novels to come.

### **Urban Probability and the Comedy of Dispossession**

As the decade of the 1830s progressed and the contours of the Newgate novel evolved, the texts shifted away from the rural scenes of highway robbery by would-be gentleman-criminals to the intricacies of metropolitan criminality within the lower classes. This heightened urban consciousness would not be immediate, however. In 1832, Bulwer penned his second Newgate novel, *Eugene Aram*, which was set in Yorkshire and told the

story of the eponymous scholar-murderer, a notorious criminal profiled in the *Newgate Calendar* and, in Bulwer's depiction, a highly eloquent one. Two years later, William Harrison Ainsworth threw his hat into the ring with *Rookwood* (1834), a Gothic romance illustrated by George Cruikshank about the contested inheritance of an English estate, most popular for its extended set piece of the eighteenth-century highwayman Dick Turpin's celebrated ride from London to York.<sup>28</sup> It wasn't until the later years of the 1830s that the contributions of Dickens and an older Ainsworth would effectively reposition the genre as an unequivocally urban style of crime fiction. Although Dickens contested his inclusion in the critically maligned school by arguing he didn't romanticize his felons, *Oliver Twist* certainly locates criminal narrative squarely in the dark heart of the crowded metropolis, circa 1830. That change of setting affected the handling of coincidence as well. How do the accidental convergences of melodrama look different when confined to a densely populated city rather than, as in *Paul Clifford*, the wide swath of England stretching from London to Bath to the gang's rural stash sites? How does the logic of plausibility change in this contracted space, defined by anonymous encounters, physical proximity, and class intermingling? And what does this all mean for property crime's sensationalism?

*Oliver Twist*'s treatment of urban recirculation undoubtedly evolved from Bulwer's narrative plotting, but it also drew inspiration from contemporary discourses on urban life and crime. Unlike Bulwer's historical world of cantering highwaymen,

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<sup>28</sup> Ainsworth understood his task as initiating a new era of Gothic fiction set in a more familiar England: "to attempt a story in the bygone style of Mrs. Radcliffe . . . substituting an old English squire, an old English manorial residence, and an old English highwayman, for the Italian marchese, the castle, and the brigand of the great mistress of Romance." Ainsworth's remodeling of Gothic—a challenge, he believed, that "requires . . . the hand of the skillful architect to its entire renovation and perfection"—still occurs at a rural jobsite though. See William Harrison Ainsworth, *Rookwood: A Romance* (London: Routledge, 1878), xxvii, xxxii.

Dickens's novel is "intensely topical to the time of its publication," as Humphrey House noted long ago.<sup>29</sup> What this section does is survey these extra-novelistic materials in order to establish two prevailing features in depictions of how property crime and underground markets worked in contemporary London. Key to both is the proximity of people, property, and neighborhoods in the metropolis. First, writers displayed a heightened interest in probability—on the one hand, its scientific potential for predicting crime based on time and location, and, on the other, the palpable limits its ability to illuminate the enigmas of the underworld. In *Paul Clifford* the issue of plausibility and probability arose out of the inherent problems of the genre itself, but in *Oliver Twist* and its intertextual literature the issues were more topical. Likelihood and coincidence were favorite subjects when discussing tourism, urban exploration, and criminal sociology. The practical limits of probability for understanding property crime are quickly exceeded, though: while it may help predict *where* theft is most common, it's less successful at predicting where those goods return to market. And, it is for the most part useless in making sense of the erratic pathways between those events. Thus, the second common feature of this writing is to highlight the comedic incomprehensibility of urban recirculation. The coincidence of a pilfered possession reappearing for sale is, in a word, a *funny* event. Sometimes this involves making fun of a duped country yokel or on-leave sailor. Other times, however, the humor is a more perverse hilarity that points to the dangerous wonders of black markets and their capacity to fly in the face of positivist economics.

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<sup>29</sup> Humphrey House, *The Dickens World*, quoted by Philip Horne, in "Introduction," Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Philip Horne (New York: Penguin, 2003), xxi.



Early nineteenth-century London guidebooks were full of warnings. They reveal a growing apprehension about the security of one's private property amid the crowded environs of the city, as well as a discourse of probability regarding the variable chances of thieves' divesting one of that property. By and large, these were texts about and for visitors; they pull back the curtain on London's racy and criminal world, in a gesture that is simultaneously titillating and cautionary. In this way, their relevance to Dickens's novel is clear, since *Oliver Twist* is, after all, a novel explicitly about individuals' initiation into criminal underworlds—the naïve Oliver's socialization into Fagin's gang, as well as the middle-class reader's introduction to criminal culture and slang. In the 1820s and 30s, the guidebooks to London not only profiled the landmarks of the city but purported to introduce uninitiated readers—both visiting country folks and curious West End dwellers—to London's more exciting corners, full of carnal and drunken pleasures. Authors framed this information with copious advice on avoiding the associated dangers to health and property. The texts were part practical companions, part guides to “fast life” in London. They owed a debt to the light-hearted flair of Egan's *Life in London*, in which Corinthian Tom introduces his naïve country cousin, Jerry Hawthorne, to London's high and low entertainments. However, many of the guidebooks for the uninitiated took the perils of city tourism more seriously than Egan, recognizing in particular the alarming prevalence of pickpockets, hustlers, and swindlers. These accounts were quasi-sensational chaperons, you could say, through London's more dangerous neighborhoods.

A brief list of popular titles reveals both their purpose and intended audience: John Bee's *A Living Picture of London, and Stranger's Guide through the Streets of the Metropolis, Shewing the Frauds, the Arts, the Snares, and Wiles of All Descriptions of*

*Rogues that Every Where Abound* (ca. 1828); *A Peep into the Holy Land, or Sinks of London Laid Open! Forming a Pocket Companion for the Uninitiated* (ca. 1831–43); F. Leveson Gower’s *The Swell’s Night Guide through the Metropolis* (ca. 1840); and *Sinks of London Laid Open: A Pocket Companion for the Uninitiated, to which is Added a Modern Flash Dictionary*, illustrated by George Cruikshank (1848).<sup>30</sup> John Bee’s *A Living Picture of London* (an expansion of his popular 1818 first edition) exemplifies the patterns of depicting visitors as beset on all sides by thieves.<sup>31</sup> Its primary goal, as Bee proclaims in the first chapter, is preparing the reader (whom throughout he calls “the Stranger”) for these threats to property: “the guarding him against being plundered.”<sup>32</sup>

Guarding the reader means educating him or her on the frequencies of property crimes in different districts. The text details the various tricks and conspiracies that greet the Stranger’s arrival by either foot, carriage, or ship, and warns especially against those individuals who seem too eager to help: “Part of these [people] aim to possess themselves of his property, either by some cajolery, overcharge, or overreaching; others by way of trade, and a few by direct unblushing robbery.” Devoting hundreds of pages to the various pilfering schemes and scenes of city thieves, the guide’s strategy for preventing the reader’s victimization is to emphasize the *likelihood* of being robbed or swindled in particular situations, depending on variables like neighborhood profile, crowd size, time

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<sup>30</sup> See John Bee [John Badcock], *A Living Picture of London, and Stranger’s Guide through the Streets of the Metropolis, Shewing the Frauds, the Arts, the Snares, and Wiles of All Descriptions of Rogues that Every Where Abound* (London: W. Clarke, 1828); *A Peep into the Holy Land, or Sinks of London Laid Open! Forming a Pocket Companion for the Uninitiated* (London: J. Duncombe, ca. 1831–43); F. Leveson Gower’s [F. L. G.], *The Swell’s Night Guide through the Metropolis* (London: [“Roger Funnyman”], ca. 1840); and *Sinks of London Laid Open: A Pocket Companion for the Uninitiated* (London: J. Duncombe, 1848).

<sup>31</sup> For an essential essay explaining the context, contents, and taxonomies of such guides, see Martha Vicinus, “Dark London,” *The Indiana University Bookman* 12 (1977): 63–92. Vicinus’s essay is also available via Adam Matthew Digital’s database, *London Low Life*. The database draws most of its material from the Michael Sadleir Collection of London Low Life, housed at the Lilly Library at Indiana University, Bloomington.

<sup>32</sup> Bee, *Living Picture*, 6.

of day, and the Stranger's deportment. Arrival via the River Thames wharves, for example, presents a high level of danger to one's luggage, though only at certain docks, since "purloining at the Tower-stairs and at Billingsgate," the reader learns, "is astonishingly infrequent." Once arrived, visitors should be hyper-vigilant in inn yards, where thieves often work in groups to carry off one's belongings, and, while walking the city, the Stranger is best to avoid alleys and lanes and instead stick to wider avenues. It is also wise, Bee advises, to avoid excessive drunkenness because of "the probability of apparent friends robbing the drunken and too-confiding bearers of money." However, if the Stranger does find himself accosted, Bee can provide several recommendations for "increase[ing] the chances of getting clear" without grave loss.<sup>33</sup> All throughout, *A Living Picture of London* incorporates a discourse of frequency and chance to assist the greenhorn's quest to enjoy the city without becoming its victim. Becoming a savvy London visitor entails learning the probabilistic calculus of street encounters.

This appeal to relative probability in urban guidebooks, by no means unique to Bee's version, represents a practical application of the broader cultural and intellectual examination of probability and coincidence that was occurring in the first half of the century, found across various landmark texts of mathematics, sociology, and logic. In the 1810s French mathematician Pierre Laplace essentially founded the school known as "frequentism" which inferred rational laws of probability by studying repeated trials with dice and coins. In the 1830s, sociologists in Britain and France were beginning to put a similar style of frequency analysis to use in modeling urban demographic change,

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<sup>33</sup> Bee, *Living Picture*, 4, 13, 94, 88.

criminal rates, and juvenile delinquency.<sup>34</sup> And, in his 1843 summa, *A System of Logic*, John Stuart Mill sought out an inductive model of cause and effect that would clearly distinguish between two directly connected phenomena (causation) and two coincidentally connected phenomena (correlation).<sup>35</sup> In short, these and other writers were part of what Maurice Lee calls “a broad intellectual and cultural shift in which chance became increasingly treated as a challenge to be managed but never mastered.”<sup>36</sup> What is at stake in these inquiries, Bee’s guidebook included, is both the validity and the limitations of predictive modeling. Bee, who frames frequency in relative terms, not quantitative, may be able to discuss criminal probabilities in geographically specific terms, but he willingly acknowledges the boundaries of prediction and knowledge regarding the criminal economy. For instance, when discussing “smashing” (the passing of counterfeit money in transactions with unaware clients), he admits, “To what extent this particular crime may be carried, with such means as their disposal, only remains to be guessed at, since there is no probability of coming at any thing like an accurate calculation.”<sup>37</sup> The criminal economy will always be partly mysterious; it is its nature.

That mysteriousness may frustrate comprehensive sociological analysis, but it also marks out a liminal region of inquiry where the sensationalism of property crime

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<sup>34</sup> For an excellent discussion of early nineteenth-century probability and its relationship to social science and policy, see Theodore M. Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking, 1820–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), 17–88. See also, Michael J. Cullen, *The Statistical Movement in Early Victorian England: The Foundations of Empirical Social Research* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975). For the relationship between statistical methods, literacy rates, and *Oliver Twist*, see Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1998), 74.

<sup>35</sup> See John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1895), esp. 372–88.

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Lee, *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 4. Lee’s comments, though taken from the introduction of his study on nineteenth-century American fiction, also capture Britain’s responses to the rise of statistical sciences.

<sup>37</sup> Bee, *Living Picture*, 23.

begins. Whereas nineteenth-century depictions of violent crime focused attention on the hyper-visible, decisive moment of assault, observers understood stolen property as part of a longer, ongoing process, only visible in certain stages. Once stolen, objects are concealed and clandestinely transported, traded, fenced, or pawned, before (perhaps) becoming visible again. My passive voice is a symptom of this veil of agency and visibility. That veil, however, generates the fantastical, figurative potential of stolen goods. So, while Bee can identify street corners where pickpocketing is most likely to occur and guess at a set of potential markets where those items may later go on sale, his description of what occurs between resorts to one of the *least* objective discourses available for describing economic circulation: the it-narrative. Faced with a lacunae and unable to describe the transporter, he instead personifies the transported object: “The trunk-maker’s corner was for many years the spot for making a good stand, and the article stolen used to walk up the Old Bailey to Whetstone-park-corner, to cloth-fair, to Smithfield, to Charter-house-lane, according as the resort might be” (55). Bee’s portrayal excises the pickpocket (and likely his confederate transporter), personifying the “article stolen” as a paranormal thing with a will of its own and a set of legs, to boot.

That phase of object invisibility produces effects relevant to the broader structures of narrative we’ve encountered in *Paul Clifford*’s plotting. Most significantly, the clandestine object creates narrative intrigue: who in this crowd is concealing (my) stolen property? In which market or pawnshop will those possessions end up? And finally, wouldn’t it be spectacularly odd to stumble across my own stolen property, redisplayed for sale? Note, moreover, the facetiousness of Bee’s description; the object is a source of comedy. The possessions are of course *not* intentional fugitives of their owner’s pocket

nor perambulators resolved on a visit to Smithfield market. Bulwer indulged in similar jokes in *Paul Clifford*, as when the still-naïve Paul asks his friend Augustus where it was



**Figure 1.2. Robert and George Cruikshank, “Peep o’ Day Boys, A Street Row, the Author Losing his Reader” (detail), from *Life in London* (1821)**

that he “found a purse,” to which he replies, “In a gentleman’s pocket.—I was so pleased with my luck” (90). The joke of theft as a type of legitimate receipt was a durable one, built into the idiomatic humor of thieves’ cant, in fact, which framed stealing as

commonplace types of production and transportation. Pickpockets are “conveyancers.” Jewelry thieves are “watchmakers.”<sup>38</sup>

Contemporary illustrations reflect a similar interest in this decisive moment of appropriation from the victim’s pocket, often humorously rendered. Robert and George Cruikshank insert a young pickpocket into the corner of one illustrated plate for Egan’s *Life in London* (Figure 1.2), for instance. But, as is common in the volume, this theft is ultimately innocuous for the character—who in this case is Pierce Egan himself—whose stolen valuables turn out to be not bank notes but his own writing notes for the novel’s next installment. It makes little difference, however, since the courteous thief, Tim Hustle, returns the pocketbook to Egan with a letter explaining even those notes are worthless since they’re too sloppy to make sense of. “Vy it ain’t vorth a single tonic [half-penny],” Hustle claims.<sup>39</sup> Cheaper prints are in on the joke too, as one crude illustration from the 1830s shows (Figure 1.3). The title “A Transfer of Property” ironically describes the action of pickpocketing in formal language typically reserved for estate settlements and bills of sale. The print enforces the juxtaposition by having the illicit trade of the thieves take place against the backdrop of legitimate consumer culture, for here the

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, [John Camden Hotten], *A Dictionary of Modern Slang, Cant, and Vulgar Words*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: John Camden Hotten, 1860).

<sup>39</sup> Pierce Egan, *Life in London; or, the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn, Esq. and his Elegant Friend Corinthian Tom, Accompanied by Bob Logic, the Oxonian, in their Rambles and Sprees through the Metropolis* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1821), 277.



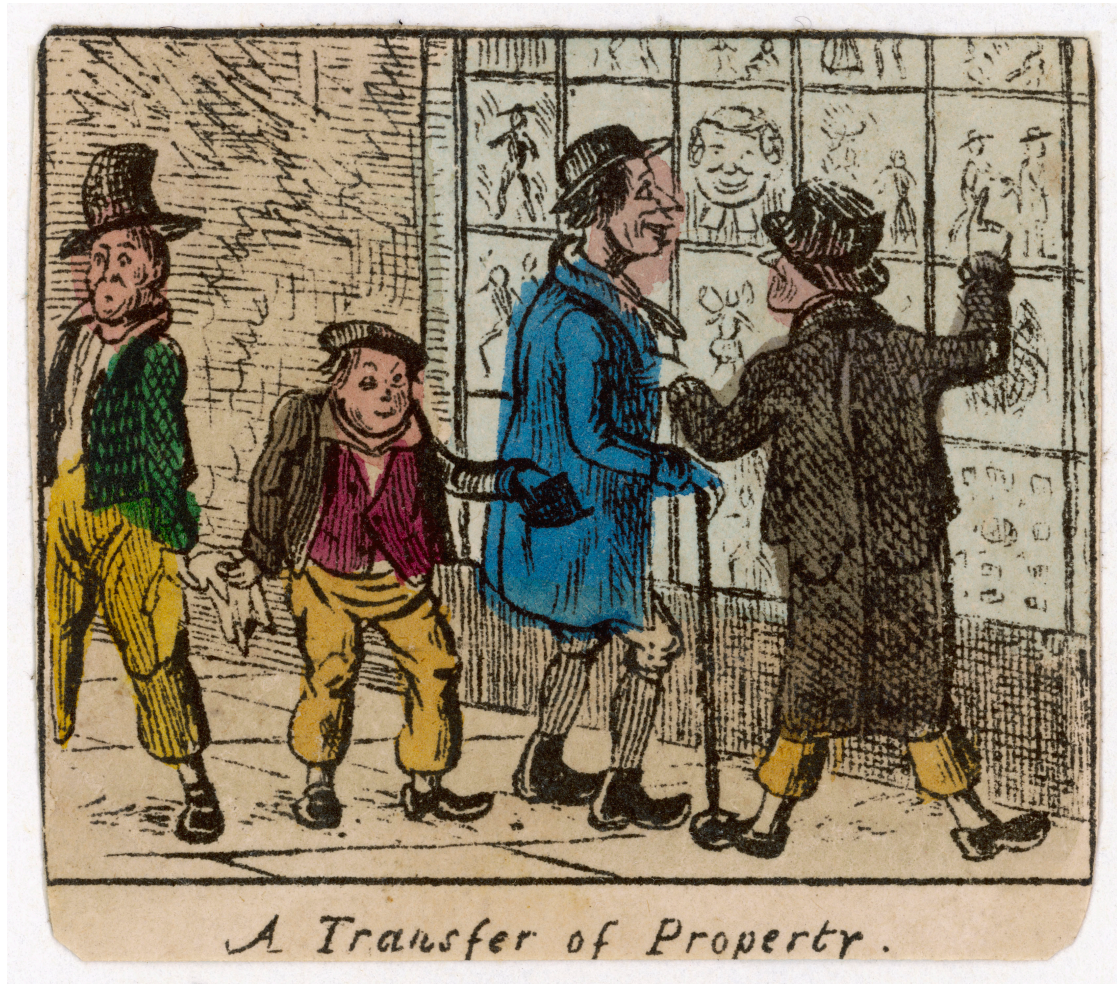


Figure 1.3. “A Transfer of Property,” ca. 1830. Copyright Mary Evans Picture Library.

two victims gaze distractedly at a store window that displays illustrated prints for sale—the very same media of which the print itself is part. It’s almost as if the illustration acknowledges that it’s both the cause and representation of the pickpocket’s success.<sup>40</sup>

It’s unclear though whether the transfer of possessions will be to a permanent new owner

<sup>40</sup> John Feltham’s 1808 guide to the city also warns that print seller’s windows are favorite locations for pickpockets: “Another formidable nuisance to strangers is, the address and nimbleness of pick-pockets, who mix in every crowd, attend about the windows of print-shops, and frequent all public exhibitions and places of amusement.” (*The Picture of London, for 1808: Being a Correct Guide to all the Curiosities, Amusements, Exhibitions, Public Establishments, and Remarkable Objects, in and near London*. [London: W. Lewis, for Richard Phillips, 1808], 28).



or just a series of hands—we have at least two sets here—that constitute the criminal network’s recirculatory chain. James Orlando Perry’s watercolor *A London Street Scene* (1835), which features a young pickpocket at work in the bottom left-hand corner against a massive backdrop of advertisements, verifies that this trope of theft in the midst of consumerist spectacle registered also in higher cultural forms like painting (Figure 1.4). Part of the viewing experience here is the amusement of noticing, after several seconds of examining the image, that a sly theft is occurring.



Figure 1.4. James Orlando Perry, *A London Street Scene*, 1835.

While a writer of city sketches but not yet a novelist, Dickens extended the joke, as it were, to highlight the chance—improbable but droll—that you might end up repurchasing your own pilfered belongings, perhaps even unknowingly. In the 1834 sketch “Brokers’ and Marine-Store Shops” (later part of *Sketches by Boz* in 1836), amid

the clutter of used and neglected things which would become a staple of his novelistic description, Dickens includes a brief gag about an unwitting seaman: “A sailor generally pawns or sells all he has before he has been long ashore, and if he does not, some favoured companion kindly saves him the trouble. In either case, it is an even chance that he afterwards unconsciously repurchases the same things at a higher price than he gave for them at first.”<sup>41</sup> In a facetious tone similar to Bee’s, Dickens summons the pickpocket into his sketch as a “favoured companion” who will sell or pledge the sailor’s goods, but only, of course, after kindly appropriating them from his pockets. The probability that the sailor then unconsciously repurchases those objects is comically inflated—a fifty-fifty chance. The humor relies on the narrator’s privileged omniscience regarding the object circuit, an instance of what J. Hillis Miller identifies as the text’s master conceit: “The comedy of the *Sketches* arises from the juxtaposition of Boz’s knowledge of this situation against the blindness of the characters to it.”<sup>42</sup> We laugh, with a twinge of pity, at the sailor because we have the advantage of a narrator who demystifies the black market for us. The comedy thus rests on perspectival irony, rather than Bee’s silly personification or *Paul Clifford*’s tongue-in-cheek witticisms. The literary imagination of the 1830s found in illegitimate commerce bountiful opportunities for amusing stories.

Around the same time, one of Dickens’s early squabbles over literary property rights occasioned another acknowledgement of the potential for pilfered goods to generate narratives of loss followed by shocking reappearances. In 1834 he published a piece in the *Monthly Magazine* entitled “The Bloomsbury Christening” (another piece that would feature in *Sketches*), and, much to his surprise, the sketch appeared in

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<sup>41</sup> Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, ed. Dennis Walder (New York: Penguin, 1995), 213.

<sup>42</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz*, *Oliver Twist*, and Cruikshank’s Illustrations,” in *Victorian Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1991), 139.

dramatic form a few months later at the Adelphi Theatre, adapted by John Buckstone without attribution to Dickens.<sup>43</sup> In a letter to the magazine's editors, Dickens protests the theft of his intellectual property, calling Buckstone's action a "kidnapping process" of his "child" and "offspring," language which prefigures both his famous comments decades later about *David Copperfield* being his "favourite child," as well as his career-long battles over his own literary copyright.<sup>44</sup> Dickens ends his letter with a handkerchief analogy that captures the interlocked phases of ownership, theft, and repossession:

It is very little consolation to me to know, when my handkerchief is gone, that I may see it flaunting with renovated beauty in Field-Lane; and if Mr. Buckstone has too many irons in the fire to permit him to get up his own 'things', I don't think he ought to be permitted to apply to my chest of drawers.<sup>45</sup>

Ideas in the form of authorial property are, like any sort of "thing," capable of being stolen, and playhouses in this sense are little different than Field Lane, London's epicenter for stolen handkerchief markets and a location which could, *plausibly*, offer up to a startled pedestrian the very same handkerchief recently stolen from him. Dickens at least recognizes his handkerchief when he sees it on sale; otherwise, he's not much better than the hapless sailor.

This imaginative play with handkerchiefs existed also in sociological texts, more as a way to dramatize the menace of fencing than to analyze its likelihood. At midcentury, Hepworth Dixon—soon to be more famous as deputy commissioner of all things new at

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<sup>43</sup> Dickens published "The Bloomsbury Christening" in the *Monthly Magazine* in April 1834, and by October of that year, Buckstone had launched his popular dramatic farce, "The Christening," based partially on Dickens's sketch but without acknowledgement. Though good-humored about the dramatic pilfering, Dickens did append a headnote to the piece when he republished it in *Sketches by Boz*, proclaiming that indeed his story came first. See Dickens, *Sketches*, 535–54.

<sup>44</sup> Dickens's remarks are found in the 1867 Preface of the Charles Dickens Edition of *David Copperfield*, reprinted in Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), 718.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The Pilgrim Edition, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1:42. The *Monthly Magazine* printed Dickens's undated letter in its November 1838 issue.

The Great Exhibition and as editor of the *Athenaeum*—would describe the Field Lane neighborhood as an underworld nexus of stolen goods awaiting their original owner’s epiphanic recognition and grudging repurchase.<sup>46</sup> In *The Prisons of London* (1850), he leads his reader from Newgate Prison to London’s House of Detention, pausing along the way with both disgust and wonder as he enters the notorious fencing neighborhood:

Let the inspector of the London prisons—after emptying all his outer pockets, and buttoning up his coat to secure his watch, pocketbook, and handkerchief—penetrate this celebrated receptacle for stolen goods. . . . This thoroughfare is occupied entirely by receivers of stolen goods, which goods are openly spread out for sale. Here you may *re*-purchase your own hat, boots, or umbrella; and unless you take especial precaution, you may have one of the importunate saleswomen—daughters of Israel, who are greater adepts in the arts of cajolery than many of the fair ladies who pique themselves on their success at charitable bazaars—attempting to seduce you into the purchase of the very handkerchief which you had in your pocket at the entrance.<sup>47</sup>

Dixon imagines the recirculation of criminal goods as a truly closed circuit. In each recursive iteration, the product’s course involves both criminal-class conspirers (so often portrayed as Jewish, a stereotype I examine in the next section) and middle-class victims, even perhaps the same gentleman stuck in a cycle of *repurchasing* his stolen property. That circuit might in fact occur so quickly that it completes itself upon leaving the neighborhood: having been robbed of his handkerchief upon entering, the gentleman repurchases the very same one upon exiting. Within Dixon, we have the ludicrous apogee of the now familiar story: the vivification of the metropolitan object world by way of a coincidental circularity. That a variety of literary and non-literary forms—sketches,

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Kent, “Dixon, William Hepworth (1821–1879),” rev. Sinéad Agnew, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7709>, accessed 11 Feb 2013].

<sup>47</sup> Hepworth Dixon, *The London Prisons* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1850), 227–28. Emphasis original.

tourist guidebooks, sociological studies—could accommodate the story speaks to the charming dynamism in its comingling of the fanciful and the plausible.

### **The Return of the Repossessed: Oliver's Suit**

In the Victorian city, nothing's too low to be stolen. That's one message, at least, you could take from depictions of London in the 30s. It's also the basis of an important distinction regarding class pretensions between the first-generation Newgate novels of the early 30s and the second-generation ones of the late 30s and early 40s. Dickens rejected the model of the horse-mounted, masked robber-hero. The dandyish impulses rang untrue with Victorian street culture. As one of the Paul Clifford's associates remarks, "I keep my mask in my pocket-book, together with my comb'" (228). The gang lets an apartment above a hairdresser—intentionally. To steal a handkerchief in this historical world of highwaymen (essentially extinct by the 1830s) was to stoop.<sup>48</sup> It was unpardonable, grounds for dismissal from Paul's gang: "Who's here so base as would be a *fogle-hunter*?" (184). As if to answer the question seven years later, Dickens instates handkerchief pickpockets—affable fogle-hunters like Charley Bates and Artful Dodger—into central roles in *Oliver Twist*.

The type of stolen property determines the type of plots a novelist can construct. Dickens's portrayal of this particular class of London robbery enabled him to expand upon Bulwer's explorations in preconceived subplots and underground recirculation. Like in *Paul Clifford*, Dickens uses the story of a sentimental locket to help disclose Oliver's highborn identity. But Oliver's London is a networked world in which larceny of low-

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<sup>48</sup> "Mere *bagatelle*," John Bee wrote in 1828 about highwaymen, apologizing for their trifling inclusion in his guide to contemporary London crime. See Bee, *Living Picture*, 97.

and modest-value objects occurs everyday throughout the streets, a phenomenon Dickens uses as justification for creating several additional layers of recirculatory subplots. Most involve clothing like handkerchiefs and secondhand suits, which constitute an enormous illegal market in the city. Using this large, churning economy to authorize his melodramatic coincidences does not, however, make *Oliver Twist* a novel far surpassing *Paul Clifford* in realism. Instead, it gives Dickens the opportunity to narratively exploit the topic of unreliable probability which we tracked in the previous section. Plot is his vehicle for expressing, often with nightmarish force, the dark comedy and uncanny kinetics of urban life.

This section embarks on a close reading of one recirculating item—the old suit of clothes that Fagin gives to Oliver—but it's first worth recalling how the novel's plotting, internally valid but often contrived, sits atop second-order economies in multiple ways. Consider how many coincidences take advantage of the temporal and spatial convergences furnished by Fagin's pickpocketing and fencing networks in order to incrementally disclose Oliver's concealed familial connections. On his first outing with Charley Bates and the Artful Dodger, the pocket they pick turns out to be that of Mr. Brownlow, an old friend of Oliver's father, one-time admirer of Oliver's now deceased aunt, possessor of Oliver's mother's portrait, and future champion of the boy's right to inheritance. Oliver's other aunt, Rose Maylie, enters into the picture when Sikes and Oliver attempt a burglary—organized from afar by Fagin, who plans to fence the stolen goods—of a country house in Chertsey which happens to be the residence of Rose and Mrs. Maylie. Meanwhile, as in *Paul Clifford*'s arrangement of incidents, a sub-plot develops around the movement of a locket and ring that can potentially confirm the

identity of Oliver's dead mother. That object is pilfered from Oliver's mother by a nurse, pawned for ready cash, recovered by Mrs. Bumble via the nurse's duplicate, and sold to Monks by the Bumbles, only to be eradicated when Monks casts it into the oblivion of Mudfog's surging river. Monks, in other words, is the saboteur of the recirculation plot, cutting short the restoration kinetics of the locket. But the momentum is already too strong, and the disposal isn't enough to overcome the detective work of Brownlow and company.

On a more local level, Dickens uses the chance convergences of walking in public to create other narrative cruxes; these he typically describes with the flag "accident." During Oliver's errand to pay the bookseller on behalf of Mr. Brownlow, Nancy recaptures the boy after "he accidentally turned down a by-street which was not exactly in his way," thus returning to his "accidental companionship" with Fagin.<sup>49</sup> Later, when Oliver "accidentally stumble[s] against a tall man wrapped in a cloak" in the country village near the Maylie's home, he turns out to be his half-brother Monks, who is in league with Fagin to criminalize Oliver so that he can have legal recourse to their inheritance money (269). When Noah Claypole journeys to London from Mudfog, his first stop as he wanders naïvely through the city ends up being a criminal tavern known as the Three Cripples, where he joins Fagin's gang as a spy on Nancy, precipitating her murder at the hands of Bill Sikes. Moreover, that tavern happens to be a house Fagin much patronizes, located in a neighborhood he much frequents: the district known as Field Lane, "a commercial colony of itself, the emporium of petty larceny," where "are exposed for sale huge bunches of second-hand silk handkerchiefs of all sizes and

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<sup>49</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Philip Horne (New York: Penguin, 2003), 120, 144. All future citations of the novel are from this edition and given parenthetically by page number.

patterns—for here reside the traders who purchase them from pickpockets” (204).

Here, I would argue, is a case in which the economics of a supposedly *peripheral* “commercial colony” actually affords the novel with a *principal* logic of circulation from which the novel derives its arrangement of incidents and objects. *Oliver Twist* incorporates these black market circuits into its narrative structure, capitalizing on what Bee, Depworth, and the Dickens of *Sketches* recognized in these scenes of reappearance: the uncanny shock of coincidence—always sensational and often comedic—that was possible in the circular routes of illegitimate commerce in London’s interior. Specific urban spaces authorize specific plot devices. Field Lane has its own material-kinetic energies. Franco Moretti has ventured a similar claim for narrative geographies: “different spaces are not just different landscapes . . . they are different *narrative matrixes*. Each space determines its own kind of actions, its plot—its genre.”<sup>50</sup> Surely this determination is not absolute—theft in country homes is common enough in British novels—but urban black markets do arrive into fiction with an inbuilt formalism, a bundled set of narrative possibilities united by the recirculation plot. One way to think about *Oliver Twist* is as a three-volume novelistic unpacking of the otherwise brief anecdotes on stolen objects we saw in the last section. Such goods afford a storyteller and reader the charm (Bulwer’s term) of encountering, losing sight of, forgetting about, and then rediscovering those possessions on the move.

The pairing of narrative coincidence and underworld economy most forcefully appears when Oliver, after his recapture and return to Fagin, beholds his old suit of clothing, the very one he had disposed of while convalescing at Mr. Browlow’s flat.

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<sup>50</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (London: Verso, 1998), 84.



When he initially surrenders the suit, Oliver symbolically leaving behind the pickpocket's life in which he nearly found himself trapped:

He was no sooner strong enough to put his clothes on properly, than Mr Brownlow caused a complete new suit, and a new cap, and a new pair of shoes, to be provided for him. As Oliver was told that he might do what he liked with the old clothes, he gave them to a servant, who had been very kind to him, and asked her to sell them to a Jew, and keep the money for herself. (106)

The detail of the Jewish old clothes man points to a realistic commercial culture of the street outside of Brownlow's windows, the same old clothes trade we find occurring outside Paul Dombey's house.<sup>51</sup> But when the old suit reappears in *Oliver Twist*, the reader recognizes it as one of Dickens's more understated moments of *seeding* his narrative with *potential* plot points to develop in later serial installments.<sup>52</sup> Oliver's recapture by Nancy and reinstatement into Fagin's gang owes its possibility to the reselling of that old suit. It ends up being an instrumental clue, the one Fagin uses to determine Oliver's approximate position in London, intelligence which then helps Nancy focus her search in the Pentonville district, eventually leading to her discovery of Oliver on the street. That particular "accident," then, is based on a valid predictability of Oliver's presence in the same neighborhood where the house servant sold off his clothes.

Soon after, the suit accomplishes a sartorial version of the return of the repressed (repossessed, really) when a hysterical Charley Bates *re*-presents the suit to Oliver:

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<sup>51</sup> In *Dombey and Son*, the old clothes man appears casually, as part of the fabric of street commerce outside of Paul Dombey's window: "the water-carts and the old clothes men, and the people with geraniums, and the umbrella mender, and the man who trilled the little bell of the Dutch clock" (Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Alan Horsman [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press 2008], 23.)

<sup>52</sup> Consider another detail that's seeded more obviously (what Genette would call an "advance notice"), but one to which Dickens never returns. It's a piece of jewelry that promises to connect to in the future to some unmet character, perhaps Oliver's mother, Agnes: "Having replaced these trinkets, the Jew took out another, so small that it lay in the palm of his hand. There seemed to be some very minute inscription on it, for the Jew laid it flat upon the table, and, shading it with his hand, pored over it long and earnestly. At length he set it down as if despairing of success, and leaned back in his chair . . ." (680). On seriality, design, and clues left unused, see Burton Wheeler, "The Text and Plan of *Oliver Twist*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 12 (1983): 41–61.

Master Bates, apparently much delighted with his commission, took the cleft stick, and led Oliver into an adjacent kitchen, where there were two or three of the beds on which he had slept before; and here, with many uncontrollable bursts of laughter, he produced the identical old suit of clothes which Oliver had so much congratulated himself upon leaving off at Mr Brownlow's, and the accidental display of which to Fagin by the Jew who purchased them, had been the very first clue received of his whereabouts. (133-34)

Accidental display: a phrase that captures the novel's method of propping up coincidence through the unexpected, though not implausible, convergence of secondhand goods on display and perambulating buyers in urban markets. Notice how the mobility of the suit underwrites the coincidental plot crux: Oliver gives the suit to Mr. Brownlow's servant, who then sells the clothing to a Jewish clothes dealer, who then displays the suit to Fagin for sale, who then purchases the suit while simultaneously gaining intelligence on Oliver's approximate location. In case we miss the terror of such recurrence, Dickens includes the additional detail that here in the *new* hideout even Oliver's bed is the very same as his from the previous den.

When we speak about the nightmarish qualities of *Oliver Twist*, we're usually pointing to the criminal underworld's uncanny energies—that is, its startling way of mingling the familiar and unfamiliar, its way of establishing its own internal logic that overrides individual attempts to break free of it. The return of the suit, which then triggers the return of Oliver to Fagin, exemplifies how important repetition is for this impression. As a narrative device, the uncanny coincidence's potency—its notorious stopping force—lies in its ability to pull the rational mind in opposite ways of belief and disbelief simultaneously. Hillary Dannenberg elaborates:

*Coincidence is a constellation of two or more apparently random events in space and time with an uncanny or striking connection.* In the traditional coincidence plot of narrative fiction, the connection is one of a *previous relationship* between coinciding (i.e., intersecting) characters. . . . [T]he most crucial elements in the

realization of coincidence in narrative fiction that transform it into a truly complex plot are the *cognitive* components of *recognition* and *explanation*.<sup>53</sup>

The cognitive response to an uncanny reappearance involves a *generalized* resistance to believing in the implausible, combined with a *specific* concession of the story's internally plausible connections. Narrative coincidences, like *Oliver Twist*'s economics, are valid but not necessarily sound. The "previous relationship" that Oliver must come to terms with isn't between himself and another character; it's between himself and a thing—a menacing suit, whose return seems impossible, but for its reality there in front of him, a trauma made worse by having to put it back on.

Given Oliver's status as a famously passive protagonist nearly starved for novelistic interiority, the moment bears special importance in a text that is at pains to connect identity with clothing. Recall how the novel regularly fixates on clothing's link to class and identity: Brownlow's bottle-green coat, Nancy's gaudy red gown, Dodger's oversized adult jacket, and, in an extreme case of attire negating the need for any name at all, there is "the gentleman in the white waistcoat" from Mudfog's parish board (12). In the novel's first chapter, the narrator announces the significance for our protagonist's fate: "What an excellent example of the power of dress young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar" (5). A sentence later, however, he is badged, ticketed, and wrapped up in old, yellowed calico robes. In truth, infant Oliver is indeed

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<sup>53</sup> Hillary P. Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2008), 93. The italics are hers.

Coincidence should be separated out into two distinct meanings, one logical and one narratological. The former refers to the scientific meaning of when "two or more phenomena are *conjoined by chance*," and not by causation, as John Stuart Mill writes. Coincidence in this sense is opposed to meaningfulness. Events may occur simultaneously or overlap, but there's no cause-and-effect relationship, only accidental correlation. For novelists, on the other hand, chance-based conjunctures are opportunities to assemble and link stories. See Mill, *A System of Logic*, 373.

closer to a nobleman than beggar, but this is a novel in which clothing defines and circumscribes characters' fates. As one of the weakest characters, Oliver is especially vulnerable to the deterministic logic that clothes make the man as well as the babe, the latter seeming the worse.

So, when Charley produces that identical old suit, it's a particularly traumatic moment of identity crisis for Oliver. Amplified by its position in the plot, the suit voices the nightmare logic of the novel: economic recirculation has the ability to overpower character agency. At this point, two paths of re-convergence—one of Oliver, *the character*, now recaptured, and one of his suit, *the thing*, now repurchased—converge themselves, exponentially multiplying the sensational effect that Dannenberg describes as “the essential uncanniness of the coincidence.”<sup>54</sup> Recirculation conspires with the darker forces of fate—the predictions Oliver has heard all of his life, that he is a born criminal, destined for the gallows. The suit's return resembles a Dickensian style of coincidence Dorothy Van Ghent describes as “the violent connection of the unconnected.” Dickens's signature transposition of persons and things, she argues, effectively demonstrates the weird logic that “there is no discontinuity in the Dickens world,” only apparent discontinuity awaiting elucidation.<sup>55</sup> The suit has more freedom of movement than the character. The very notion is vicious, but especially when plot design impels it. The sartorial manifestation of violence gains further gravity when Bill Sikes threatens Oliver with his pistol, loaded, he tells him, with powder, bullet, and “a little bit of old hat for wadding” (168).

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<sup>54</sup> Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, 94.

<sup>55</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent, “The Dickens World: A View from Todgers's,” *The Sewanee Review* 58:3 (1950): 428.

Why does Charley take so much enjoyment in this scene of reunion? General explanations for Master Bates's laughter have been numerous, including William Cohen's memorable reading, following the pun, that it signals an explosive masturbatory energy within the all-boys club of Fagin's gang.<sup>56</sup> But in this scene Charley directs his amusement particularly at the miraculous coincidence of finding the old suit. Here, Dickens stages the comedy of dispossession and repossession that we found in the previous section as so frequently occurring in other writing on city economies. Charley's joviality is a perverse hilarity, a delight at the seamless return of both body and clothing. His laughter expresses the cruel comedy of the novel's thing world. "What fun it is!" he exclaims, exchanging the old duds for Oliver's "smart ones" from Mr. Brownlow, leaving Oliver in the dark, locked room from which he continues to hear "The noise of Charley's laughter" through the wall (134). The chapter ends with this eerie detail, proceeding immediately, with no installment break, to Dickens's well-known meditation on melodrama's alternating structure of tragedy and comedy as like "the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon." The narrator proceeds: "The hero sinks upon his straw bed, weighed down by fetters and misfortunes; and, in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song" (134). Dickens uses this digression principally to justify leaving behind the suffering Oliver to return us to the ludicrous Mr. Bumble, but the textual proximity of this digression on melodrama also points backward to the bifurcated spatial conclusion of the previous scene.

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<sup>56</sup> William Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1996), 26–72.

Imagine, for a moment, an author transposing the alternating structure from temporal oscillation to spatial juxtaposition: despair on one side of a wall, laughter on the other. Considered this way, the account of melodrama describes Oliver and Charley at least as accurately as Oliver and Bumble. And, because Charley's laughter doesn't come from sadism—he's not Bill Sykes—it may well be Dickens's metacommentary. Charley



Figure 1.5. "Old Clothes Man," *Street Cries, Part I*, ca. 1816–28.

laughs at the starkly plausible implausibility of the coincidence. This, perhaps, is Dickens's own chuckling recognition that his melodramatic plotting is guided by the competing desires to maintain the realism of *Oliver Twist* while also confessing its grand and "accidental" improbability.<sup>57</sup>

We need to understand one final layer of this accidental improbability: the politics of Jewish representation, which Dickens uses to blur the boundaries between legitimate secondhand trade and fencing. The economic system underwriting the plot crux is the Jewish trade in old clothes, which, despite its legality, many English writers conflated with illegal fencing. The history of these ethnic prejudices is important to the Newgate novel because writers often portrayed Jewish merchants as the principal agents in sensational stories about former owners recognizing their fenced goods. Dickens makes the stereotype almost natural by not distinguishing between the nefarious Jewish criminal Fagin and the legitimate Jewish merchant who first purchases Oliver's suit. It's a relatively small offense within Dickens's larger anti-Semitic pattern of drawing Fagin as sinister *first* by way of his Jewishness and only *second* by way of his actual crimes. Nevertheless, the attitude shares in a British cultural discourse that mistrusts Jewish merchants because of their influential positions within an obscure and unregulated secondhand economy.<sup>58</sup> The Jewish old clothes man figures repeatedly, for instance, in books of London street cries, texts which provide us with one of the best glimpses of

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<sup>57</sup> Maurice Lee finds a similar tension in *Barnaby Rudge*, and my argument here is indebted to his interpretation of "Dickens's competing desires: an impulse to maintain the realism of the novel, and meta-critical urge that . . . confesses the improbable constructedness of the plot." See "Evidence, Coincidence, and Superabundant Information," *Victorian Studies* 54 (2011): 91.

<sup>58</sup> In *Oliver Twist*, the Jewish dealer and his social network traverse (with ease) the *cordon sanitaire* between bourgeoisie and criminal classes that critics like D. A. Miller have emphasized as the key disciplinary boundary of the novel. See *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), 4–10. See also Simon Joyce, *Capital Offenses: The Geography of Class and Crime in Victorian London* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2003), 59–100.

street culture before Mayhew's midcentury journalism. Take, for example, one six-pence edition of *London Cries* (ca. 1816–28), which pictures the old clothes merchant loaded up with hats and a sack of clothes walking about Trafalgar Square on his way to the secondhand markets in Rosemary Lane (Figure 1.5). In rhyming street cry, the poem uses the merchant's explanation of his collection process to ironically communicate a mistrust of Jewish dealers. Witness the sycophantic pleas ("my pretty belles and beaux") and the language of deception ("I trick all the flats o'er again and again").<sup>59</sup>

In the era just before *Oliver Twist*, this stereotype of Jewish street peddling as a cover for fencing intensified on account of the notorious Jewish fence, Isaac "Ikey" Solomon (sometimes Solomons). Solomon's celebrity was so enduring that as late as 1896, Arthur Morrison could refer to "the prince of fences, Ikey Solomons" in *A Child of the Jago* without any further explanation.<sup>60</sup> Historian J. J. Tobias writes that after Solomon's trial in 1830, which revealed he has amassed stolen goods worth over 20,000 pounds, it became a great distinction in thieves' circles to be called "another Ikey Solomons."<sup>61</sup> An 1841 version of the *Newgate Calendar* points to even broader notoriety: "There are few offenders whose name and whose character are more universally known than Ikey Solomon."<sup>62</sup> Solomon also holds a central position in the Newgate school of fiction: he is thought to be the inspiration for Dickens's Fagin (a connection that the plagiarized version, *Oliver Twiss*, makes explicit by changing the Fagin character's name

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<sup>59</sup> *London Cries, Part I* (London: E. Wallis, ca. 1816–28), n.p. This and dozens of other books of street cries, most of which feature the Jewish old clothes dealer, are part of the Virginia Warren Collection of Street Cries, housed at the Lilly Library at Indiana University and digitized by Adam Matthews Digital as part of the London Low Life collection.

<sup>60</sup> Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago*, ed. Peter Miles (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 118.

<sup>61</sup> J. J. Tobias, *Prince of Thieves: The Life and Crimes of Ikey Solomons* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, and Co., 1974), 1.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Pelham, *The Chronicles of Crime; or, The New Newgate Calendar*, 2 vols. (London: Thomas Tegg, 1841), 2:235.



to “Solomon”), and in Thackeray’s Newgate novel parody, *Catherine*, he chooses the authorial persona of “Ikey Solomons, Esq. Junior”—supposedly Ikey’s respectably established son who, a decade after his father’s trials, can now condemn the criminals of contemporary Newgate novels.

The significance of Ikey Solomon to the Newgate novel is evident not so much as character inspiration but in the sensational manner in which contemporary media reported on two issues: on the one hand, the fence’s expert processing of stolen goods, and on the other, the coincidences that ultimately led to his downfall—specifically, when fenced goods become recognized by former owners. Solomon’s operations were multivariate: he orchestrated burglaries, received stolen property, processed pirated bank notes, manufactured counterfeit ones, and smuggled continental goods into England. His legendary success originated in his and his associates’ meticulous method of processing things in order to obliterate all identifying marks and thereby eliminate the risk of the product being recognized when it returns to market: diamonds were removed from mountings and “re-set according to another fashion”; the marks on boots’ soles “were obliterated by hot irons”; for clothing, “the head and fag ends [were] cut off”; and for a watch that was “valuable for its works more than its case, the interior was soon entombed in another.”<sup>63</sup> Anonymizing stolen articles effectively terminates the story of past possession that an object might be able to tell.

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<sup>63</sup> Pelham, *The Chronicles of Crime*, 2:240.



Figure 1.6. George Cruikshank, “Oliver Amazed at the Dodger’s Mode of ‘Going to Work’”

In *Oliver Twist*, George Cruikshank cleverly captures the initiation and completion of this process within the single frame of his illustration, “Oliver Amazed at the Dodger’s Mode of ‘Going to Work’” (Figure 1.6). The foreground pictures Charley and Dodger filching Brownlow’s handkerchief, and the background shows a pawnshop

(recognizable by the emblem of the three balls) with clothing for sale hanging outside the door.<sup>64</sup> The snapshot also portends the role that this clothing trade will have in Oliver's recapture. What the illustration does not depict—the crucial processing phase of the thieves' economy—is exactly what Fagin has Oliver do when he teaches him to remove the initials from handkerchiefs—"the marks shall be picked out with a needle"—after which Fagin washes them, sorts them on his clothing horse, and prepares them to sell them off (70). Yet another version of this process in the novel is passing stolen plate through "the melting-pot" (118). Even the term itself, "fence," alludes to a barrier, separating two life stages of an object. If a fence is adept, he eliminates the possibility of a current owner discerning any hints of past owners. Not all "marks" are so easily annihilated though, and in the end, the decisive evidence against the Artful Dodger turns out to be the engraved name of the owner on the lid of a snuffbox.

Solomon's presence in the background of the novel demonstrates, moreover, how sensational effect erupts at the point when the empirical appearance of dispossessed materiality resolves a criminal mystery. According to one autobiographical pamphlet on Solomon's life and crimes (at least three hit the market in 1829–30 during his trial), his apprehension occurred after a coincidental reencounter that at this point will sound familiar:

The house of Colonel Napier, in Percy-street, was broken into and his desk ransacked of 150*l.* a gold watch, chain and seals. Some weeks after this Ikey, who was frequently given to take a drop too much, when he got it at other peoples expence, was sitting in the Percy Coffee-house, Rathbone-place, got into

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Maxwell points to other instances of Cruikshank's suggestive play with handkerchiefs. He offers up a reading of the illustration "Oliver Introduced to the Respectable Old Gentleman" (65, in the Penguin edition) that emphasizes how a series of handkerchiefs form an implied diagonal line from Oliver's satchel to Dodger's kerchief to Fagin's head scarf, ending with the gallows broadsheet above the fireplace—a series that underscores the process of socialization into criminal life and its deadly endpoint. Ultimately, Maxwell's reading is one of linearity, not circularity. See *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1992), 76–77.

conversation with a gentleman in elegant black cloathes, who pushed his bottle freely to Ikey.

They became good friends and Ikey sold him a pearl ring from his finger. This emboldened him to offer a gold watch for sale; the gentleman no sooner looked at it than he exclaimed, ‘this is Colonel Napier’s watch, of which he was robbed, where did you get it.’

Ikey said, ‘Oh, I bought it in London-street,’ and after many vain attempts to get the watch again into his hands, was allowed to depart, as he said, to bring in the jeweller from whom he purchased it: he never returned, and the waiter stating that he was a friend of Mr. King, the Jew banker, they soon discovered that it was Ikey, the swindler.

The person who held the watch was Colonel Napier’s steward, and, on a nearer inspection, the ring was also discovered to be the Colonel’s.<sup>65</sup>

It make little difference whether the event with Colonel Napier’s steward occurred or not.

Such scenarios of accidental owner-object reunions, here arranged as the pamphlet’s climax, existed to exploit the sensationalism of black-market contingency. Then, in the Old Bailey criminal courts, the original scenes of identification would be repeated: police would display the seized goods and have the original owners verify under oath and in front of the court that the objects were indeed their own. As another pamphlet on Solomons reports, more than half a dozen charges against the Prince of Fences were corroborated in this way. The effect will no doubt be guessed at: “These charges produced a sensation in the Justice Room unequalled.”<sup>66</sup>

When we add these accounts up, narrative coincidence’s central place in the representation of black markets appears to function simultaneously as the verification of a networked urban reality and the sensationalizing of that verification. Resurfaced objects announce the improbable as plausible, but the act of empirically proving that plausibility

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<sup>65</sup> [“Moses Hebron,”] *The Life and Exploits of Ikey Solomons, Swindler, Forger, Fencer, and Brothel-keeper* (London: Edward Duncombe, 1829), 8.

<sup>66</sup> *Adventures, Memoirs, Former Trial, Transportation, & Escapes, of that Notorious Fence, and Receiver of Stolen Goods, Isaac Solomons . . . By A Former Police Officer* (London: Joseph Knight, 1829), 30. The third known pamphlet on Solomon’s life is *The Life and Adventures of Isaac Solomons, the Notorious Receiver of Stolen Goods, Better Known as Ikey Solomons* (London: C. Strange, 1830). See Tobias, *Prince of Thieves*, 42–58.

relies on overdramatizing empiricism itself, the equivalent of proving a statement by way of an overstatement. If the recirculation of stolen objects in *Oliver Twist* plausibly grounds coincidence in the accidental crossings of stolen property and its disenfranchised owner, then it also invests that moment with an exaggerated sense of objectified spectacle that owes its debt to melodrama. *Oliver Twist* has long received censure for its overreliance on narrative coincidence, expressed most severely by Dickens's loving but critical apprentice, George Gissing, as "the sin, most gross, most palpable."<sup>67</sup> But we should at least understand this implausible plotting as an expression of a palpably new urban world of unexpected convergences in which realism draws support from melodrama rather than being opposed to it. Dickens's realism is more grisly and graphic than Bulwer's, but he too creates vitality through a potent *aura of verisimilitude* rather than probability. The novel's rhythms—its exaggerated, electrifying bravura—belong to the streets; its plotting is constitutive of a Dickensian dialectic of referentiality and romance at one of its earliest stages of incubation.<sup>68</sup>

Dickens's own editorializing has obscured the continuities between *Oliver Twist* and previous Newgate novels. In the 1841 Preface to the third edition, he distances his

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<sup>67</sup> George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (London: Blackie and Son, 1898), 57.

<sup>68</sup> Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton have made analogous claims about how Dickens's trademark style of caricature (his other great abuse of reality, as many see it) expresses the historicity of nineteenth-century metropolitan perception. Eagleton writes that Dickens's characterization "belongs to the street . . . in the sense that the way he perceives men and women—vividly but externally, caught in a single posture or defined by one or two idiosyncratic features—is the way we take in passing strangers on busy street corners." See Terry Eagleton, "Preface," in *Bleak House*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (New York: Penguin, 2003), viii. See also, Eagleton's *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 145. Eagleton's discussion expands upon Raymond Williams's remarks in the *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), where Williams writes: "As we stand and look back at a Dickens novel the general movement we remember—the decisive moment—is a hurrying seemingly random passing of men and women, each heard in some fixed phrase, seen in some fixed expression: a way of seeing men and women that belongs to the street" (32).

For a recent argument that argues for narrative coincidence's appropriateness to realism, see Adam Grener, "Coincidence as Realist Technique: Improbable Encounters and the Representation of Selfishness in *Martin Chuzzlewit*," *Narrative* 20:3 (2012): 322–42.

novel from the genre, particularly its glamorization of the criminal's life on the road. Bulwer gains Dickens's approval for his earnest critique of penal oppression, but he implicitly critiques *Paul Clifford* when he denigrates fiction that's driven by "the dash and freedom with which 'the road' has been, time out of mind, invested" (458). However, what goes unsaid in this preface is *Paul Clifford*'s greater influence on Dickens during those years when he was first beginning to work out the narrative architecture for his fiction, a relationship evident through the lens of the recirculation plot. Bulwer's technical guidance may have been even more overt, considering that at exactly the moment Dickens was working out the narrative arcs of *Oliver Twist*, Bulwer was publishing "On Art in Fiction" (March–April 1838), and the two men were becoming friends, dining together at least as early as March of 1838.<sup>69</sup> Regardless, from Bulwer, Dickens borrowed—then made his own—an object-based literary blueprint that enthroned recirculating objects as instrumental to mystery plots of orphanhood and crime.

### ***Jack Sheppard's Criminal Memorabilia***

There existed one text above all others from which Dickens's strident 1841 Preface wished to purge *Oliver Twist* of association: the quintessential Newgate novel, William Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard*, a historical romance illustrated by George Cruikshank about the rebellious youth, audacious crimes, and spectacular hanging of the eponymous eighteenth-century housebreaker and prison escape artist. If *Jack Sheppard*

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<sup>69</sup> According to their correspondence, Dickens dined with Bulwer sometime in February or March 1838, the month of the *Monthly Chronicle*'s launch. See Dickens, *Letters*, 1:379. Regarding *Oliver Twist*, Dickens wrote twice to Bulwer, once in October 1838 to personally alert him of the novel's popular progress (See *Letters*, 1:442), and again on 15 November 1838 to offer him a copy of the newly published three-volume edition: "As I troubled you with a note the other day relative to this son of misfortune, I am the more anxious to introduce him to your notice" (*Letters*, 1:454).

marks the high point of the Newgate novel controversy, it also marks several crucial transformations in the genre's treatment of underworld economies. Ainsworth's novel recapitulates the pattern of marrying coincidental plotting with stolen goods' recirculation, but in doing so, he flags that pattern as a normalized convention within a subgenre that by the decade's close was becoming codified and even obsolescent. Only casually interested in subplots of recirculation, *Jack Sheppard* instead hints at the device's own imminent status as cliché. In its reception history, a mass-cultural dialectic occurs in which the novel and its theatrical adaptations gives rise to a hitherto-unseen commodity craze for criminal memorabilia, which then becomes reabsorbed into the novel as a plot feature in its later serial installments. The objects that Jack leaves behind from robberies and escapes serve to establish his celebrity. *Jack Sheppard* therefore marks out the final stage in the Newgate novel's developing treatment of illicit markets: the fascination with criminal objects shifts from endlessly circulating stolen goods to the traded morbid memorabilia of notorious criminals. Rather than commodity objects being the motivation for crime, evidentiary objects become their own type of commodity—weapons, accessories, bodies—valued for their association with a crime that has already occurred. Through object mediation, non-criminals could share in the transgressive thrill of theft and murder without being either criminals themselves nor their victims.

*Jack Sheppard* is an flagrantly sensational portrayal of crime and theft.

Ainsworth's choice of hero capitalized on the actual Jack Sheppard's pre-existing celebrity—"once the single most well-known name from the eighteenth-century," writes Peter Linebaugh<sup>70</sup>—and augmented the tale with two intertwined orphan mystery plots, elaborate scenes (textual and visual, with the help of Cruikshank) of prison escape, and a

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<sup>70</sup> Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, 7.

vivid style of violence that outstripped Nancy's murder in *Oliver Twist* and looked ahead to G. M. W. Reynolds's gory penny dreadful, *The Mysteries of London* (1844–48).<sup>71</sup> Thackeray's parody, *Catherine*, a sarcastic sendup of *Oliver Twist*, *Jack Sheppard*, and the genre as a whole, labeled Ainsworth as the chief offender against a reading public that was "gorged with blood, and foul Newgate garbage."<sup>72</sup> Apocalyptic rhetoric flooded the bourgeois press. Of man and nature, the novel was a "corrupted, stunted, and deformed degradation of both," according to the *Athenaeum*, which also thought it a portentous sign of the times: "Jack Sheppard, then, is a bad book, and what is worse, it is of a class of bad books, got up for a bad public."<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile in the *Examiner*, a young John Forster wrote about his own reading experience, "Nothing could have been more vile."<sup>74</sup>

Although the gore attracted the harshest rebuke, property crime is the more common transgression depicted. The disenfranchised classes self-organize as a colony of debtors, robbers, and murderers in a central London neighborhood nicknamed "the Island

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<sup>71</sup> Lauren Gillingham makes the point that *Jack Sheppard* domesticates romance and melodrama patterns—and thus readers' sympathies—to a lower segment of society than anything previous. See Gillingham, "Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* and the Crimes of History," *SEL* 49:4 (2009): 884. Modern critics have seen Jack as both exceptional and typical. For the former, see Matthew Buckley who argues the illustrated text holds a landmark position in cultural and literary history because it ushered in a new "perceptual modernity" as exemplified in the rationalist visual acuity of Jack himself, whom Buckley sees as embodying a new heroic agency. See Buckley, "Sensations of Celebrity: *Jack Sheppard* and the Mass Audience," *Victorian Studies* 44:3 (2002): 425.

For the latter, see Edward Jacobs and Manuela Mourão, who understand Jack in terms of his class rather than perceptual ability: "*Jack Sheppard* remains unique in presenting carcerality as a fate suffered not by exceptional, prominent individuals . . . but rather by a disenfranchised *class* of people having neither prominence, power, not any 'desperate plot' beyond the need to escape the power of others." See Jacobs and Mourão, "Introduction," in William Harrison Ainsworth, *Jack Sheppard* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2007), 20.

<sup>72</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *Catherine: A Story*, ed. Sheldon Goldfarb (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1999), 116.

<sup>73</sup> Unsigned rev., *Athenaeum* 626 (26 Oct. 1839): 803. The writer thought it a portentous sign of the times: "Jack Sheppard, then, is a bad book, and what is worse, it is of a class of bad books, got up for a bad public" (803).

<sup>74</sup> Unsigned rev. [John Forster], *Examiner* 1657 (3 Nov. 1839): 691.



of Bermuda,” suggesting a dangerous vortex where property disappears.<sup>75</sup> Ainsworth clearly capitalized on the sensationalism of exposing this underworld, relishing the opportunity to translate thieves cant for his readers: “[Nearby] sat a fence, or receiver, bargaining with a clouter, or pickpocket, for a suit,—or, to speak in more intelligible language, a watch and seals, two cloaks, commonly called watch-cases, and a wedge-lobb, otherwise known as a silver snuff-box” (228). The novel’s plot tracks Jack’s uneasy integration into this world; he becomes a thief yet remains nobler than his associates. Like *Oliver Twist*, he is said to be “destined to the gibbet” (77), but in Ainsworth’s novel the prognostication is accurate: despite being raised by the respectable carpenter, Mr. Wood, the orphan Jack shirks his duties and, initially under the influence of the shape-shifting Jonathan Wild—both a thief and thief-taker, who turns out to be the novel’s arch villain—Jack advances from pickpocket to burglar to gaolbreaker, before his hanging closes the novel.

*Jack Sheppard* often adopts the device of object as latent narrative solution in a manner that calls attention to its literary artifice, rather than gesturing toward a verisimilitudinous world, as we saw with Bulwer and Dickens. The caricaturization of this Newgate novel trope occurs with Jonathan Wild, the blackmailer, thief-taker, and criminal overlord whose success depends on his compulsive habit of gathering and preserving *everything* that might serve as incriminating material against others. Wild himself announces the strategy early in the novel, when, by chance, he finds a key on the ground in the Old Mint neighborhood of London: “‘Never throw away a chance,’ thought Jonathan. ‘Who knows but this key may open a golden lock one of these days?’ And,

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<sup>75</sup> William Harrison Ainsworth, *Jack Sheppard*, ed. Edward Jacobs and Manuela Mourão (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2007), 69; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

picking it up, he thrust it into his pocket” (79). It appears at first that Ainsworth is cribbing Bulwer’s character Dummie Dunnaker and his proclamation in *Paul Clifford* that “*tannies* today will be *smash* tomorrow!” Ainsworth even conflates the *metaphorical function* of an object as a key to plot development with the *concrete thing* itself, a real key. It’s not one of Ainsworth’s subtler moments. Indeed, for the ungenerous reader, it’s one of many examples of his artless exposure of his plot’s seams. Those willing to make some concessions will read the lines as representing his vulgarization of plotting, making his design more discernable for the less-educated audience he expected of his novel. Or, to those big-hearted readers of Ainsworth, it may be his ironic side: he’s having a joke here about the overreliance on the strategy. Whatever’s the case, Bulwer’s method has become a Newgate novel commonplace, a generic convention.

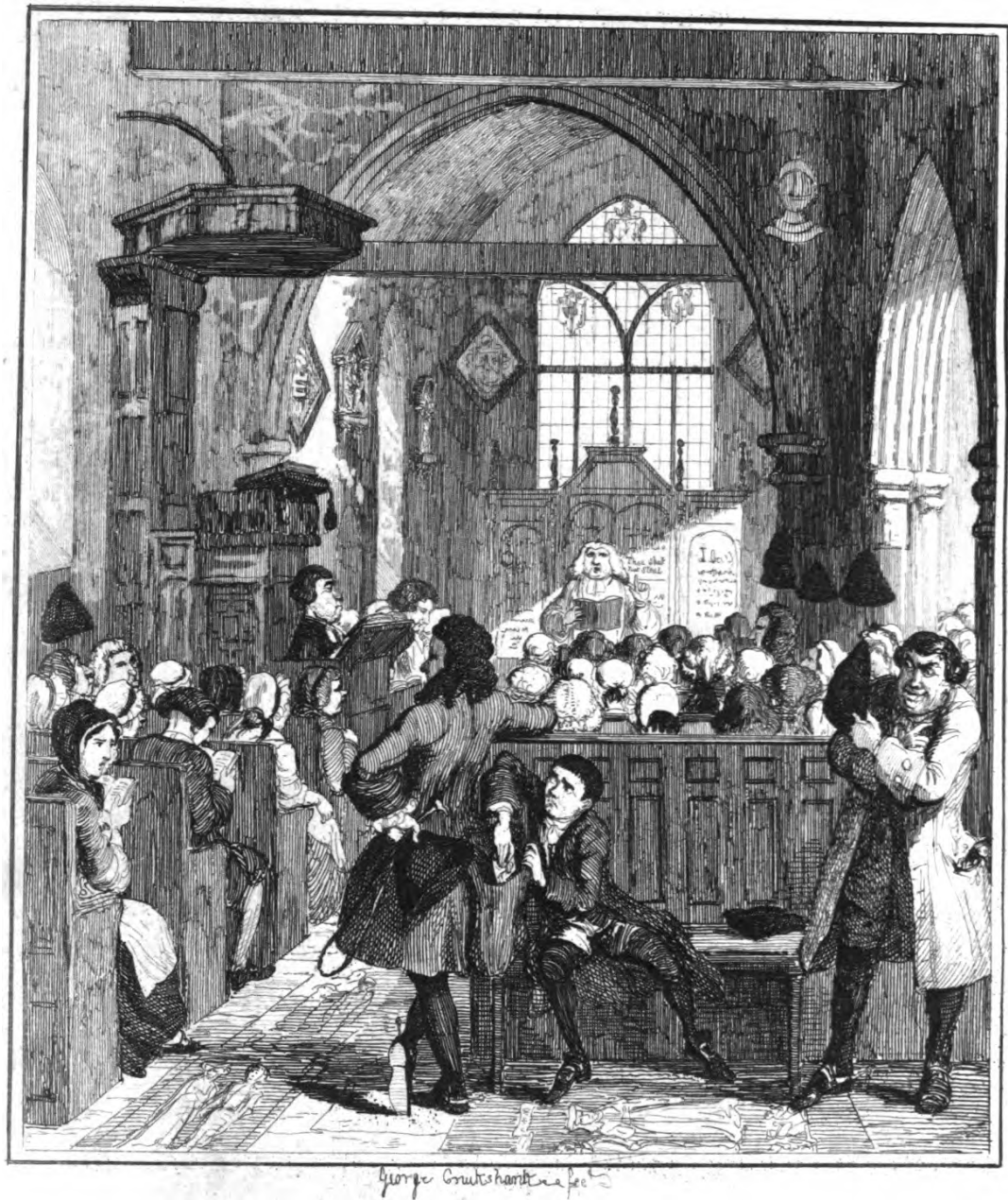
The ironic reading has several things going for it, not least of which is the fact that the key does *not* actually end up opening a golden box or empowering a *deus ex machina*. Jonathan Wild, in one of his early criminal temptations of the adolescent Jack, gives him the key so that the boy can clandestinely try its fit in the locked boxes in Mr. Wood’s shop, who happens to be the key’s original owner and Jack’s guardian. Nothing comes of it, though. Jack feels a pang of guilt and hands the key over to Mr. Wood. It never returns; if anything, it gets absorbed into the novel’s thematics of imprisonment, escape, and the figure of the “turnkey” (the guards that stand watch just outside Jack’s many holding cells). *Jack Sheppard* manages object recurrence in two ways: it combines instances of successfully circular and coincidence-derived plotting with other instances of *intentional* miscarriage, like the key. Jack’s adolescent theft of an apparently random miniature portrait, for instance, ends up unlocking the parental identity mystery of

Thames Darrell—Jack’s fellow orphan, honorable foil, and, as we later learn, his first cousin. But, later in the novel, after one of Jack’s four prison escapes, his hopes that some papers will help him depose Jonathan Wild go unrealized. Having robbed a man on horseback (who coincidentally turns out to be one of Wild’s accomplices), he discovers a pocketbook which “appeared to contain several papers, which Jack carefully put by, in the hope that they might turn out of importance in a scheme of vengeance which he meditated against the thieftaker” (290). But like the key, these papers are non-starters. *Jack Sheppard* enacts the partial decomposition of the plot device, the explicit loosening—though not undoing—of the tightly knit, closed system of object recurrences within the Newgate economy. Ainsworth relishes tinkering with the device, knowing that it piques readers’ sensitivity to seeded object details, but never does he seem particularly interested in using them to substantiate any pretense of realism. His is a more freewheeling adventure novel.

It’s from this vantage point that we should approach the novel’s morbid interest in the culture of criminal memorabilia, for if the novel displays ambivalence toward narrative conventions of recirculation, it offers Jonathan Wild’s museum of criminal rarities as a hyper-sensational auxiliary. His private museum holds physical mementoes of notable heists, murders, and hangings. Ainsworth, who based his depiction on the real-life Jonathan Wild’s collection, describes a gruesome museum that fixes objects in display cases: “a vast assortment of weapons” from notorious homicides (razors, iron bars, knives, “an immense two-pronged flesh fork”); the skeletal remains of those hanged at the Tyburn gallows; bits of the hangman’s ropes; and “an array of implements of housebreaking almost innumerable, and utterly indescribable” (239). Wild has organized

the objects into his own private museum within his house: “All of these interesting objects were carefully arranged, classed, and, as we have said, labeled by the thieftaker” (239). In other words, the collection is a second, alternative object paradigm to that of mobile stolen goods. As an aficionado of celebrated felons, Wild *accumulates* objects in his museum that carry the trace of criminality and then fixes them in a stable organization. But the original object paradigm lives just beside the museum; the collector is also a fence. In the same home he has a fencing crib, where he holds and processes a separate inventory of objects before selling them in the black market. Wild is thus a key intermediary figure standing between two poles of objecthood in *Jack Sheppard*: one of memorabilia and one of stolen goods.

In our genealogy of Newgate novels’ coincidentality, the most striking outcome seems to proceed from the points where the two systems overlap. Even Wild’s massive collection of relics—a nod to his pathological appreciation of crime—can channel the electrifying shock of coincidence that typically constitutes stolen goods’ reappearance. As Wild leads his guest, Sir Rowland Trenchard, through a tour of his museum, he points to one seemingly random skull within the collection of innumerable items: “‘This skull,’ [Wild] added, pointing to a fragment of mortality in the case beside them, ‘once belonged to Tom Sheppard, the father of the lad I spoke of just now. In the next box hangs the rope by which he suffered.’” (240–41). Here, a characterological relationship quite suddenly jumps out from a descriptive catalog. The criminal commemoration trope may conceptually stand opposed to the object recurrence trope, but memorabilia can at times co-opt the coincidentality of contraband for its own sensational purposes.



**Figure 1.7.** George Cruikshank, “Jack Sheppard Committing the Robbery in Willesden Church,” frontispiece of *Jack Sheppard*, Book II, 1839.

In its attentiveness to this style of morbid collecting, *Jack Sheppard* demonstrates an awareness of its own, serially developing reception. The Sheppard mania of 1839–40 was both extra-textual and perversely commoditized. The novel spawned a culture of

adaptations and derivatives that included at least eight stage melodramas (many opening before the novel was completed), street shows, pamphlets, cartoons, souvenirs, baubles, and, according to Thackeray, purchasable sacks of burglary tools, for any playgoer wishing to emulate Jack. “[T]hey say,” he wrote disapprovingly in a letter to his mother, “that at the Cobourg [Theatre] people are waiting about the lobbies, selling *Shepherd-bags*—a bag containing a few pick-locks that is, a screw driver, and iron lever.”<sup>76</sup> Those not willing to hazard any illegal behavior could at last save the tools as souvenirs.

Whether outfitted with these pick-locks or not, adolescent boys were indeed imitating Jack’s spectacularly staged burglaries, if we are to believe the firsthand reports taken from juvenile delinquents in Manchester and Liverpool. While critics in periodicals obsessed over *Jack Sheppard*’s moral message, teenagers—who were flocking in droves to the playhouses—honed in on the ingenuities of his pilfering methods. One jailed Liverpool teen’s remark is typical: “I have seen ‘Jack Sheppard’ performed; thought it was very nice, and if I was only as clever I should be thought one of the best of thieves. I thought that part the cleverest, where he takes the purse from the lady, also the taking the snuff-box from Lady Trafford was very good; his method of picking locks and getting out of gaol was very good. I first commenced stealing in the market, apples, &c.”<sup>77</sup> Another boy in the report remembers the streets saturated with Cruikshank’s illustrations from the novel, particularly one that shows Jack picking pockets in church while a sinister

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<sup>76</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1945), 1:395. For examples of Jack Sheppard print adaptations, see Patricia Anderson, *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790–1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 164–67.

<sup>77</sup> These remarks are made by “W. D.,” fourteen years old. See *Sixth Report of the Inspectors of Prisons, Northern and Eastern Districts* (London: W. Clowes, 1841), 132. Portions of this report are reprinted in the appendix of *Jack Sheppard*, ed. Jacobs and Mourão. Also of interest is Michael Macilwee, *The Liverpool Underworld: Crime in the City, 1750–1900* (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 2011).

Jonathan Wild supervises to his right (Figure 1.7).<sup>78</sup> Friedrich Engels comments on the book's popularity in 1840s Manchester; Mayhew singles it out as the most influential book for London teenagers. Over and over, the interviewed youths report they have pilfered not just to mimic Jack, but to obtain money to see him on stage once more, often at cheap shows called "penny hops." They steal change from parents, scrap metal from strangers, watches from shopkeepers, and fruit from costermongers. They pawn the stolen property to get money for the play. Once inside the playhouses, the pickpocketing of attendees commences. While there's reason to question whether these reports were modified to validate anxieties about the play's influence, the report confirms Sheppard mania inundated urban areas with far-reaching and diverse incentives to steal.

Still more perverse—and more in line with Jonathan Wild's proclivities—was the period's broader interest in collecting objects that are the physical leftovers of violent crime scenes. In 1831, the journalist Albany Fonblanque termed this collector's obsession as "The Diseased Appetite for Horrors," and suggested it was giving rise to a pathological commerce in which any willing buyer could vicariously experience sensational crime through owning and handling its material remnants:

The landlord upon whose premises a murder is committed, is now-a-days a made man. The place becomes a show—the neighborhood as the scene of a fair. The barn in which Maria Martin was murdered by Corder, was sold in toothpicks: the hedge through which the body of Mr. Weare was dragged, was purchased by the inch. Bishop's house bids fair to go off in tobacco-stoppers and snuff-boxes. . . . If a Bishop will commit a murder for 12*l.*, which seems the average market-price, the owner of a paltry tenement might find it worthwhile to entice a ruffian to make it the scene of a tragedy, for the sale of the planks and timbers in toothpicks, at a crown each. . . . We throw out these considerations to check the diseased

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<sup>78</sup> "H. C.," age fifteen: "There were pictures of him about the streets on boards and on the walls; one of them was his picking a pocket in church" (*Sixth Report*, 134).

appetite for horrors, lest their indulgence should lead, to a more extensive trade in diabolicals, than the impediments to the supply of the dissecting-tables.<sup>79</sup>

The objects serve as witnesses from the scene of the crime, and they thereby allow the owner a measure of mediated involvement in the violence—whether via an axe’s display or a toothpick’s flavor. In this process, violent crime gives birth to a new stratum of underground market. John Thurtell’s gory murder of William Weare in 1823 (mentioned above by Fonblanque) exemplifies the perverse enthusiasm for what Martin Meisel calls “the sensationalism of the authentic material witness.”<sup>80</sup> Implicitly personified, objects from the crime scenes were thought to have seen the murder, to bear the stamp of its gruesomeness, and to have returned to tell the tale. The purported gig used to transport the mangled body of Weare soon appeared, with much ballyhoo, on stage in an 1824 melodrama. The criminal vestige might even be corporeal, such as John Thurtell’s own caul, the protective membrane on some newborn infants’ heads, considered lucky. It was Pierce Egan who gained possession of Thurtell’s caul after covering the murder for the newspapers. He then passed it on as a gift to a friend, a novelist he had come to admire very much: Edward Bulwer.<sup>81</sup>

As *Jack Sheppard* approaches its conclusion and comes to focus more on Jack’s escapes from prison rather than the burglaries that got him there, the novel appropriately

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<sup>79</sup> Albany Fonblanque, “The Diseased Appetite for Horrors,” *Examiner* 1245 (11 Dec 1831): 787. Reprinted in 1837, with slight changes, in Fonblanque’s *England Under Seven Administrations*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley), 2:194–95.

<sup>80</sup> Meisel, *Realizations*, 249.

<sup>81</sup> For an account of the “early cluster of sensational cases” (17)—murders which were widely covered and eagerly consumed from 1823–1837, especially the John Thurtell case—see Richard Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (New York: Norton, 1970), 17–40. Walter Scott swung by Gill’s Hill for a tourist’s look at the crime scene; Thomas Carlyle and Thomas De Quincey weighed in on the act; and, even in his old age, Robert Browning could still recite street ballads about Thurtell’s murder.

As for the caul as exchanged object, recall the opening chapter of *David Copperfield*: “I was born with a caul, which was advertised for sale, in the newspapers, at the low price of fifteen guineas.” Cauls were thought to be good luck, especially for sailors. After not selling, it is put up for raffle at a town raffle. See Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (New York: Penguin, 2004), 15.



shifts its attention from what he plunders to the materials he leaves behind—the durable objects that promise to extend, perhaps indefinitely, Jack’s celebrity. The escape sites draw particularly large crowds, especially the later ones in Newgate prison: “Some of these persons were examining the spot where the spike had been cut off; others the spike itself, now considered a remarkable object; and all were marveling how Jack could have possibly squeezed himself through such a narrow aperture” (360). Even the jailers realize the potential of the eager crowds and begin charging admission to see the damaged cell bars. Following his second of two escapes from Newgate Prison, Jack receives the services of an admiring blacksmith whose preferred payment is not money but something solid with which to remember Jack. After removing his fetters, the smith promises to cherish them unto permanence, even if Jack’s own days are numbered: “I’m afraid, Jack, you’ll come to the gallows, . . . but if you do, I’ll go to Tyburn to see you. But I’ll never part with your irons” (444). Ainsworth’s sources for the blacksmith scene are eighteenth-century accounts of Jack Sheppard, but the detail about the irons as mementos is Ainsworth’s own. They seem to be his own nod to the era’s “trade in diabolicals,” as well as his recognition that his book was deeply embedded in such networks of criminal fetishism.

By the end of 1840, the murderous valet Courvoisier had been hanged, Sheppard mania had subsided, sweeping changes to property crime punishments had come into effect, and the Newgate novel had largely run its course. Its presence in the 1840s was more as stubborn cliché than pioneering fiction or political threat.<sup>82</sup> The 1840s also saw

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<sup>82</sup> Notable novels of the 1840s within the tradition are Bulwer-Lytton’s *Lucretia* (1846), and to a limited extent, Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). Thackeray claimed in 1840 that the taste for the Newgate novel was “on the wane” (William Makepeace Thackeray, *Fraser’s Magazine* 21 (Feb 1840): 210. For a discussion of the subgenre’s final phase, see Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel*, 167–222. Gary Kelly

political progressivism migrate into new territory: from the Newgate novel to the industrial novel, thereby shifting focus from black markets undergirded by titillating networks of thieves to commodity markets sustained by sympathetic crowds of the proletariat. *Jack Sheppard*'s own internal shift from plunder to memorialization might even be seen as structurally registering the legal and cultural shifts of its era, particularly the relaxations of larceny laws which tempered the the sensationalism of stolen goods.

But surely what we *have* seen is that this body of texts from the 1830s reworked several fundamental structures of narrative by drawing on the kinetics of a criminal counter-economy defined by its unpredictable systems of recirculation. These object circuits provided new materials to animate plot devices like coincidence, capitalizing on a type of verisimilitude that sensationalized its own claims of realism. Jewelry, old clothes, and handkerchiefs all helped to usher in the novelistic form whose multi-plotted vitality derived from its endeavor to capture such extensive circuits in its own limited narrative space. If the Newgate novel is the rather awkward adolescent phase of the Victorian novel—which, as most think, would properly “grow up” in the 1840s—then what we see in Bulwer's, Dickens's, and Ainsworth's texts are the Victorian novel's growing pains. During this transitional negotiation of literary form, the skeletal structure of narrative fiction expanded rapidly, incorporating the materials of urban reality without leaving behind the body of melodrama.

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helpfully separates out the Newgate novel from Newgate literature, which includes broadsheets, editions of the *Newgate Calendar*, and melodrama, all aimed at a lower-class audience. These forms continued in popularity well past the early 40s. See Kelly, *Newgate Narratives*, lxxi.

## Chapter Two

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### **A Ragged Totality: *Bleak House*'s Paper Routes and the Dickensian Character Economy**

*“From whence do these papers come,  
you say? That is the great question.”*  
—Miss Flite

If you want to find Charles Dickens transfixed by rubbish, the conventional wisdom is to head straight to *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), a text that centers on the wealth-producing dust mounds of Boffin's Bower. A long critical tradition has enthroned Dickens's final completed book as the premier rubbish novel of the nineteenth century, the *locus classicus* for observing Dickensian and even Victorian attitudes toward salvage. While there's significant disagreement over how much Dickens dotes on rubbish and how much he dreads it in *Our Mutual Friend*, readers agree that the novel's vision of material reclamation grapples with challenges of filth, cultural degeneration, and in a more historically specific sense, the sanitation crises of the 1850s and 60s.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Readings that take a more affirmative view of rubbish have come from both metaphysical and materialist angles. For the former, see J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*

The problem with this line of thinking isn't its validity, but the way in which it normalizes the category of rubbish as something inherently dirty and scandalous. This not only paints an inaccurate picture of Victorian culture and economics; it also forecloses or oversimplifies analysis of Dickens's less sensational portrayals of salvage. It's much more accurate to say *Our Mutual Friend* represents the dark conclusion of Dickens's career-long fascination with urban recirculation, most of which is *not* imperiled by organic matter or pollution. Indeed, we saw in the previous chapter how that interest in recirculation's less polluted forms is evident as early as the pawnshops of *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and the black markets of *Oliver Twist* (1837–39). But the novel that profits most from reorienting our theories of rubbish is Dickens's mid-career masterwork, *Bleak House* (1852–53), where scavenging involves the pursuit of informational scraps from piles of discarded or superfluous paper. This is the form of salvage most appropriate, after all, for a book that's both a bureaucratic saga and a mystery novel. Because Victorian waste paper constituted a rubbish category much different than our own, its dynamism as a narrative object becomes evident only with the help of both historicist and

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(Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), 279–327, who sees reclamation as a metaphor for spiritual rebirth. For the latter, see Nancy Aycock Metz, "The Artistic Reclamation of Waste in *Our Mutual Friend*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 34:1 (1979): 59–72; and Talia Shaffer, *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 119–144. On the other hand, the critical tradition of connecting filth to social crisis might be said to begin with Humphrey House's remark that "In *Pickwick* a bad smell was a bad smell; in *Our Mutual Friend* it is a problem" (see House, *The Dickens World*, 2nd ed. [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960], 135.) Later generations of historicist critics have been especially attentive to the ineradicable problems of filth and disease in relation to reusability. See, for example, Pamela K. Gilbert, "Medical Mapping: The Thames, the Body, and *Our Mutual Friend*," in *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2005), 78–102; and Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographers in Victorian London* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 86–114.

For an important reading of the novel's relationship to the discourse of political economy, see Catherine Gallagher, "The Bioeconomics of *Our Mutual Friend*," in *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 86–117. For an excellent study of Victorian waste, dustmen, and, to a certain extent, *Our Mutual Friend*, see Brian Maidment, *Dusty Bob: A Cultural History of Dustmen, 1780–1870* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2007).

formalist analysis. Not only does paper comprise the Victorian era's most prevalent recycling economy; it operates within the novel on several levels: as diegetic object, forensic data carrier, and character metonym. By examining these linked dimensions, this chapter argues that Dickens exploits the versatility of waste paper as the master organizing principle for his intricately networked, socially panoramic form.

This organizing principle shapes both the novel's object economy and what I call its character economy. What I mean is that Dickens first draws on the narrative kinetics of paper recycling to create object-based suspense, and he then transposes that paradigm of waste and recuperation onto *Bleak House*'s character world, which, having become more sprawling than any of his previous novels, is large enough to possess its own logic of circulation, use value, and suspense. The conditions that enable this structural homology derive from the patterns of the Victorian waste paper economy, which included parchment's many repurposed forms as well as its pre-life form as old cloth rags, which manufacturers used as the raw materials for fresh paper. Much like the black markets of the Newgate novel, this economy possessed its own fundamental temporality. Via transformational cycles, paper repeatedly deferred its final stage of absolute waste. Whether discarded documents or deteriorating rags, paper-based rubbish existed in a kind of limbo, persisting as unnoticed material, awaiting potential conversion or revaluation. In the Victorian cultural imagination, these cycles highlighted the material interrelationships of persons from different social strata, that is, between the destitute classes who wore and collected these rags and the middle- and upper-class people who handled paper on a daily basis. Because our modern paper no longer has these life stages,

we have missed the degree to which Dickens uses recirculating materiality to answer the novel's master enigma of social totality—"What connexion can there be?"<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, we have missed seeing how Dickens uses paper's stages of latency and rebirth as a model for the narrative stages in which minor characters disappear from and reappear into the novel's field of visibility, often doing so with a new function or identity. This homology between materiality and character might at first seem too neat—too much the product of a modern literary-critical wish to assimilate form and content (a methodological debate with a long history of using *Bleak House* as a case study).<sup>3</sup> But the correspondence was in fact the result of the Victorian era's own fascination with economics as having its own narrative form, combined with Dickens's willingness to experiment with the homology. Not only did writing on rag recycling and paper production often turn to personification, but within *Bleak House* the most prominent examples of characters operating as recirculating rubbish occur with those who are literally "ragged" in appearance, such as Krook, Nemo, and Jo. Dickens's signature trope of collapsing the boundary between things and person thus becomes his starting point for overtly representing characters as participants in a world of serviceable textual rubbish. But, as we'll see, the phenomenon extends to the entire field of minor figures, the dozens of individuals who disappear from and reappear into the novel's field of visibility, often marked by transformation.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (New York: Penguin, 2003), 256. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>3</sup> The debate about the correspondence between form and content in *Bleak House* runs deep. D. A. Miller calls the "critical fondness" for this assimilation "a facile sleight-of-hand" (*The Novel and the Police* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988], 84). His targets here are J. Hillis Miller's "Interpretation in Dickens' *Bleak House*," (reprinted in *Victorian Subjects* [Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1991], 179–200); and Terry Eagleton's *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: NLB, 1976). For a response to this debate, see Daniel Hack, "'Sublimation Strange': Allegory and Authority in *Bleak House*," *ELH* 66 (1999): 129–56.

We have long understood paper in *Bleak House* to allegorize aspects of narrative form, but by approaching the novel through the lens of economic recirculation, we see in particular how it illuminates plot design and the character economy that shapes it. Studying paper *routes*, in other words, reinvigorates the well-worn topos of paper, which, in other critics' hands, has been shown to dramatize the decline of domesticity, to speculate on the archaeological archives of past empires, and to bureaucratize the urban mystery genre of the 1840s.<sup>4</sup> In addition, J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive thesis, that the novel is "a document about the interpretation of documents," has recently seen revision by critics working on Victorian theories of materiality, particularly by Daniel Hack, who claims that the novel is "a document about the materiality of documents and the interpretation of that materiality."<sup>5</sup> (Hack's argument indicates how even the critical history of *Bleak House* likes to recycle its own syntax.) Like Hack, I see the historical contexts of paper as highly significant, especially given Dickens's self-aware presentation of paper's life stages (from rag to love letter to fuel) in both *Bleak House* and the journalism he himself wrote on paper production. But I ultimately find these contexts most meaningful for formalist reasons more in line with Hillis Miller,

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<sup>4</sup> See, respectively, Kevin McLaughlin, *Paperwork: Fiction and Mass Mediacy in the Paper Age* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 80–96; Andrew M. Stauffer, "Ruins of Paper: Dickens and the Necropolitan Library," *Érudit: Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 47 (August 2007), <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ravon/2007/v/n47/016700ar.html>; and Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1992), 160–90. For other notable analyses of paper in *Bleak House*, see Tony E. Jackson, *The Technology of the Novel: Writing and Narrative in British Fiction* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2009), 79–102; see also Michal Peled Ginsburg, *Economies of Change: Form and Transformation in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996), 142–48. Jackson, from an anti-deconstructive position, sees paper as the essential technology of modern storytelling. Ginsburg connects Krook's hoarding to the novel's linear plots of restoration, in contrast to *Our Mutual Friend*, which associates recyclability with more complex plots of transformation.

<sup>5</sup> J. H. Miller, "Interpretation in Dickens' *Bleak House*," 179; Daniel Hack, *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2005), 38. Hillis Miller's essay first appeared as the introduction to an earlier Penguin edition of the novel; for the original version of the argument, see the introduction to *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 11–34.

particularly his claim that the text's "complex fabric of recurrences" is essential to the readerly experience of protracted multiplot narrative.<sup>6</sup>

Once brought to the surface, *Bleak House*'s character economy showcases the cognitive and affective experience of reading novels that are simultaneously digressive and economical. Dickens uses the rubbish paradigm to exploit the irresolvable gap between character excess and narrative closure—that is, between the novel's celebrated overpopulation and the constraints of administering that overpopulation within the boundaries of novelistic form. Through its intricate but so often opaque network of minor characters, *Bleak House* organizes itself around multiple thresholds of novelistic suspense and surprise, since there exists for the reader always the possibility that a character or object that has exited the novel's purview may reappear, even if in an altered or figural form. This pattern occurs in two ways. The first involves the lingering presence of deceased figures (Krook, Nemo, and Jo, especially) overtly associated with rags and paper, who continue to haunt the novel's elaborate metaphors long after the reader expects them to have disappeared entirely. The second includes the return of lapsed minor characters whom we expect to have outlived their narrative utility or whom we have nearly forgotten—a phenomenon especially germane to the original serial readership and of particular interest to Victorian critics. And yet, *Bleak House* often frustrates the very expectation of character return and closure that it works so manifestly to create. However tidy or frugal its narrative economy appears to be, it remains in many ways open-ended. For Dickens, novelistic form invites the serial author's impulse toward orderly design, but is in the end an unstable organizational unit. And in *Bleak House*, that

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<sup>6</sup> J. H. Miller, "Interpretation in Dickens' *Bleak House*," 183.



instability is precisely what creates the opportunity for the metamorphosis of value that corresponds to the temporally contingent logic of rubbish.

By overtly flagging his churning character world as recirculatory, Dickens shows a new self-consciousness about how he has been organizing character visibility and function over the course of his career. *Bleak House* accentuates, often extravagantly, the dynamic intersection of temporality and character fundamental to his plotting. In its pre-planned, orchestral coordination, *Bleak House* is best suited to demonstrate Dickens's global methods of novelistic design, particularly the strategy he began with *Dombey and Son* (1846–48) of meticulously planning out his novels in working notes. These mid- and late-career novels, marked throughout by what Harry Stone calls a “concern with timing and recurrence,” evince that Dickens's tightly knit plots coalesce via his techniques for introducing, withdrawing, and reinstating the characters that hover about the peripheries of his stories.<sup>7</sup>

### **Paper Mills and the Rubbish Economy**

The narrative tension of *Bleak House*'s paper world lies in the fact that, on the one hand, it insistently creates the impression that paper records are meaningless—the inconsequential superabundance of mass-produced media—and yet on the other hand, it consolidates its mystery plots around the discovery of hyper-consequential records from within that superabundance. Information, like the paper that supports it, exists in a state of limbo in which potential value lies within an environment of surfeit, awaiting the discovery that may cause its sudden spike in significance. The first step to understanding *Bleak House*'s global structure is analyzing this *material* system of detritus and salvage

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<sup>7</sup> Harry Stone, *Dickens' Working Notes for His Novels* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), xxv.

since it serves as the support for its *formal* arrangement of narrative data. To do so, this section focuses on paper as an object, one with life stages, production methods, and cultural associations. I begin by looking to anthropological theories of value fluctuation to develop a more precise vocabulary and model for understanding paper's contingent, fluctuating status. Key to paper rubbish's temporality are the intermediate stages of covert potentiality between the more dramatic acts of transformation. I then connect these insights to the history of paper production, namely the use of recycled rags as raw materials collected from and by the lower classes. Paper uniquely demonstrates how material lifecycles bind, materially though not always visibly, the stratified class system of Victorian Britain. From generalist periodicals to chemistry manuals to the mad writings of Thomas Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdröckh, writers used the recirculatory economy of rags and paper as a potent analogy for social totality.

The document stashes of *Bleak House* can be said to represent a bureaucratic intensification of the mystery device that Edward Bulwer exploited in *Paul Clifford*: the bundle of lost or stolen papers that is preserved based on the vague sense of their having prospective value. But whereas Bulwer spotlighted the papers of potential value early in his novel, Dickens buries his within a chaos of parchment, creating a deep uncertainty regarding where value resides. It's worth reminding oneself just how thick the famous piles of the novel are: for half the narrative, Krook's shop appears to be a happily bloated holding tank for inconsequential old parchments, the disordered detritus of London's legal transactions. The Court of Chancery, the rag-and-bottle shop's more distinguished correlative, proliferates documents at a manic rate; and yet, however much of this production turns out to be superfluous—and a great deal of it does—the documents are

usually thrust back into the barristers' "battery of blue bags" and refiled in the disorderly archive of legal precedent (19). Only one of these two locations will yield the meaningful records that the novel needs to resolve its narrative uncertainty. However, as Richard Carstone's desperate research in the Chancery files indicates, *Bleak House* maintains the prospect that paper-borne meaning and value might surface from within either setting. Mrs. Jellyby's house, another vortex of paper, never achieves the narrative prominence of the Court of Chancery or Krook's shop, but because it shares similar characteristics, it too reiterates the tension that substance and superfluity are mingled indistinctly. Letters about the "African project" pile up on desks; they blanket the floor; they spill out of closets; and they end up forming "a nest of waste paper" in which Mrs. Jellyby roosts as she dictates her reply letters (53, 58).

Waste paper commands attention within the narrative economy because it paradoxically is not yet absolute waste; it exists in an intermediate stage of relative waste. Critically explicating such a complicated scheme is difficult to do given the relatively abstract vocabulary of narratology, though. For that reason, I want to turn to Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory*, an anthropological approach to objects that emphasizes precisely these intermediate states defined by ambiguous value. In approaching rubbish through its temporal transformation rather than its association with filth, Thompson gives us a working paradigm that will then help us understand the recirculatory characteristics of the novel's material economy, and then by extension, the character economy that Dickens develops from it.

For Thompson, there are three categories of objects, classified according to their economic value: the *transient* (that which decreases in value over time, as most ordinary

goods do); the *durable* (that which increases in value over time or retains its value); and a third, covert category known as *rubbish*. Thompson defines rubbish as the object category that occupies a strange middle state in which objects have no immediate or apparent value. The rubbish item, he explains, “is able to provide the path for the seemingly impossible transfer of an object from transience to durability. What I believe happens is that a transient object gradually declining in value and in expected life-span may slide across into rubbish.” It then “just continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo where at some later date (if it has not by that time turned, or been made, into dust) it has the chance of being discovered,” and thus revalued and returned to the “durable” category (i.e. that of increasing value).<sup>8</sup> In distinction to the waste items of pollution and disgust that Mary Douglas examines, Thompson’s rubbish category includes those ordinary objects that are covert—consigned to out-of-sight locations.<sup>9</sup>

The phenomenon of rubbish’s fluctuating valuation emerges alongside, and largely because of, the rise of the Victorian commodities market. In Thompson’s account, these returns to durability often feature what we call antiques, and his analysis of modern rubbish begins, appropriately enough, with Victorian woven silk pictures from the 1870s, which, having had the status of covert rubbish for decades, returned to the durable category as collector’s items in the 1960s. What interests Thompson most is how the silk pictures, once they had fallen out of fashion, became nearly valueless, and remained for much of the early twentieth century in the rubbish category, that intervening state

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 9–10.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966). Douglas’s classic text of social anthropology, though surely interested in categories of social value, focuses on how dirt, not household junk, throws into relief humans’ systematic classification of matter. Jonathan Culler helpfully draws out the distinction between these two strains of anthropological thought in his review of Thompson’s book: “Junk and Rubbish: A Semiotic Approach,” *Diacritics* 15.3 (1985): 2–12.

between the transient and the durable. Decades later, as a result of changing social tastes toward Victoriana, the prints once more became highly valuable; in 1973 a set of now-durable antiques sold for £3,000, though before 1960 they had been virtually unsellable. In the nineteenth century, the sheer abundance of mass-produced items like these silk prints ensured an ever-growing supply of such transient objects which, as Thompson puts it, “may slide across into rubbish.”<sup>10</sup> The keyword here is “may,” since many transient objects simply fall apart or become buried in a landfill, and many that do slide into the limbo category of rubbish will never again become durable.

*Bleak House*, of course, is not a novel about antique valuations, and characters do not value its paper rubbish for aesthetic trends. They value it for its informational worth, its contents, its capacity to disclose a hidden past. With that said, the novel’s piles of mostly inconsequential but potentially valuable documents do correspond to Thompson’s theoretical category of rubbish in terms of his emphasis on the limbo state that is delimited temporally. Paper lingers, mostly on account of characters’ faint sense that it may one day have worth, though they rarely know why or how. For both Thompson and Dickens, you’ll also notice that rubbish’s return to durability connects individuals inhabiting different socioeconomic worlds: art collectors are suddenly willing to pay thousands for what modest families stash away in attics; lawyers and aristocrats scramble to recover what salvage dealers and pauper copyists leave behind. With the lost Jarndyce will, we can sharpen Thompson’s theory further and say that its informational value

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<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, 126. Thompson has difficulty identifying the line between transience and rubbish, but he summarizes the possibilities as such: “first, all items entering into the transient category are eventually either consumed or transferred to the rubbish category, and second, . . . some, but not all, rubbish is either consumed by services (e.g. refuse disposal, sewage treatment) or transferred into the durable category. Some remains as rubbish” (126).

enters into limbo due to the accident of its coming into the illiterate Krook's possession. I would add, then, that the rubbish category is not always defined by a general lack of social interest, but rather the contingency of location and decipherability.

The return to value from rubbish characterizes several of the novel's key papers once assumed worthless. The love letters between Captain Hawdon and Lady Dedlock, previously of no narrative importance other than as tokens of past romance, are cast back into the realm of the durable by the forensic noses of Guppy, Tulkinghorn, and Bucket. Likewise, Mr. George's old letters from Hawdon, saved in remembrance of a lost friend, become valuable evidence in Tulkinghorn's quest to find a handwriting match for the law briefs Hawdon had written under the pseudonym Nemo. And most important is the lost Jarndyce will, uncovered by Grandpa Smallweed from Krook's clutter—a mess of sheets described by Inspector Bucket as “a good deal of Magpie property . . . Vast lots of waste paper among the rest. . . . of no use to nobody!” (944). From its intermediary state of rubbish (for the birds, so to speak), relatively valueless because of Krook's illiteracy, the Jarndyce will is instantly converted into a document of significant durability, even if its promise of substantial monetary value proves to be unstable given that the suit's entire fortune has been eaten up by legal costs.

Krook's shop itself gives us the clearest logic for interpreting the role of paper in the rubbish state. Although Esther describes it as a place where “Everything seemed to be bought, and nothing to be sold,” the shop is more accurately a place where paper goes to wait, not to die (67). The stagnant air and temporal haze confirm it as a place where documents exist in valueless limbo, awaiting either discovery or eventual disintegration. Several critics have focused on this perverse location to uncover Dickens's motivations in

obsessively calling attention to the materiality of writing and its relationship to the bodies with which it interacts.<sup>11</sup> I, too, take great interest in Krook's shop, though not for the material trappings of writing (pens, ink, and parchments) but rather the shop's representation of paper production from the waste of other materials.

Dickens affirms the function of documents as latent value holders and plot devices through an icon of regeneration displayed in Krook's window: a red mill that produces paper from old rags. As the wards of Jarndyce enter the shop with Miss Flite, Esther notices the picture of the mill before any ink jars or paper:

[Miss Flite] had stopped at a shop, over which was written, KROOK, RAG AND BOTTLE WAREHOUSE. Also, in long thin letters, KROOK, DEALER IN MARINE STORES. In one part of the window was a picture of a red paper mill, at which a cart was unloading a quantity of old rags. (67)

The tableau represents paper in the manufacturing phase, according to the standard practice of papermaking in the nineteenth century. A *Bradshaw's Journal* article from 1842 succinctly describes the reasoning for this practice in a tour of a Lancashire paper mill: "no substance, it was found, could be better suited for the purpose, than the tattered remnants of old clothes, worn-out linen, or rags unfit for use—which daily increase in quantity, and would otherwise have been considered valueless; and from them it is that paper is manufactured."<sup>12</sup> Paper production operates according to an economic principle of frugality: recycle the rubbish material that already exists in abundance. The

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<sup>11</sup> For example, "The handling of mass-produced paper in Dickens's novel," McLaughlin writes, "dramatizes the decline, not just of the domestic aura, but also of domesticity as a metaphor for a stable sense of place" (*Paperwork*, 80). Also see Hack, *The Material Interests*: "By emphasizing the materiality of texts and the semiotics of bodies, *Bleak House* reduces the difference between texts and bodies" (43). For an analysis of how the superabundance of Krook's shop anticipates the literary critical questions of interpretation and search technologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see Maurice S. Lee, "Searching the Archives with Dickens and Hawthorne: Databases and Aesthetic Judgment after the New Historicism," *ELH* 79 (2012): 747–71.

<sup>12</sup> "A Day at the Darwen Paper Mills, Lancashire," *Bradshaw's Journal: A Miscellany of Literature, Science, and Art* 3.3 (May 21, 1842): 34.

remarkably technical article is accompanied by several illustrations of various paper mill machines, including one of the “Dusting Machine,” which pictures a man carrying an armload of rags to a counter where two women are “occupied in assorting a quantity of cotton waste, mixed with rags, strong linen sheeting, and old ropes.”<sup>13</sup> The dusting machine represents the moment of initial transformation from rag to paper, the moment when cloth rubbish begins its return to a revalued form (Figure 2.1).

It’s worth exploring the mid-century cultural preoccupation with rag-to-paper recycling for several reasons, the first of which is that it suggests Krook’s shop is not the novel’s grand symbol of constipation—the downstream terminus for the Chancery’s surplus—despite its status as the most celebrated site of hoarding in Victorian fiction. Instead, I want to argue that Dickens positions it as a hub in the novel’s broader system of rubbish’s circular movement among characters and classes. I mean this not only in its role as a plot device—the shop does cough up most of the novel’s key documents—but also as a figure for recycling’s intrasocial kinetics. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson connect Krook’s tableau of the paper mill to the author’s optimistic environmentalism—what they call “Green Dickens.”<sup>14</sup> Our deep dive into writing on rags and paper will show that Dickens invokes the rubbish economy as a reminder of the material interconnectedness of society, a model integral both for his vision of social totality and his slow revelation of character connections in *Bleak House*’s plot.

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<sup>13</sup> “A Day at the Darwen Paper Mills,” 35.

<sup>14</sup> Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, “Green Dickens,” in *Contemporary Dickens*, ed. Eileen Gillooly and Dierdre David (Columbus: The Ohio State Univ. Press, 2009). Chase and Levenson describe the paper mill as “a utopian figure for what ecologically pure manufacture might be” (146).



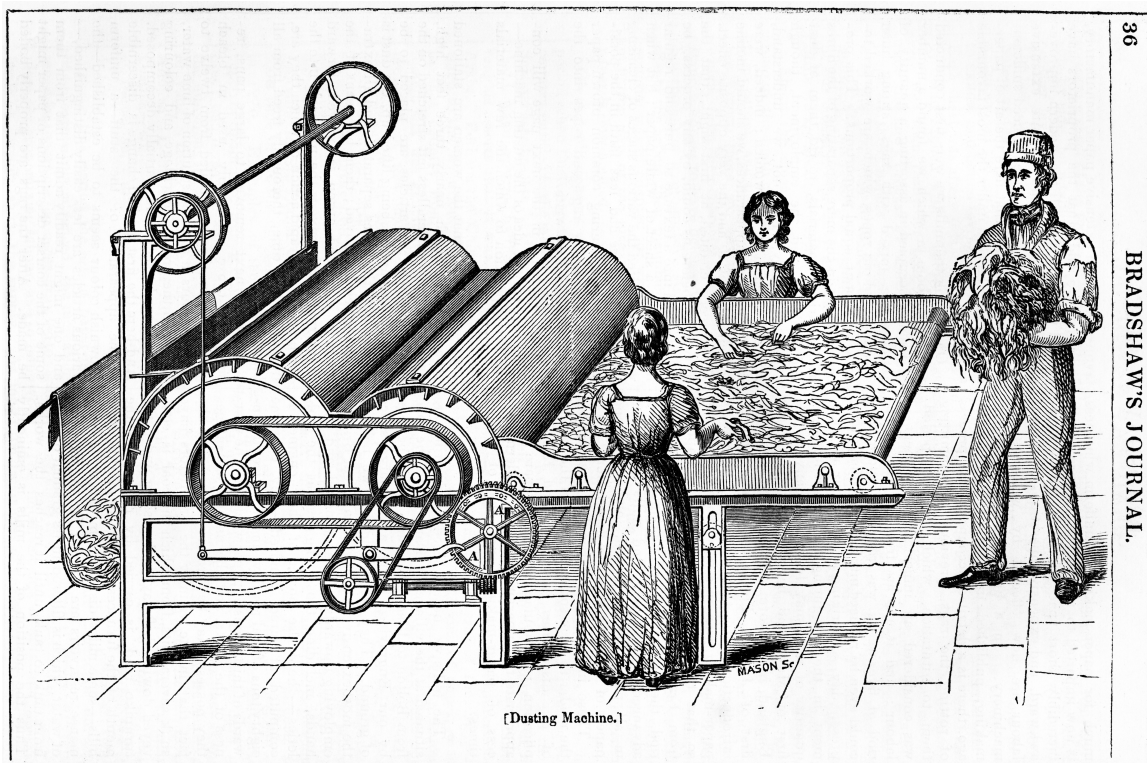


Figure 2.1. “Dusting Machine,” *Bradshaw’s Journal: A Miscellany of Literature, Science, and Art* (1842)

To start, the size of the rags-to-paper industry was massive. Krook’s tableau is a miniature representation of an industry, which in Britain alone recycled 90,000 tons of rags in 1853, the second year of *Bleak House*’s serial run.<sup>15</sup> Though paper producers began to experiment with wood fiber to create paper pulp at mid-century (the process still used in modern twenty-first-century paper production), the use of recycled rags for parchment continued through the late nineteenth century, even as rags were becoming scarcer in the 1850s and thus more valuable.<sup>16</sup> Krook’s rag-and-bottle shop, you’ll

<sup>15</sup> Joel Munsell, *A Chronology of Paper and Paper-Making*, 4th ed. (Albany, NY: J. Munsell, 1870), 113–14. Munsell also records that the quantity of paper manufactured in Britain and Ireland in 1852 was 154,469,211 lbs., valued at two million pounds sterling (111).

<sup>16</sup> For a trans-historical account of paper-making practices, see Dard Hunter, *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft* (New York: Dover, 1974). See also Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Holt, 1999), 69–97. Also of interest is Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass’s famous description of early modern paper as the carrier of rags’ many histories: “Only because of its absorbency is paper permeable by the black spots of ink. In addition, paper retains the traces

remember, collects a large quantity of rags as well as paper, which is to say both in its pre-paper form and rubbish form. (That waste paper, in turn, could also be regenerated into new paper by other industrial methods, though this process was much less successful.)<sup>17</sup> The rags of Krook's shop are suspended between the two distinct states of clothing and of paper, literally hanging off the very scale that can quantify the profitability of the rags' sale to a paper mill: "The litter of rags [that] tumbled partly into and partly out of a one-legged wooden scale, hanging without any counterpoise from a beam, might have been counsellors' bands and gowns torn up" (68). The recycling of Chancery officers' garb materially demonstrates the uncanny truth of Krook's parodic title of "Lord Chancellor." In the picture in Krook's window, the transfer of rags from the cart to the red paper mill depicts the transformation of rubbish material into the now durable material of paper—durable, at least, for a short period of time, before then passing hands perhaps to a butcher to wrap food, a carpenter to line cupboards, or another rag-and-bottle shop owner like Krook.<sup>18</sup>

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of a wide range of labor practices and metamorphoses. In Shakespeare's time paper owed its existence to the rag-pickers who collected the cloth (itself the residue of sheets and clothes) from which it was made" ("The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 [1993]: 280). This concept largely holds true for Victorian paper despite its more mechanized production processes.

<sup>17</sup> We now refer to this process of making new paper from old paper as "recycling," but in nineteenth-century Britain, the process went by the term "remanufacture." Munsell records that a machine for this remanufacturing process was first introduced in 1813 in England (*A Chronology of Paper*, 59). John Murray also notes the method with great wonder in *Practical Remarks on Modern Paper* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1829), 85. Leslie Howsam records how remanufacture was used in the production of cheap bibles in Victorian England; see *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), esp. 90, 98.

<sup>18</sup> In *London Labour and the London Poor*, Henry Mayhew remarks, "The purchasers of the waste-paper from the collectors are cheesemongers, buttermen, butchers, fishmongers, poulterers, pork and sausage-sellers, sweet-stuff-sellers, tobacconists, [and] chandlers." Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and The London Poor*, 4 vols. (New York: Dover, 1968), 2:114. Leah Price argues that Mayhew's representation of this paper ecosystem is highly plotted: "narrative structures Mayhew's providential model of the market in which, far from exhausting or depreciating objects, circulation animates them and invests them with fresh value." See Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), 222. For more on paper's uses aside from writing, see Asa Briggs, "'Carboniferous Capitalism': Coal, Iron, and Paper," in *Victorian Things* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 289-326.

The *Bradshaw's* paper mill tour may have been uncommon in 1842, but soon many other periodicals—including a variety of venues like *Chambers's Journal*, *Reynolds's Miscellany*, William Makepeace Thackeray's *Cornhill Magazine*, and Dickens's own *Household Words*—began to feature detailed essays on paper's history, manufacture, and raw materials.<sup>19</sup> A book-length study, *Paper and Paper Making, Ancient and Modern*, would even appear in 1855.<sup>20</sup> That paper in particular was of such interest is due partly to its ubiquity: with the era's proliferation of bank notes, newspapers, and cheap literature, paper had a claim to be one of the most widely handled manufactured commodities in Britain. Additionally, paper's production was particularly intriguing because its raw materials were so familiar. Paper did not begin as iron ore deep in the earth; it started as cotton and linen clothing, a tangible form with which everyone could identify.

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The joke that a will might be sold off to buyers in the food industry shows up in *David Copperfield* in David's remarks about the notoriously disorganized Prerogative Office: "whether they have lost many [wills], or whether they sell any, now and then, to the butter shops; I don't know. I am glad mine is not there, and I hope it may not go there, yet awhile" (See Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Jeremy Tambling [New York: Penguin, 2004], 487.) See also Dickens, "The Doom of English Wills," *Household Words* 2.27 (1850): 1–4.

<sup>19</sup> For one of the earliest and most detailed articles on paper mills, see "Paper Making," *Penny Magazine of the Society for the Useful Diffusion of Knowledge* 2.96 (28 Sept. 1833): 378–84. Many periodicals in Victorian Britain consciously acknowledged their existence as contingent on new industrial technologies for making cheap paper. By the late 1840s and 50s, it was common to see articles on paper mills and their raw materials. The following is a representative but by no means comprehensive list of articles on papermaking in mid-century periodicals: "The Art of Paper-Making," *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* 171 (9 May 1835): 119–20; "Rags," *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* 158 (9 Jan. 1847): 22–24; "Paper," *Reynolds's Miscellany of Romance, General Literature, Science, and Art* 3.72 (24 Nov. 1849): 301–302; Charles Dickens, "A Paper-Mill," (1850), cited above; [Harriet Martineau], "How to Get Paper," *Household Words* 10.240 (28 October 1854), 241–45; "The Paper Difficulty," *Chambers's Journal* 44 (Nov. 4, 1854), 295–97; R. Hunt, "The Manufacture of Paper," *The Art-Journal* 23 (1 Nov. 1856): 349–50; "Paper," *The Cornhill Magazine* 4.23 (Nov. 1861): 609–623; and John Timbs, "Paper-Making in England," *Once a Week* (19 Dec. 1863): 709–712. Many articles, like Dickens's own, protest the tax on paper; this would be abolished in 1861. Coverage in the 1850s and 60s often discuss papermaking in terms of England's rag shortage during the time.

For a droll poem that is partly from a rag bundle's point of view, see J. E. Carpenter, "The Bundle of Rags," *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist* 80.320 (Aug. 1847): 402–403.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Herring, *Paper & Paper Making, Ancient and Modern* (London: Longmans, 1855).

The significant public interest in the technical details of papermaking demonstrates that paper was not a fetishized commodity with obscured origins but rather a product whose manufacturing methods and labor requirements were of great interest to its consumers. In this way, paper appears to participate in what Elaine Freedgood calls “Victorian thing culture,” an alternative, or at least an adjustment, to the commodity culture theorized by Karl Marx at mid-century.<sup>21</sup> In fact, visitors to London’s Great Exhibition in 1851 could have seen a “Paper-mill rag-engine” on display, as well as patent washing machines for cleaning rags, specimens of pulped cloth, and papier mâché toilette tables.<sup>22</sup> The *Bradshaw’s Journal* tour even featured illustrations printed on paper produced in the very Lancashire mill it described: “The reader will also be enabled to judge of its qualities by examining the paper on which the engraving which accompanies this Number, is printed,—it having been manufactured at the establishment we are describing.”<sup>23</sup> This moment serves as an invitation to the reader to link texture and textuality: to consider, in fact to feel, how paper’s materiality is indebted to rags, and how its current quality can be evaluated with reference to its previous life form.

More broadly, Krook’s paper mill picture resonates with the mid-nineteenth-century championing of recycling as a utilitarian practice that was economically profitable and aesthetically elegant. Dickens’s *Household Words* was at the forefront of the popular reporting on “how art and science have been brought to bear upon things before thought worthless: how the refuse of the smithy, the gas-works, and the slaughter-

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<sup>21</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 8. Especially relevant to my argument here is Freedgood’s discussion of the public interest in the details of industrial production at the Great Exhibition (see 142–50). Also see Freedgood, ed., *Factory Production in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003). Her collection includes touristic accounts of hat and button factories by George Dodd and Harriet Martineau, respectively.

<sup>22</sup> *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, 1851. Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*, 3 vols. (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851–52), 2:606, 2:654, 2:801, 2:742, respectively.

<sup>23</sup> “A Day at the Darwen Paper Mills,” 38.

house, have been made to yield products the most valuable, results the most beautiful.”<sup>24</sup>

Today, the most well known of these *Household Words* articles is Richard Horne’s “Dust; or Ugliness Redeemed” (1850), since its rags-to-riches story of a dust scavenger community is thought to be an inspiration for *Our Mutual Friend*. However, Horne’s article was one of dozens during the period that covered processes of repurposing, reuse, and recycling—and the majority of these reports emphasized not filth or organic matter, but less sensational industrial processes. Aside from papermaking, in the first five years of Dickens’s journal there appeared articles on army rifles made from horseshoe nails, perfume from the ammonia waste of gas factories, “shoddy” broadcloth from old wool, and public works buildings from the metallurgic leftovers of mining. The Victorian ethos of thrift optimistically imagined a world where no materials could be lost or wasted, even fantasizing that such innovations could overcome the very category of dirt and the threats it carried. *Chambers’s Journal* proposed in 1859 that “if, instead of considering dirt and refuse, sweepings and cuttings, scourings and washings, to be valueless, we could only bring ourselves to believe that they are good things in wrong places, we should be better both in health and in pocket than we are now.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, good things in wrong places are not transient garbage. They are rubbish awaiting entrepreneurial intervention.

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<sup>24</sup> John Capper, “Important Rubbish,” *Household Words* 11:269 (May 19, 1855), 376. Other *Household Words* articles include Richard Horne, “Dust; Or Ugliness Redeemed” 1:16 (July 13, 1850), 379–84; George Augustus Sala, “Old Clothes!” 5:108 (April 17, 1852), 93–98; George Dodd, “Penny Wisdom,” 6:134 (Oct. 16, 1852), 97–101; John Capper, “Waste,” 9:220 (Oct. 6, 1854), 390–93. Author attribution follows Anne Lohrli’s compilation of the periodical’s record books in *Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850–1859* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973). For a discussion of these *Household Words* articles in relation to *Our Mutual Friend*, see Metz, “The Artistic Reclamation of Waste in *Our Mutual Friend*.” See also Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens’s Household Words: The Social Life of Goods* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), esp. 153–56.

<sup>25</sup> “Nothing Lost,” *Chambers’s Journal* 294 (Aug. 20, 1859): 116. The article begins by quoting Lord Palmerston, British home secretary: “Dirt is only matter in the wrong place!” (116).

This history of reutilization is a fascinating and understudied strain in economic history, but its chief relevance to *Bleak House* lies in the fact that rags-to-paper recycling transgressed class boundaries in ways few other objects could. It was a tale that could provoke both astonishment and anxiety. But either way, it was a tale. Its sociological dynamism was plotted. “To trace the history of a rag from its forming a portion of the beggar’s tattered dress to its constituting a page in some gilded volume for the boudoir, would be a pleasing task for the curious inquirer,” *Bradshaw’s Journal* speculates.<sup>26</sup> Many midcentury writers would end up indulging in this pleasing object narrative.

Charles Knight’s 1854 study *The Old Printer and the Modern Press* (a book he dedicates to Dickens) speculates that its own printed paper

might have accompanied every revolution of a fashionable coat in the shape of lining—having traveled from St. James’s to St. Giles’s, from Bond Street to Monmouth Street, from Rag Fair to the Dublin Liberty, till man disowned the vesture, and the kennel-sweeper claimed its miserable remains. . . . No matter, now, what the colour of the rag—how oily the cotton—what filth it has gathered and harboured through all its transmutation—the scientific paper-maker can produce out of these filthy materials one of the most beautiful productions of manufacture.<sup>27</sup>

As different persons reuse clothing, the material moves down the social ladder, until it reaches a rubbish state where it awaits potential revitalization back to paper. The miracle

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<sup>26</sup> “A Day at the Darwen Paper Mills,” 33.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Knight, *The Old Printer and the Modern Press* (London: John Murray, 1854), 257. Knight was an influential publisher and founder of *Penny Magazine*, one of the first working-class weekly newspapers. In 1858 the *Scottish Review* speculated similarly: “Having terminated its career as an article of dress or clothing, having begun, perhaps, as the shirt of a king and ended as the duster of a cook, the cast-away rag enters on a transition state, and, after many vicissitudes, it begins a higher and civilizing mission—it becomes paper.” See “Substitutes for Paper Material,” *The Scottish Review* (Oct. 1858): 295. For the eighteenth-century emergence of this trope of class boundary crossings, see Price, *How To Do Things with Books*, 233–36.

of this industrial technology supplies the nineteenth-century social imagination with an extraordinary trope about the class ironies of material reconstitution.<sup>28</sup>

The most sensational narrative technique used in these accounts is reorienting the point of view so that the reader glimpses only the most visible and public phases of a rag's industrial transformation. By doing so, the empirical account becomes more of a mystery story—indeed it becomes *the recirculation plot*—since it involves patterns of disappearance and reappearance that an observer experiences from a limited point of view rather than an omniscient scientific one. P. L. Simmonds's *Waste Products and Undeveloped Substances* (1862), a scientific *summa* of mid-century breakthroughs, prefaces the text by emphasizing the shocking moment when a recycled rag or repurposed paper appears in an entirely new class domain:

Let us examine the ragman's basket: what do we turn up first? We have pieces of cotton and linen rags,—the raw material of the paper-maker, who transforms these unsightly objects probably into the most delicately-scented note-paper. . . . What a singular history we have here! The ball-dress of a lady drops into the rag-basket, and reappears as a *billet-doux* [love letter]; disappears again to reappear once more in the drawing-room of the nursery, as a workbox or a doll.<sup>29</sup>

The sociological wonder of paper was at its most potent when authors capitalized on the story's formalist potential by refusing to align recirculation with point of view.

All of these accounts show how the paper economy possessed its own narrativity based on its continual but often unnoticed work of linking together social classes.

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<sup>28</sup> A less triumphalist curiosity animated Charles Baudelaire, who thought the rag-picker's work allegorized the modern poet's method of collecting inspirations from residual urban energies: "[The rag picker] collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry." See Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres*, ed. Yves-Gérard Le Dantec, 2 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1931–32), 1:249. This translation is from Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Howard Eiland and others (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), 108.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Lund Simmonds, *Waste Products and Undeveloped Substances: or, Hints for Enterprise in Neglected Fields* (London: Robert Hardwicke, 1862), 7.

Although broken down chemically in paper mills and reconstituted as parchment, the same vegetable particles come into contact with both pauper and aristocrat, even if details of the intermediate rubbish phase remain enigmatic. To put this point differently, the historicization of rag and paper recycling provides a new answer to the central crux of *Bleak House*:

What connexion can there be, between the places in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together! (256)

We have long understood this canonical passage to articulate Dickens's vision of *ethical* interconnectedness by way of the novel's mystery plot. But he's also reminding readers of the astonishing *material* interconnectedness of the vegetable matter that Victorians all handled and clothed themselves in on a daily basis.<sup>30</sup>

Dickens's implicit argument that rag recirculation has an allegorical claim on social and ecological totality becomes even clearer if we look to Thomas Carlyle's idiosyncratic novel, *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), a text whose influence on Dickens is apparent throughout his entire career.<sup>31</sup> In the face of a modernizing world that threatens to endlessly manufacture commodities, Carlyle's protagonist, Professor Teufelsdröckh, presents an optimistic vision of salvaged rags as the basic carriers of life:

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<sup>30</sup> The passage also playfully suggest Jo's rags could become the actual costume of the Mercury in powder. In a *Household Words* article published three months before this installment of *Bleak House*, George Augustus Sala described the manufacture of new clothes with the recycled wool of old clothes in similar terms: "Who shall say that the Marquis of Camberwell's footman—those cocked-hatted, bouquettèd, silk-stockinged Titans—may not have, in their gorgeous costume, a considerable spice of Patrick the bog-trotters's ragged breeches, and Luke the Labourer's fustian jacket?" (Sala, "Old Clothes!" 98.)

<sup>31</sup> The influence of Carlyle on Dickens has received much attention. See, for example, Michael Goldberg, *Carlyle and Dickens* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1972); William Oddie, *Dickens and Carlyle: The Question of Influence* (London: Centenary Press, 1972); and Jeremy Tambling, "Carlyle through Nietzsche: Reading *Sartor Resartus*," *The Modern Language Review* 102 (2007): 326–40.



[I]s it not beautiful to see five million quintals of Rags picked annually from the Laystall; and annually, after being macerated, hot-pressed, printed on, and sold,—returned thither; filling so many hungry mouths by the way? Thus is the Laystall, especially with its Rags and Clothes-rubbish, the grand Electric Battery, and Fountain-of-Motion, from which and to which the Social Activities (like vitreous and resinous Electricities) circulate, in larger or smaller circles, through the mighty, billowy, stormtost Chaos of Life, which they keep alive!<sup>32</sup>

In ecstatic tone, Teufelsdröckh demonstrates why, as “Professor of Things in General,” he would choose to conceptualize that totality by writing about clothing’s lifecycles.<sup>33</sup> Notice how Carlyle uses papermaking to link together so many registers: the industrial, the kinetic, the aesthetic, the humanitarian, and the social. From the base materiality of rags, he builds outward into increasingly immaterial frames, eventually reaching the circles that bind together “the Social Activities.”

Both Carlyle and Dickens invoke this economic imagery to provide readers with a more concrete set of reference points through which to comprehend the internal class relations. This model of society is both fractured and unified, one in which a radically stratified British class system nevertheless coalesces as a whole in terms of how material exchanges like the rag economy bind persons who reside on opposite sides of great gulfs. And because *Bleak House* is a mystery novel unlike *Sartor Resartus*, Dickens can inflect this social model into the multiplot form of his realist novel in such a way that while society may remain fragmented and unequal, the novel’s originally obscure coherence becomes discernable via Krook’s stash of apparent rubbish. And this model of semi-visible totality is what Dickens then draws on for his character economy, which operates as a circumscribed zone of social circulation with its own regenerative logic.

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 35.

<sup>33</sup> Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 14.

## On Bundles

One way of summarizing the previous section is to say that it was ordinary knowledge in Victorian Britain that rags would be called back to life in extraordinary ways to supply the material for paper media, and Victorian writers thought this rag-to-paper trope was a powerful figure for understanding internal social relations across class divides. The way of proceeding is to follow Dickens's own lead in conceptualizing *Bleak House*'s character ensemble as so large and socially panoramic that it might in fact possess its own economics, especially with regard to its most peripheral and "ragged" characters. Although Thompson's anthropological model of waste is less relevant to the formalist analysis that follows, his three value categories—transience, rubbish, and durability—will remain helpful for theorizing narrative tactics Dickens used often but never publically or systematically reflected on.<sup>34</sup>

In *Bleak House* there exists a deep homology between paper's stubborn deferral of its own death and minor characters' lingering presence in a narrative from which they are assumed to have exited. The critical questions that drive the remainder of the chapter explore the conjunction of recycling and the extensive cast of minor characters for which *Bleak House* is renowned. After a character's marked departure from the novel's story or discourse, what are the patterns by which he or she reappears? To what extent does this design formalize the material world of regenerated rags, and where does that homology end? And, finally, what does this indicate about the wider structural patterns of the

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<sup>34</sup> Aside from physical rubbish, Thompson attempts to apply his ideas, with varying degrees of success, to pollution economics, Cartesian philosophy, mathematical catastrophe theory, and aesthetics. The stark differences in content and structure between these fields makes it impossible for his theory to work evenly or succeed, but it's worth noting that all of these share a basic temporal principle, which also exists in the realist novel: they operate according to systems of covert but powerful changes in value across time.

nineteenth-century realist novel as it worked to capture a totalizing social vision while also retaining cohesive narrative development? Kevin McLaughlin has provided some inroads into this conceptual tangle of media, urban life, and novelistic character in *Bleak House*. He characterizes the novel as “an illuminating attempt by the most popular serial novelist of the Victorian period to assign meaning to the sprawling urban masses of mid-nineteenth-century London by comparing them to the mass-produced material support that made his own work possible.”<sup>35</sup> For McLaughlin, Victorian paper’s mechanized production and potential for disintegration represents the increasing vagrancy of the urban masses—a more materialist version of what Georg Lukács would call the “transcendental homelessness” of the modern novel.<sup>36</sup> My aim here is to consider what it means that these mobile urban masses often narratologically reside in the dynamic character field between unnamed strangers and central protagonists.

McLaughlin’s point about *Bleak House* might be thought of as the more politically fleshed-out version of Alex Woloch’s claim that “In terms of their essential formal positions, *minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*.”<sup>37</sup> Woloch’s *The One vs. the Many* (2003) argues that minor characters constitute a restless population within the realist novel’s “distributional matrix”—a condition that, in turn, requires “the narrative’s continual apportioning of attention to different characters who jostle for limited space within the same fictive universe.”<sup>38</sup> His argument about asymmetry is most

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<sup>35</sup> McLaughlin’s thesis, a distillation of his work in *Paperwork: Mass Mediacy in the Paper Age*, comes from “*Bleak House*, Paper, and Victorian Print,” in *Approaches to Teaching Dickens’s Bleak House*, ed. John O. Jordan and Gordon Bigelow (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2008), 57.

<sup>36</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1971), 41.

<sup>37</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 27.

<sup>38</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 13.

at home in Dickens's fiction. It yields especially valuable insights onto the causal relationship between the necessary boundaries of visibility within novelistic discourse and Dickens's famously eccentric minor characters. For example, describing figures cloaked in fog and heads poking around corners, Woloch claims that "Half-visibility is, in fact, the necessary consequence of social multiplicity, and such multiplicity is narratively enacted by the variously 'extraordinary' minor characters who are crowded into every Dickens novel and who signify their subordination in their distortion, fragmentation, and eccentricity."<sup>39</sup> In other words, when the socially inclusive ambitions of Dickens come up against the limited space of the novel form, the result is both the sharpening of minor characters' eccentricities and their visually incomplete (or incompletely described) presence in the narration.

But given what we've seen with the promise of recirculation in the world of rags and paper, the system of minor characters in *Bleak House* is sustained not so much by the cramped space of the novel than by the narrative's open-ended boundaries. This lively indeterminacy derives from the lingering presence of minor characters who continue to bob above the novel's horizon of visibility long after their disappearances from the narrative, either via death or what appears, at first, to be their transience. Rather than seeing the edges of discursive visibility as distortion-producing boundaries where characters wriggle, thrash, and compete against each other, we can just as productively conceptualize them as animating thresholds whereby lapsed minor characters can reappear in altered forms. In *Bleak House*, Dickens is especially intent on showcasing these mechanics of how characters come to exist in marginal positions and transient states—and how they later return to prominence within the narrative discourse.

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<sup>39</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 152.

In what follows, this chapter explores two ways in which this character recurrence occurs: first, in the form of a character's death—an individual's striking and presumably final exit from the story—that is nevertheless undercut by his or her residual postmortem presence. The second way, explored in the sections following this one, involves a less dramatic, but much more common pattern in *Bleak House* as well as the other novels of Dickens's maturity. A minor character disappears from narrative discourse, only to unexpectedly return in a new functional position later in the novel. However different, both patterns carry the impression that minor characters are difficult to suppress narratologically, an impression Dickens exploits to solicit readerly anticipation and surprise regarding potential reappearances. Via the novel's metaphors of paper waste, these characters become individuals who, like documents, cannot be completely disposed of or eliminated. They are characters who, after their deaths or departures, turn out to have a persistent influence and even a modified use value in the narrative economy. Heavily populated novels organize their character worlds around various thresholds of absence and presence, which is to say, the narrative categories of the covert and the overt.

Less than a year before Dickens began planning *Bleak House*, we can find him experimenting with the trope of recycled rag as character. In his *Household Words* article "A Paper-Mill" (1850), a tour of a manufacturing plant in Kent, Dickens employs the genre of the first-person it-narrative to recount the steps by which the factory produces paper from old cloth. He thereby enables a playful exploration of the affinity between how rags and bodies might undergo analogous processes of transformation and textualization. After examining the "bales of dusty rags . . . of every colour and of every kind," the narrator—at this point still in human form—approaches the industrial

machinery of the mill.<sup>40</sup> Just then, the narrator's body transmutes into rags: "My conductor leads the way into another room. I am to go, as the rags go, regularly and systematically through the Mill. I am to suppose myself a bale of rags. I *am* rags."<sup>41</sup> The now ragged narrator then recounts how his body undergoes various processes of disintegration and reconstitution: for example, "Here, I am pressed, and squeezed, and jammed, a dozen feet deep, I should think, into my own particular cauldron; where I simmer, boil, and stew, a long, long time."<sup>42</sup> After several more steps, our narrator becomes "quires and reams" of paper, remarking finally, "I am ready for my work."<sup>43</sup> What we're seeing here with the narrator is an early instance of characters evolving according to the lifecycles of paper.

If the paper mill is a prominent emblem of *Bleak House*, does it matter that the novel has no physical mill, just a pictorial representation of one? Considering how Dickens tends to take the mill's transformative logic and inflect it into narrative structure, my sense is *no*, it makes no difference. Interestingly, though, when we do look to the most prominent instance of an actual paper mill in Dickens's oeuvre—the one that employs Lizzie Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend*—we find him using the mill similarly as a site of a character's rebirth. At the foot of the River Thames paper mill, the destitute Betty Higden, one of Dickens's most sympathetic homeless characters, lies down to die. Upon seeing the mill, she gains a sense of comfort in the promise of a spiritual afterlife:

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Dickens, "A Paper Mill," *Selected Journalism, 1850–1870*, ed. David Pascoe (New York: Penguin, 1997), 264. Dickens published the article in *Household Words* on August 31, 1850; it was co-written with Mark Lemon. Anne Lohrli's compilation of the periodical's record books shows that Dickens and Mark Lemon were listed as its coauthors, with Dickens's name appearing first; see *Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850–1859*, ed. Lohrli (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973), 65.

<sup>41</sup> Dickens, "A Paper-Mill," 265 (*italics original*).

<sup>42</sup> Dickens, "A Paper-Mill," 265.

<sup>43</sup> Dickens, "A Paper-Mill," 267.

There now arose in the darkness, a great building, full of lighted windows. Smoke was issuing from a high chimney in the rear of it, and there was the sound of a water-wheel at the side. . . . "I humbly thank the Power and the Glory," said Betty Higden, holding up her withered hands, "that I have come to my journey's end!"

She crept along the trees to the trunk of a tree whence she could see, beyond some intervening trees and branches, the lighted windows, both in their reality and their reflection in the water. She placed her orderly little basket at her side, and sank upon the ground, supporting herself against the tree. It brought to her mind the foot of the Cross, and she committed herself to Him who died upon it. Her strength held out to enable her to arrange the letter in her breast, so as that it could be seen that she had a paper there. It had held out for this, and it departed when this was done.<sup>44</sup>

After expiring, Betty is buried in the graveyard adjacent to the mill, leaving behind only one item: the paper letter that John Rokesmith has written on her behalf. Seen in light of Dickens's "The Paper-Mill," *Our Mutual Friend*'s suggestions of the factory as a site of purification make more sense; in the tour Dickens also spiritualizes the transient rag's journey from dirty rubbish to clean parchment. Starting in a room described as "a grave of dress," the rag has much of its dirt boiled off ("gradually becoming quite ethereal") and is further whitened by bleaching ("very spiritual indeed").<sup>45</sup> Dickens thus appears to bring Betty to the foot of the rural paper mill for a similar purpose: to initiate her redemptive, Christian transition from ragged impoverishment to spiritual purification.

A similar linking of persons and parchments occurs when *Our Mutual Friend* describes paper at the other end of its lifecycle, as the litter that swirls about in London's streets:

The mysterious paper currency which circulates everywhere in London when the wind blows, gyrated here and there and everywhere. Whence can it come, which can it go? It hangs on every bush, flutters in every tree, is caught by the electric wires, haunts every enclosure, drinks at every pump, cowers at every grating, shudders upon every plot of grass, seeks rest in vain behind the legion of iron rails.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Adrian Poole (New York: Penguin, 1997), 504–55.

<sup>45</sup> Dickens, "A Paper Mill," 265, 265, 266.

<sup>46</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 147.

The moment is surely one of Dickens's finest descriptions of urban detritus, but my attention is drawn to the way in which the train of verb clauses in the final sentence moves from literal descriptions of the paper as passive litter (hanging and fluttering) to personified descriptions of paper as a throng of desperate vagrants (haunting public spaces, cowering and shuddering in recesses). The dark vision here is that the city's paper and its poor—two prodigious carbon-based life forms—decay in equivalent processes.

To a much greater extent, *Bleak House* conjoins abject bodies with rags and waste paper. There exist three key figures of alterity in the novel whose dying bodies come to be intimately related to the novel's recirculating paper world: Krook, Nemo, and Jo. Despite their grisly deaths, the presence of these literally ragged bodies lingers in an intermediate and interstitial state much like the contingent rubbish category. Krook surely is the greatest example of the grotesque characterological possibilities of this figuration—a creature so extraordinary Dickens chooses to have his body burned off the page, though, as I'd like to consider, not at all out of the novel. Krook's body appears to spontaneously combust as a result of his internalization of the paradox of paper rubbish: that is, despite his plethora of documents, he's unable to determine what in his inventory is potentially durable. Even before his startling death, Dickens—with the help of Hablot K. Browne's illustration, "The Lord Chancellor Copies from Memory"—highlights the metonymic relationship between Krook's body and his paper and rags (Figure 2.2). Within the shop, his body is enclosed in multiple layers of rags that hang from his walls and his shoulders as if to suggest that he himself might be weighed on the scale to his left, dumped in front of the red paper mill of the picture, and converted into paper product.





Figure 2.2. Hablot K. Browne, "The Lord Chancellor Copies from Memory"

The figurative language applied to him actually seems to bear out the suggestion. Before his death, when Guppy and Jobling attempt to wake him from a drunken sleep, the third-person narrator compares him to rags, remarking "it would seem as easy to wake a bundle of old clothes, with a spirituous heat smouldering in it" (328). Just after his combustion, however, that metaphorical old bundle of clothes appears to have

transformed into a bundle of parchments: in place of Krook's living body in the chair, there lies "the tinder from a little bundle of burnt paper" (519). Tony Jackson recognizes the metonymic equivalence implied here: "The paper letters and Krook's entire body appear to have been roughly equal as combustible substances."<sup>47</sup> Crucially though, the letters aren't completely consumed by the fire. To rephrase Jackson's point, then, Dickens's figurative play converts a bundle of dirty clothes into a bundle of charred paper.

The physical dispersion of Krook's actual body suggests a similar material endurance. Upon his death, Krook leaves an unctuous residue that refuses easy cleaning. "Confound the stuff," Guppy exclaims while upstairs, "it won't blow off—smears, like black fat!" (512). Downstairs "there is a smouldering suffocating vapour in the room, and a dark greasy coating on the walls and ceiling" (517). Emily Steinlight cleverly reads this scene allegorically in terms of Marx's commodity theory, arguing that for Krook, "*all that is solid melts into air*."<sup>48</sup> But if Krook does melt into air, he quickly condenses on the wall. His body is now disgustingly strewn about the cluttered store, the greasy coating likely dispersed far beyond its boundaries. (Mr. Snagsby will use two of his five senses to discern Krook's residue in the night air.) Beyond the atmospheric diffusion, the paper routes of the novel suggest that the remains of Krook's physical body will be broadly dispersed into the novel's character networks. The emptying out of the shop by the Smallweed family—what might at first seem like a significant step toward the erasure of Krook from the novel—is actually an occasion for his physical recirculation by way of the neighbors who manually sort through his documents, many of which, we have to

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<sup>47</sup> Jackson, *The Technology of the Novel*, 94.

<sup>48</sup> Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, quoted in Emily Steinlight, "'Anti-Bleak House': Advertising and the Victorian Novel," *Narrative* 14 (2006): 151.

assume, carry some trace of that greasy coating. In fact, Krook's residue coats the shop so ubiquitously that one would also have to assume that both the love letters and the will carry his physical trace as well. This suggests a foul detail that goes unvoiced throughout the novel: the fact that so many of *Bleak House*'s characters—including Grandpa Smallweed, Inspector Bucket, Mr. Jarndyce, and Conversation Kenge—unknowingly handle the remains of Krook's body when they hold the novel's essential documents. Dickens will at least hint at this physical residue in his description of the Jarndyce will, which physically resembles the once-smoldering Krook: it is "a stained discoloured paper, which was much singed upon the outside, and a little burnt at the edges, as if it had long ago been thrown upon a fire; and hastily snatched off again" (947).

In addition to these documents, Krook's presence endures in the metaphorical descriptions of characters who come to mimic his parchment fetish, particularly Grandpa Smallweed and Richard Carstone. For example, in Smallweed's final scene of the novel, in which he delivers the unearthed paper will to Mr. Jarndyce, Esther's description of his collapsing body (always in need of being shaken up) echoes the language previously applied to Krook: "[Grandpa Smallweed] had slipped and shrunk down in his chair *into a mere bundle*" (945, my emphasis). This is not the first metaphor to liken Smallweed to a bundle, but previous instances have associated him with rags—"a bundle of clothes" or "a mere clothes bag" (346, 334). Now, having spent his recent weeks in Krook's shop, poised "upon the brink of a well or grave of waste paper," Smallweed's bundle-like form at the novel's end shifts to emulate the bundles of documents he's been handling (634). In the temporary flare of metaphor, Krook's postmortem presence is visible. Esther's description of Richard's slow decline amongst the written chaos of Chancery also

summons up the paper bundle, here in the form of simile: “Thus we came to Richard, poring over a table covered with dusty bundles of paper which seemed to me like dusty mirrors reflecting his own mind” (784).

What we see with Krook, in other words, is how Dickens cultivates a given character’s metonymic relationship to paper (upheld first by his *contiguity* to it) in order to serve a more complex metaphors of person and paper (borne by his *resemblance* to it). Dickens then distributes that figural system throughout the novel and its various characters after the given character’s death. Despite going missing halfway through the novel, Krook transmits his presence and idiosyncrasies to other more determined, less flammable characters.

The fact that this transmission frequently occurs through the trope of character-as-bundle adds a curiously literal dimension to Henry James’s criticism of the typical Dickensian character as not a psychologically complete individual but a “mere bundle of eccentricities, animated by no principle of nature whatever.”<sup>49</sup> Rather than argue against James, let’s instead ask what the advantages for Dickens might be of representing—and encouraging readers to understand—his minor characters via a model of bundling: that is, characters composed of two or three linked tics and idiosyncrasies. For James and so many others of the generation following Dickens, the character-as-bundle signaled his weakness in characterization and reliance on the low cultural forms of farce and melodrama. But however artificial this bundling of character tics may be, it does possess a unique advantage within Dickens’s carefully plotted narrative system of recurrences:

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<sup>49</sup> Henry James, “The Limitations of Dickens,” in *The Dickens Critics*, ed. George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1961), 49. James’s essay originally appeared in *The Nation* in 1865. His comment is aimed at *Our Mutual Friend* in particular, but for the young James it held true for all of Dickens’s works: “he has created nothing but figure. He has added nothing to our understanding of human character” (52).

the reader can be reminded of a departed character via the repetition of his or her eccentricity in another character's behavior. Minor figures, when reduced to one to two obsessive qualities, can reemerge, via the plasticity of metaphor, in the novel's discourse far after their ostensible deaths.

If Dickens refrains from explicitly detailing the physical process by which Krook's greasy remains move through the character world as scattered paper fragments, the novel certainly elaborates that threat of circulation in its treatment of the body of Nemo (Captain Hawdon's alias), a character the reader never sees alive. Like its portrayal of Krook, the novel's introduction of Nemo places his corpse alongside the recurrent image coupling of rags and paper:

There are some worthless articles of clothing in the old portmanteau; there is a bundle of pawnbrokers' duplicates, those turnpike tickets on the road of Poverty; there is a crumpled paper, smelling of opium, on which are scrawled rough memoranda . . . There are a few dirty scraps of newspapers, all referring to Coroners' Inquests; there is nothing else. (171)

Nemo's body lies amongst various scribal ephemera—note again the bundle—signifying his destitution and addiction to opium, as well as, on a different register, his involvement in a character economy that takes its cues from waste paper's dynamism. His postmortem influence in the plot is perhaps more obvious than Krook's: his ongoing function in *Bleak House* is expressed in his handwriting, that unique script whose recognition by Lady Dedlock in the first serial installment serves to incite one of the novel's multiple mystery plots, the ultimate deciphering of which will require Nemo's other written letters to George.

With Nemo, Dickens envisions the postmortem characterological potential of a minor figure to break out of the state of limbo and back into the visibility of narrative.

Nemo embodies the textual problem of novelistic interpretation that rubbish theory throws into relief: namely, how to conceptualize a character's absence as predicated on his potential for later presence. ("Nemo," Latin for "no one," expresses this idea of an absent presence.) In Nemo's case, the answer is in part an epidemiological one. Tyson Stolte has argued that *Bleak House*'s representation of corpses shows Dickens's engagement with contemporary debates on putrefaction, many of which were published in *Household Words* articles in the late 1840s and early 50s: "*Bleak House* draws heavily on new scientific theories charting matter's movement (at the atomic level) through a variety of forms," especially "the recycling of matter into new bodies."<sup>50</sup> Just as killing Nemo off as a character will not eliminate his textual impact (in many ways it heightens it), burying his corpse will not entirely dispose of his remains. Buried in one of London's many overpopulated pauper graveyards, his body almost threatens to unearth itself. Jo offers to lend a hand, though, should the disguised Lady Dedlock desire:

"There!" says Jo, pointing. "Over yinder. Among them piles of bones, and close to that there kitchen winder! They put him wery nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you, with my broom, if the gate was open. That's why they locks it, I s'pose," giving it a shake. "It's always locked. Look at the rat!" cries Jo, excited. "Hi! Look! There he goes! Ho! Into the ground!" (262)

Given the kitchen window's proximity to the grave, rats may not even figure in the pestilential exchange. Either way, Dickens makes the Gothic trope of a shallow burial into an epidemiological plot device. The novel even suggests that Charley's and Esther's sicknesses can be traced back to the corpses of the pauper graveyard, via the vector of Jo.

At first Jo would appear to have little to do with these patterns of reappearance since his relationship to writing and paper is one of avoidance and confusion. "I don't

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<sup>50</sup> Tyson Stolte, "'Putrefaction Generally': *Bleak House*, Victorian Psychology, and the Question of Bodily Matter," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 44 (2011): 403, 409.

know . . . nothink about no papers,” he tells Lady Dedlock in his doubly meaningful response to her question about the newspaper coverage of Nemo’s inquest (260). Dickens’s repetitive description of Jo as “very ragged”—the universal signifier of poverty in the realist novel—seems always weighted toward the raw materials of recycling, not its products (176). But in this raggedness, we can see Jo’s affiliation with the subaltern bodies of Krook and Nemo. Simply by virtue of his presence in the novel’s marginal world of dirt and poverty, Jo inhabits the unsettled peripheral spaces of those minor characters whose textual traces extend beyond their living bodies. In the sense that he exists within the web of figurative language that continually reduces persons to bundles, Jo is certainly one of the most notable of the novel’s many such bundles. When Allan Woodcourt finds him sick in Tom-All-Alone’s, Jo is wearing clothes that “look, in colour and in substance, like a bundle of rank leaves,” and upon his arrival at George’s shooting gallery, the place where he is to die, he helplessly “stands huddled together in a bundle” (713, 724). These linguistic repetitions, which ironically suggest Jo’s association to paper, are part of what J. Hillis Miller identifies as the novel’s “deep grammatical armature,” its “complex fabric of recurrences” between its characters.<sup>51</sup>

I want to demonstrate Jo’s status as part of this fabric by proposing that Dickens’s metaphor for his death as the “draw[ing]” of a street cart points backward to the recent scene of a dust cart carrying away Krook’s paper rubbish, and looks forward to Esther’s language of resolution in the novel’s final chapter (728). Dickens retains the cart metaphor throughout all of chapter 47, turning to it again and again and building pathos through the double meaning of “drawing” as shallow breathing and exhausting street employment. As Jo’s condition worsens, Dickens writes “that cart of his is heavier to

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<sup>51</sup> J. H. Miller, “Interpretation in *Bleak House*,” 182.

draw, and draws with a hollower sound” (728); the cart then becomes “so hard to draw, [it] is near its journey’s end, and drags over stony ground” (731). Finally, just before Jo passes away, “The cart is shaken all to pieces, and the rugged road is very near its end” (733). The elaborate metaphor’s most obvious, or at least most adjacent, point of reference is the loaded dust cart from eight chapters earlier, the one the Smallweeds contract to “carry off a cart-load of old papers, ashes, and broken bottles” (633). If, by some transitive property within the narrative, the two carts do correspond—in other words, Jo’s allegorical cart, like the figure of Roman Allegory, points to another literal cart—then it follows that Jo’s cart draws heavier due to the burden of paper waste loaded into it. For a character famously confused and encumbered by written language, it might be said that the dross and indecipherability of writing takes a figurative toll on his vitality, a point Dickens seems to be making with the ironic chapter title: “Jo’s Will.” Dickens’s intratextual metaphors expose language’s radical threat to Jo via paper, the material support for that language.

The death fails to exorcise Jo from the novel, though, for we can hear his faint breath in Esther’s closing words of *Bleak House*: “I try to write all this lightly, because my heart is full in drawing to an end” (987). Esther’s use of the multivalent term “drawing”—unnerving for the reader who recalls Jo’s death scene—confirms Robert Lougy’s evaluation that Dickens grants Jo a deeply intractable position in the narrative: “Jo is an extraneousness that is very much a part of that which wants to exclude or deny him.”<sup>52</sup> Echoes of Jo’s crisis occur at the exact moment when the novel ostensibly uses

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<sup>52</sup> Robert E. Lougy, “Filth, Liminality, and Abjection in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*,” *ELH* 69 (2002): 484. For an analysis of Jo’s liminal status in relation to governmentality and overpopulation, see Emily Steinlight, “Dickens’s ‘Supernumeraries’ and the Biopolitical Imagination of Victorian Fiction,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43 (2010): 227–50. For more on Jo in terms of labor, bodies, and race, see



Esther's narrative to finalize its resolution through her marriage to Woodcourt, far away from the infected slums of London. Moreover, the echo of Jo's last breath disturbs the reliability of Esther's closing remarks by amplifying what is undoubtedly the most conspicuous instance of his afterlife: her own scarred face, a condition with which her final words ("even supposing—") seem unable to come to terms (989).

### **Rubbish, Reading, Realism**

Modeling a narrative theory around the dynamic shifts in characters' visibility raises questions about not only the structural qualities of the realist novel, but the reading practices those novels ask of their consumers. No modern critic's answer to this question has been as influential or controversial as D. A. Miller's in *The Novel and the Police* (1988). Miller argues that Dickens's novel, like much midcentury realist fiction, is "A drill in the rhythms of bourgeois industrial culture" and is complicit in the disciplinary procedures of the Victorian state: "a novel like *Bleak House* is profoundly concerned to train us . . . in the sensibility for inhabiting the new bureaucratic, administrative structures."<sup>53</sup> The critical debates over the reader's training certainly owe something to Dickens's own remark in his Preface that "I believe I have never had so many readers as in this book" (7). This point can be taken in at least two ways: that Dickens's readership for the serialized version of the novel was higher than any of his previous works (a fact that Robert Patten's research confirms) or that never before had Dickens represented so

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Rachel Teukolsky, "Pictures in Bleak Houses: Slavery and the Aesthetics of Transatlantic Form," *ELH* 76 (2009): 491–522.

<sup>53</sup> D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, 83, 89. Most critiques of Miller's argument have used historicist approaches to highlight overlooked social contexts and reading habits in Victorian Britain. See, for example, Lauren Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003), 86–117; and Simon Joyce, *Capital Offenses: Geographies of Class and Crime in Victorian London* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2003), 101–44.

many reading persons within a novel.<sup>54</sup> *Bleak House* is one of the first detective novels in the English language not simply because of the police detective Mr. Bucket, but because the multiple reading characters in the story allegorize its own reader's active search for meaning when confronting a book that structures its narrative unfolding around a series of hidden character connections and suspenseful withholdings.

We've seen how the novel provides opportunities for recognizing the partial existences of Krook, Nemo, and Jo after their deaths, either in their material residue or in the narrators' metaphorical reiterations. But how does the novel arrange and coordinate those minor characters who don't die but do tend to reappear at unforeseen moments after long absences in the plot? When we speak of this broader field of minor characters—including, say, Mrs. Rachel, Phil Squod, or Mrs. Pardiggle—we move away from the physical world of waste paper and rags, but the logic of paper's metamorphosis remains within the deeper structures of the novel. As the narrative proceeds, Dickens places these minor characters into an unobserved limbo state, from which they may return to durability, thus taking on a new functional position in the narrative economy, or fall into transience, disappearing from the plot entirely. These shifting character fates sustain the reader's experience of suspense and intermittent surprise. Such responses constitute a vital affective experience for the reader of all Dickens's fiction, but especially his mid-

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Patten writes, "the popular success of *Bleak House*, measured by sales rather than reviews, was markedly greater than that of any of the monthly serials written during the 1840s." See *Charles Dickens and his Publishers* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 216. Patten also describes the novel's promotion by Bradbury and Evans and its unusually high volume of paper advertisements: "For whatever reasons, advertisers flocked to *Bleak House* in record numbers, taking a total of 264 pages in the Advertiser, the front wrappers inside and the back wrappers inside and out, and printing eighty-two separate trade inserts, totaling 318 pages" (220). On the relationship between the serial novel and its contiguous advertisements, see Emily Steinlight, "'Anti-Bleak House'" and Andrew Stauffer, "Ruins of Paper."

and late-career fiction, which features a heightened systematization of plot and character recurrence.

I'd like to approach the mechanics of this process somewhat indirectly, though, by examining the system of objects in *Bleak House*, since as modern readers we tend to be more sensitive to the question of functionality regarding things than characters. In their equivocal potentials, the novel's minor characters resemble its densely populated world of things, only some of which will become material clues essential to the plot—what the book calls “Signs and Tokens” (137). On one hand, Dickens's narrative resists the representational practice Barthes calls “the reality effect”: fiction's numerous gratuitous details that have no symbolic or functional utility for the narrative itself, but rather, simply point to the category of “the real” and thereby ensure verisimilitude to life's material profusion.<sup>55</sup> Very often Dickens is at pains to confine the limits of the represented world by reinstalling into the novel's structural economy details that previously had appeared to be gratuitous, those things we might at first assume to constitute a reality effect. Lady Dedlock's portrait, for instance, is more than a likely feature of any baronet's country home; it's a sign that jolts Guppy into the faint recognition of Esther's parentage. Likewise, Esther's handkerchief is more than a likely clothing accessory of a modest woman; it's a clue whose circulation later connects her to

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<sup>55</sup> See Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 141–148. John Reed, in *Dickens's Hyperrealism* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2010), has recently written on Dickens's incompatibility with Barthes's “reality effect,” anchoring his claims in the concept of “redundancy,” a term he borrows from information theory. Reed writes, “Dickens utilizes redundancy not merely to reinforce narrative meaning, but to assert his control of how that meaning will be received, and also to indicate the limitations of the realist program” (88). Though we're both interested in the novelist's management of (supposed) superfluity, I differ from Reed not only in my emphasis on character reclamation (rather than informational redundancy), but also in that I see challenges to the “reality effect” not so much as a means for stubborn authorial control over interpretive multiplicity, but as a recognition of the possibilities for fiction, including the authorial play that happens at the novel's limits of control.

her mother and to Bucket.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, Dickens's relational networks of things do not wholly skirt the reality effect, for the novel is far too voluminous to make every represented thing into a meaningful object within the plot. In some cases, Dickens even thematizes this tension by teasing the reader with the promise of an object's significance, only to reveal it as a red herring, as with the original charred bundle of letters Guppy and Jobling incorrectly believe to be Hawdon's love letters.

*Bleak House*'s world of minor characters similarly stands poised between frugality and superfluity. With respect to some characters, the novel is remarkably thrifty (for instance, using a single character for multiple functions), and their returns to narrative visibility carry the uncanny effect of sudden and unexpected recognition. Take, for example, Mrs. Rachael from Esther's childhood, who is presumably lost in our protagonist's past after the opening chapters, only to reappear much later in the novel as the wife of Mr. Chadband. Though we recognize Mrs. Chadband's former identity before Esther does, her response captures a sense of surprise analogous to the reader's own: "I saw before me, as if she had started into bodily shape from my remembrance, Mrs Rachael of my godmother's house" (398). At moments like these, the novel draws attention to its own recurrent staging practice of suddenly unveiling a previously obscure connection between the two narratives. Mrs. Rachael, who essentially has been occupying a interstitial state of limbo for several installments of the novel—and for about a decade's worth of story time—now is reclaimed for the purpose of Mr. Chadband's conjugality. Upon returning she is, as the freshly recycled parchment from Dickens's "A Paper-Mill" might say, "ready for my work"—which in this case is the specific function

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<sup>56</sup> See Lougy, 493–495, for a reading of the handkerchief as a threat to narrative integrity. As a figure for the protagonist Esther, the handkerchief is a circulating cloth that, unlike rags, never undergoes deterioration or renovation.

of assisting Bucket's investigation into Lady Dedlock's past.<sup>57</sup> Or consider Guster, the servant at the Snagsby's household who is given to fits when excited. For much of the novel, her main purpose appears to be to serve as the target of Mrs. Snagsby's displaced anger, yet in the closing chapters she proves essential to the plotline: as the last character to speak to Lady Dedlock before her death, she helps Bucket and Esther track her to the graveyard.<sup>58</sup>

Guster becomes less minor because she becomes a different *type* of minor character: a more operative one in the plot. Her transition roughly corresponds to a shift between what Woloch describes as the realist novel's two paradigms of minoriness: "the *worker* and the *eccentric*, the flat character who is reduced to a single functional use within the narrative, and the fragmentary character who plays a disruptive, oppositional role within the plot."<sup>59</sup> Guster appears at first to be a prototypical eccentric, notable in the margins primarily for her fits. Her promotion in the later scenes of the novel transforms her into a functional worker—a part of the narrative machinery necessary for the resolution of Lady Dedlock's pursuit. For Woloch, minor characters exist in a more or less fixed state at some point along the spectrum between pure eccentricity and functionality. But what we see with Guster—and indeed innumerable others in Dickens's corpus—is that characters have the potential to metamorphose *between* these two states. In fact, the dynamism of the Dickensian character economy derives from the unpredictable transformations of transient eccentric characters into more functional and therefore more durable characters, or vice versa. The temporal phase that allows for this

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<sup>57</sup> Dickens, "A Paper-Mill," 267.

<sup>58</sup> In his sensitive analysis of Guster's position in this scene, John O. Jordan claims that she is "one of the few examples in the novel of genuine charity." See Jordan, *Supposing "Bleak House"* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia, 2010), 138.

<sup>59</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 25.

transition between the two types is the intermediate stretch of character limbo that *Bleak House*'s paper routes personify so strikingly.

Cases like Mrs. Rachael's and Guster's exemplify *Bleak House*'s tightly knit narrative frugality, a method of characterization allegorically represented by the shadowy figures that Esther sees during her first day in London. She watches "the sweeping out of shops, and the extraordinary creatures in rags, secretly groping among the swept-out rubbish for pins and other refuse" (66). The scene of destitute scavenging presents an appropriate image of Dickens's method: any rubbish that can return to serviceability should be reincorporated. Notably, contemporary reviewers remarked on this parsimony in design using the same metaphor of dropped pins: "Not a point is missed," Henry Chorley wrote in the *Athenaeum*, referring to the exposure of Lady Dedlock's past, "not a person left without part or share in the gradual disclosure—not a pin dropped that is not to be picked up for help or for harm to somebody."<sup>60</sup>

Yet Chorley's observation on the novel's economic construction only holds true for this core exposure plot, since, beyond that center, the recurrence of character does not always hold. In other words, for every Guster, there is also a Gusher—that is, Mr. Gusher, loquacious philanthropist, friend of Mrs. Jellyby, and one of many characters to appear only once and have no bearing on the plot. To forget him is certainly forgivable. Crucially, however, *Bleak House* cultivates the reader's expectation that any such minor character *could* bob above the horizon dozens of chapters later. Of course, plenty will fail to do so. If Mrs. Rachael is notable for her durability, then Mrs. Pardiggle typifies the phenomenon of character transience: after much visibility early on, during Esther's visits

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<sup>60</sup> [Henry Fothergill Chorley], in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 278.

to the brickmakers, she wanes in prominence and then disappears completely after the wedding of Caddy Jellyby, lapsing into insignificance in the novel's overall plotting. Mr. Bayham Badger, Richard's medical mentor, will suffer an even more precipitous disappearance, though, early in the plot at least, he arguably comes across as a more substantial character than Guster.

How is the reader to predict these recurrences? To a large extent, the shifting fates of minor characters are unforeseeable, and the anticipation of these returns—sometimes fulfilled, sometimes frustrated—accounts for the pleasures of suspense in reading a work of fiction like *Bleak House*. But, because Dickens creates such an outsized ensemble, some of those reappearances will almost certainly surprise the reader rather than satisfy her expectation, suddenly prompting her to recall a nearly lost memory of a distant minor character, and thereby to contemplate how minor characters uniquely call attention to the temporality of reading. Dickens's impulse toward recuperation is often most intense when his novels approach conclusion, the point at which he casts a dragnet into the depths of his character economy, recapturing all sorts of long-lost minor figures in an effort to tie up loose ends and capitalize on readers' openness to nostalgia. (The longer the novel, the more intense this nostalgia can be.) Yet, these final recuperative sweeps never succeed in recovering all bygone characters. What *Bleak House* demonstrates so well is that lengthy and densely populated realist novels organize character positions around a series of stages on the way to other stages that are themselves never stable or permanent; in the process some characters temporarily rise to prominence while others lapse away into irrelevance, sometimes permanent, sometimes not.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> In a magnificent article on thermodynamics and narrative form, Tina Young Choi argues novels that tend toward this type of circularity owe a debt to Victorian scientific theories of conservation: "Within the

Contemporary reviewers of *Bleak House* were highly sensitive (more so than us, I believe) to the equivocality of the book's supernumeraries. In fact, one of the strongest indications of the novelty of the book's character economy is its immediate reception: only with *Bleak House* do Dickens's periodical reviewers begin devoting significant attention to plot construction.<sup>62</sup> (Before the novel, the overwhelming majority of critical discussion involved his morality, caricatured style, and sense of humor.) While Chorley's remarks in the *Athenaeum* about dropped pins emphasized the novel's thrifty reclamation of characters in the rubbish state, *Bentley's Miscellany* was more attentive to the opposite phenomenon of how characters lapse into transience:

There are a great number of *dramatis personae* moving about in this story, some of them exercising no perceptible influence upon its action or in any way contributing to the catastrophe of the piece. They disappear from the scene, give no sign, and when we come to look back upon our transient acquaintance with them, we begin to suspect that the story would have profited more by 'their room rather than their company.'<sup>63</sup>

Neither these remarks nor Chorley's are inaccurate; they are simply noticing the different outcomes of character potential built into *Bleak House*'s plotting.

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thermodynamic aesthetic, the novel's circled-back ending is thus the culmination of the novel's multiply encircled and circulatory qualities, the intricate circuits linking cause and effects, old and new, and the transformations and continuities traceable throughout the whole. Within this formal structure, resolution, like the rainfall, must be drawn from that bounded system itself, from the circulation of characters and other elements already present." See Tina Young Choi, "Forms of Closure: The First Law of Thermodynamics and Victorian Narrative," *ELH* 74 (2007): 316.

<sup>62</sup> To observe this shift in reviewers' interest regarding plot, see *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971). The new focus on plot in *Bleak House*'s reviews led to polarized conclusions, ranging from those who claimed the novel has no plot whatsoever to those who claimed it had too much. On the one hand, George Brimley complained in the *Spectator* that the novel had an "absolute want of construction" and that "Mr. Dickens discards plot" (*Critical Heritage*, 283). On the other hand, the *Illustrated London News* found the novel overly fabricated, groaning over its use of "a thousand artifices to excite curiosity." (*Critical Heritage*, 281). I thus take issue with Amanpal Garcha's characterization of Dickens's reviewers: "While their plots are undoubtedly important to Victorian novels, plottedness—especially the coherent, "totalizing" plottedness about which [Peter] Brooks theorizes—does not seem especially vital in terms of Gaskell's, Thackeray's, or Dickens's appeal to Victorian readers." See Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), 20.

<sup>63</sup> [Unsigned Rev.], in *Critical Heritage*, ed. Collins, 287.



Of all contemporary reviewers, Dickens's friend John Forster most lucidly articulated how peripheral eccentrics become meaningfully incorporated into the novel's central stories over long stretches of time, even if those characters remain until the end at several degrees of separation:

Event leads to event; and chance words, or the deeds of chance people, that seem perfectly irrelevant, are seen everywhere, precisely as in real life, exorting a direct and powerful bearing on the course taken by a train of incidents whereof the issue is one of life or death, of happiness or misery, to men and women perfectly unknown to them. . . . The subtle linking together of the deeds and interests of many people, so far as they bear on the progress of one given set of incidents, is in fact truer to nature, infinitely truer, than the common plan of representing half a dozen men and women acting and reacting on each other exclusively, as if they were fenced out from the surrounding world. Its drawback is that it compels a large number of characters which come and go during the progress of the story; and as their purpose in the narrative is not always evident until the reader can look back from the journey's end over the ground he has traversed, they may now and then cause some confusion in the reader's mind, and produce an effect like that of a crowded picture.<sup>64</sup>

Effectively, Forster has translated Bulwer's claim in "On Art in Fiction" (1838) that *object* recirculation expresses casual verisimilitude into the claim that *character* recirculation expresses social verisimilitude.<sup>65</sup> Like Bulwer, Forster's claim may fail a probability test, but also like Bulwer, Forster seems to be after how novels create a lifelike impression or aura of reality. Dickens portrays not so much a crowd as a "crowded picture," a depiction with borders. In *Bleak House*, this accurate impression derives from the many characters who "come and go" and, perhaps, come back across these borders into that crowded picture.

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<sup>64</sup> [John Forster], Unsigned Review, *Examiner* 2384 (Oct. 8, 1853): 644. (Forster's remarks are not part of Collins's excerpt in *The Critical Heritage*; it is thus cited in its original form.).

<sup>65</sup> Recall Bulwer's formula of verisimilitude: "What more common in the actual world than that the great crises of our fate are influenced and coloured, not so much by the incidents and persons, but by many things of remote date, or of seeming insignificance." (See Edward Bulwer, "On Art in Fiction," in *Nineteenth-Century British Novelists on the Novel*, ed. George Leonard Barnett [New York: Meredith, 1971], 108)

This narrative system, Forster recognizes, is *deliberately* convoluted. The reader can only apprehend the character world fully if he or she willingly submits to some degree of temporary confusion until resolution emerges in later serial installments. In *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), his next multiplot novel, Dickens would explicitly reformulate this poetics of coming and going through the motif of crisscrossing travellers. In his working notes he writes, “People to meet and part as travellers do, and the future connexion between them in the story, not to be now shewn to the reader but to be worked out as in life. Try this uncertainty and this not-putting of them together, as a new means of interest.”<sup>66</sup> In *Little Dorrit*, international transit networks supplant the domestic paper routes of *Bleak House* as the central means for developing the opaque character connections responsible for the reader’s curiosity.

Key to the mechanics of surprise surrounding characters’ returns is the reader’s process of *partially* forgetting the details of past scenes that were perplexing. In *Bleak House* Esther’s own subjective descriptions provide a clue to this temporal progression. After the death of her godmother, while in the stagecoach en route to Greenleaf, Esther encounters a man who offers her plum cake, throws it out the window when she declines, and leaves the coach at Reading without introducing himself. The unnamed man could, potentially, be one of Dickens’s celebrated eccentrics, one of the many anonymous characters who contribute to the reality effect in terms of the novel’s overpopulated character economy. It’s entirely believable, after all, that Dickens would have Esther meet a strange man with a habit of throwing treats out windows, as if only to show the teenage girl how bizarre the great world can be. Instead, we later learn, the man was none

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<sup>66</sup> Stone, *Working Notes*, 271. For an excellent discussion of *Little Dorrit*’s public transit network as it relates to multiplottedness, see Jonathan Grossman, *Charles Dickens’s Networks: Public Transport and the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 155–214.

other than Mr. Jarndyce, although six years pass before Esther realizes this to have been the case. During that time, she will come to forget about the passenger: “We left him at a milestone. I often walked past it afterwards, and never, for a long time, without thinking of him, and half expecting to meet him. But I never did; and so, as time went on, he passed out of my mind” (38).

Esther’s wording captures the phenomenon of partial forgetting so essential to Dickens’s method: when the man passes out of her mind, Esther does not entirely forget him, although she does cease to actively recall him. Upon arriving at Bleak House, she recognizes Mr. Jarndyce, and her epiphany produces the uncanny mix of shock and wonder that comes from recognizing a faintly identifiable person whom we never anticipated meeting again. And yet, Esther’s experience of utter surprise differs slightly but significantly from the reader’s reaction, which is constituted by both surprise and fulfillment. Because Esther takes the time to highlight the very process of her own partial forgetting of the man, her retrospective narration curiously grants his exit more attention than the reader would expect. Her report thereby hints at the possibility that he might indeed return, and that the reader might be asked to recall the initial meeting. The man’s reappearance in the new role of Mr. Jarndyce thus fulfills the proleptic suggestion embedded within Esther discourse.

### **Good Mrs. Brown and the Unification of Design**

*Bleak House* is by no means Dickens’s first novel to capitalize on this device of partial forgetting. Indeed it’s one of his career-long signatures. In its earliest form, character reemergence less frequently carried the sense of proleptic fulfillment we saw in

Esther's account, though. In his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37), the comic charlatan Alfred Jingle achieved such popularity partly because of the unpredictable ways in which he would suddenly appear in scenes, often newly dressed, sometimes with a new name, but always recognizable by his distinctive broken English speech pattern.<sup>67</sup> At one point, having gone unseen for three monthly installments, Jingle unexpectedly emerges from a crowded party: “With these broken words, a young man dressed as a naval officer made his way up to the table, and presented to the astonished Pickwickians the identical form and features of Mr. Alfred Jingle.”<sup>68</sup> Given the shocking effect, the sentence might be more appropriate with an exclamation mark. Because *The Pickwick Papers* was not planned as a complete novel, and therefore its story improvised along the way, Jingle's reappearances were Dickens's extemporaneous response to readers' positive reception of the character. Dickens famously responded to Sam Weller's popularity by attaching him at the hip to Samuel Pickwick as his Cockney sidekick, thereby installing him permanently into the center of the picaresque novel. Dickens responded to Jingle's popularity much differently: by holding the character in abeyance for several installments at a time, then staging his unexpected eruptions into disparate episodes where he presumably had no place being.

Within Dickens's oeuvre, the artistic potential of this period of character abeyance—what I've also referred to as the state of character limbo—became much more

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<sup>67</sup> Steven Marcus famously argues that Jingle's first appearance decisively marks *The Pickwick Papers* as something “entirely new to the novel of Dickens's day.” See *Dickens: Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 15. Alex Woloch makes a related claim in his recent discussion of *Pickwick*: “much of *The Pickwick Papers* hinges on exploring how characters *might* ‘come’ and ‘go,’ or ‘appear’ and ‘disappear,’ at the same time—the way in which the expulsion or elision of a person, for instance, can actually work to call attention *to* him or, conversely, how the exterior features through which a person is made legible can serve to obscure his or her interior perspective.” See Woloch, “Partial Representation,” in *The Work of Genre: Selected Essays from the English Institute*, ed. Robyn Warhol (Cambridge, MA: English Institute/ACLS, c. 2011), para. 240.

<sup>68</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. Mark Wormald (New York: Penguin, 2003), 209.

pronounced with *Dombey and Son*, published serially in 1846–48; at this point Dickens began carefully planning all of his novels with detailed working notes about the incidents and characters that would constitute each installment. A decade before, Jingle's recurrences in *Pickwick* stood out so sharply because the novel was picaresque, full of disparate incidents and characters that are never revisited. "[T]he scenes are ever changing," Dickens writes in the Preface, "and the characters come and go like the men and women we encounter in the real world."<sup>69</sup> Though all of his early novels surely feature some degree of forethought regarding plotting, *Dombey and Son* inaugurated the tightly knit, multiplot narrative structure that marks Dickens's mature novels. Kathleen Tillotson describes the novel's decidedly economical form compared to what came before: "For just as there are no inactive characters in *Dombey*, none that are decorative marginal flourishes, there is no episode which fails to advance the 'general purpose and design.'"<sup>70</sup> *Dombey and Son* systematizes Dickens's desultory picaresque patterns of recurrence—of coming and going and coming again—into the sort of character economy that we've seen at work in *Bleak House*.

Nowhere in *Dombey and Son* is this design clearer than in the interstitial position of Good Mrs. Brown, the grotesque, witch-like pauper who haunts the entire novel as a linking figure between the various social milieus. Mrs. Brown manifests the novel's deep structural connections—those links that Dickens planned from the beginning but makes fully visible only at the end. She is thus a prime plot mover in a novel that many consider to be Dickens's most fully realized sentimental novel and (perhaps because of that) one

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<sup>69</sup> Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, 6.

<sup>70</sup> Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 182.

of his most sluggish.<sup>71</sup> She enters the story as the mad abductor of Florence Dombey in Camden Town, potentially a one-off character, there only to frighten young Florence. However, she returns half a dozen installments later (this time unnamed) as a fortune-teller who solicits Edith Granger and Carker the Manager in the countryside. Then, late in the novel she serves as the informant to Paul Dombey about the commercial deception of Carker the Manager, who, many years earlier, has romantically deceived Mrs. Brown's own daughter, Alice.

The fact that Mrs. Brown is a lower-class rag collector suggests an early experiment of the strategy Dickens developed fully in *Bleak House*: in *Dombey and Son* Dickens summons the thematics of rubbish—interclass connections via recirculated objects—and then transposes those thematics from the novel's object world onto its character world. In her apartment “there was a great heap of rags of different colours lying on the floor; a heap of bones, and a heap of sifted dust or cinders; but there was no furniture at all.”<sup>72</sup> Unlike Krook's stash, these rag and rubbish piles never play any functional role in the plot, though; no evidence is buried within them. However, the significance of her position as rag collector, and therefore as textual nexus, is confirmed when the narrator places her within the novel's greater metaphor of the text as textile. Using this figure of cloth, *Dombey*'s narrator hypothesizes that the exploitative relationship between Mrs. Brown and Alice is reiterated at a higher social level between Mrs. Skewton and the newly married Edith Dombey: “Allowing for great differences of

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<sup>71</sup> For discussions of *Dombey and Son* as in the tradition of the sentimental novel, see Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987); and Lyn Pykett, “*Dombey and Son*: A Sentimental Family Romance,” *Studies in the Novel* 19.1 (1987): 16–30. For a recent reexamination of the novel through the ethical lens of shame, see Andrew Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008), 163–80.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Alan Horsman (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 77.

stuff and texture, was the pattern of this woof repeated among gentle blood at all?"<sup>73</sup> The provocative line resembles *Bleak House*'s "What connexion can there be" question, in the sense that it uses the symbolism of cloth (here, the transverse threads of cloth known as the woof and the warp) to gesture toward social connectivity. Both are instances of what Peter Garrett calls the "moments of synoptic vision" that are built into the rhetoric of many Victorian multiplot novels.<sup>74</sup> These moments are "an attempt to discover a hidden pattern that both unifies the novel's form and expresses its significance, that permits an understanding of the fictional world denied to any of its inhabitants."<sup>75</sup> In this sense, Good Mrs. Brown is an early incarnation of Krook, Jo, and Nemo.<sup>76</sup> And what that resemblance indicates is that as Dickens pursued more complex narrative structure, he appropriated and relied on lower-class characters—particularly those participating in second-order economies—to play more operative roles within plots that hinge on the revelation of coherence between different tiers of a social totality. With Good Mrs. Brown, we see subplot structure developing into multiplot.

The trope of the ragged character waiting in limbo for his or her return into narrative visibility is electrically realized in the way that Dickens has Mrs. Brown haunt the wedding scene of Paul and Edith Dombey without physically appearing in the story. Again, the narrator employs rhetorical questions to obliquely suggest unexplicated character connections:

Now, the people run, and push, and press round in a gaping throng, while Mr. Dombey, leading Mrs. Dombey by the hand, advances solemnly into Feenix

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<sup>73</sup> Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 525.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Garrett, *The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogical Form* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), 31.

<sup>75</sup> Garrett, *Victorian Multiplot Novel*, 31.

<sup>76</sup> For a reading of Mrs. Brown as a link within the sexual economy of the novel, see Joss Lutz Marsh, "Good Mrs. Brown's Connections: Sexuality and Story-Telling in *Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son*," *ELH* 58 (1991): 405–26.

Halls. Now, the rest of the wedding party alight, and enter after them. And why does Mr. Carker, passing through the people to the hall-door, think of the old woman who called to him in the grove that morning? Or why does Florence, as she passes, think with a tremble of her childhood, when she was lost, and of the visage of Good Mrs. Brown?<sup>77</sup>

Most obviously, the narrator uses the juxtaposition of questions to imply that the “old woman” fortune-teller who previously confronted Carker *is* the same woman who kidnapped Florence: Good Mrs. Brown. But the questions still stand: why *do* they both simultaneously think of Mrs. Brown at that moment? It’s not an answerable question at that point, given the available evidence of the text; only in the following installment do we receive evidence that allows for a conjectural answer. Mrs. Brown tells her daughter, “I have hung about a family, my deary, . . . Mr. Dombey’s . . . Since then, darling, I have seen them often. I have seen *him* [Carker].”<sup>78</sup>

And, in fact, if we look back to the wedding scene tableau, *we* can see *her*. Dickens may not answer the rhetorical questions about Florence and Carker’s apprehension of the old women, but Hablot K. Browne certainly does. In his spectacularly busy illustration “Coming Home from Church,” Browne mingles recognizable characters with city strangers in a way that pits the ordered procession of the wedding party in the foreground against the entropy of the London streets in the background (Figure 2.3). As all such illustrations do, this one calls out for the reader to try to identify characters he or she recognizes: Paul Dombey and bride crossing the house’s threshold; Carker the Manager giving his hand to Florence as she exits the carriage; Diogenes chasing another dog at far right. And, there, mingled in the crowd visible between Paul and Edith on the left, and Major Bagstock and Mrs. Skewton on the

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<sup>77</sup> Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 473.

<sup>78</sup> Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, 517, emphasis original.



right, appears the figure of Good Mrs. Brown (Figure 2.4). She crouches, eying Paul and Edith, doing exactly what she says she's been doing: hanging about the family, seeing them often.

The fact that Florence and Carker do not plainly see her and that she makes no



Figure 2.3. Hablot K. Browne, "Coming Home from Church"

appearance in Dickens's description makes the scene into a perfect emblem of the phenomenon of character limbo. The narrator paradoxically asserts Mrs. Brown's presence by her physical absence in the reported action. In the meantime, the illustration renders her presence discernable, but not conspicuous—right at the border between the nameless faces of strangers that constitute the figure's *background* and the recognizable



Figure 2.4. Hablot K. Browne, “Coming Home from Church” (detail)

characters within its *foreground*. Mrs. Brown’s realization here is, to borrow a phrase from *Our Mutual Friend*’s description of London, “divided in purpose between being visible and invisible, and so being wholly neither.”<sup>79</sup> Her double representation captures how the Dickensian character economy exploits the state of character abeyance to generate suspense via absence, thereby creating the opportunity for a surprising return to presence that meaningfully resolves previously obscure evocations.

<sup>79</sup> Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 417.

*Bleak House*'s more ostentatious use of minor characters' equivocality—the fact that some will be Gusters, others mere Gushers—becomes clearer when we consider how *Dombey*'s tightly knit character economy was necessarily loosened by the more episodic demands of *David Copperfield* (1849–50), the first-person *bildungsroman* that preceded *Bleak House*. In *Dombey*, Florence's kidnapping by Mrs. Brown becomes an integral part of the unified design; the reader perceives her transition, like Guster and Krook, from marginal eccentric to an essential, functional character. Thus, one might expect an equivalent durability of character in *David Copperfield* when David encounters a similarly eccentric and terrifying old clothes fanatic—the pawnbroker on the road to Dover who jabbers at David with “innumerable Goroos interspersed.”<sup>80</sup> But to many readers' disappointment (including my own and likely yours) the Goroo man constitutes part of *David Copperfield*'s relatively large group of one-off eccentric characters whom David encounters on his episodic excursions among Blunderstone, Yarmouth, Dover, Canterbury, and London. This group stands in contrast to the more lasting minor characters like Mr. Micawber and Barkis, figures whose frequent recurrences are responsible for the novel's comedy as well as its coherence. (Recall Micawber's habit of disappearing with only a melancholy letter of insolvency, only to materialize as a happy figure at David's doorstep dozens of chapters later. As for Barkis, recall his persistent willingness.)

To Virginia Woolf, it was the dwarf cosmetician Miss Mowcher who exemplified Dickens's habit of getting insufficient utility from his most vivaciously drawn eccentrics. Woolf observes that the intensity of creation Dickens devoted to minor characters is often out of sync with the purpose of that character in the plot:

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<sup>80</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (New York: Penguin, 2004), 195.

With such a power at his command Dickens made his books blaze up, not by tightening the plot or sharpening the wit, but by throwing another handful of people upon the fire. The interest flags and he creates Miss Mowcher, completely alive, equipped in every detail as if she were to play a great part in the story, whereas once the dull stretch of road is passed by her help, she disappears; she is needed no longer.<sup>81</sup>

Miss Mowcher represents the inverse fate of Mrs. Brown: she's the eccentric who remains an eccentric. The "stretch of road" that Miss Mowcher occupies arguably is more prominent than Woolf judges, but her observation does seize on the implicit question that accompanies Dickens's introduction of any minor character: will the immediate blaze of novelty be only a transient flare of interest, or will those characters be "needed" for a more particular purpose in the story?<sup>82</sup>

Without insisting on a neat teleology of development, we can say that in *Bleak House* Dickens openly negotiates between the two impulses of character management on display in his previous two novels—one based on recuperation, one on obsolescence, like some laboratory device running on both centripetal and centrifugal forces. Seen this way, the more unruly energies of the picaresque within *Bleak House* may be said to weaken its coherence from within, but in doing so, they activate the reader's sensitivity to the narrative future, thereby intensifying suspense and surprise. And if narrative suspense is, as Caroline Levine argues, "the realist strategy par excellence" due to its cultivation of skepticism and speculation in the reader, then that suspense develops not only from the central mystery plots of Victorian fiction, but also from the unpredictable arrivals and

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<sup>81</sup> Virginia Woolf, "David Copperfield," *Collected Essays*, 4 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967), 1:194. Interestingly, multiple studies of Dickens's "imagination" use the figure of fire in their titles. See, for example, John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973); and Earle Davis, *The Flint and the Flame: The Artistry of Charles Dickens* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri, 1963).

<sup>82</sup> The reader will not see Miss Mowcher at the novel's conclusion, but she will be invoked as the captor of the criminal Littimer. "I highly respected Miss Mowcher for it," David remarks (861).

departures of the character world.<sup>83</sup> *Bleak House* exemplifies this suspenseful dynamism so well because its sheer volume allows the representation of multiple narrative networks which shift throughout the novel, thereby reorienting the thresholds of visibility across which characters pass on the rise to functional significance and the fall to inconsequentiality. In its dedication to depicting an expansive social canvas, *Bleak House* exposes its own boundaries of representation, acknowledging not so much the frustrating limits of novels, but the potential vitality of a form that draws its energy from its margins.

The final reason why *Bleak House* presents the ideal case study for how Dickens's fiction exploits these thresholds is its innovative double narration, divided between the first-person account of Esther and the third-person perspective of the omniscient narrator. What happens when a character whom the reader comes to know via the third-person narrator's perspective suddenly appears in Esther's narrative, or vice versa, presented as if he or she were brand new to the novel? The structural irony produces an uncanny and often amusing sense of recognition. Consider when Esther visits Cook's Court with Bucket in search of her mother late in the novel, she describes a diminutive man she sees in a law stationer's office: "In the passage, behind the door, stood a scared, sorrowful-looking little man in a grey coat, who seemed to have a naturally polite manner and spoke meekly" (906). Esther introduces the man as a stranger, but of course the attentive reader recognizes him as an old friend: Mr. Snagsby. Only a less observant reader will need her postponed clarification about her new acquaintance's identity: "Mr Snagsby, as I soon found the little man to be" (906). The

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<sup>83</sup> Caroline Levine, *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2003), 3. More recently, Caroline Levine has used network theory to read *Bleak House*'s social world as, among other things, a set of "superimposed, conflicting, and overlapping relational webs" ("Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordances of Form," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42 [2009]: 518).

novel contains many such instances in which it grants the reader a perceptual advantage over one of the narrators, enabling the satisfaction of successfully identifying a character who has traversed the obscure zone between the two narrational frames.

The importance of these thresholds to Dickens's overall design appears most definitively in *Bleak House*'s working notes, also known as the number plans. Before examining the details within, it's first worth observing their material history: these memoranda, saved by Dickens, carefully bundled and preserved by Forster after the author's death, and later bequeathed to the Victoria and Albert Museum, have undergone an editorial canonization suggestive of the most extreme revaluations of rubbish theory. No respectable edition of any Dickens novel from *Dombey and Son* to the unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* can exclude these notes, and no other Victorian author's pre-

Mems:

Mr Guppy - His mother? Not yet

Mr Krook Yes.

The Turveydrops No. Next time

Tom-all-Alone's D<sup>o</sup>. Yes -

Miss Flite - Her friend? Not yet

The Brickmaker's family? Slightly

Gridley ? Very slightly

Mr Tulkinghorn? Carry on

Figure 2.5. *Bleak House* memoranda, No. 7 (detail), formatted as typescript by Harry Stone in *Dickens' Working Notes for His Novels* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).

writing—whether Thackeray’s journal notes or Eliot’s meticulously researched “quarries”—have come to command such essential status as paratextual apparatus. These once transient, now eminently durable documents form a large and now highly valued portion of what John Sutherland calls “the shavings from Dickens’s workshop floor.”<sup>84</sup>

The substance of *Bleak House*’s working notes demonstrates how Dickens’s design for each serialized installment included a conscious plan for how and when to bring characters out of limbo and back into the plot. The notes are an abridged version—almost a visual rendering—of the novel’s character economy. On the right side of each installment page, Dickens charts out the events that would constitute each chapter and on

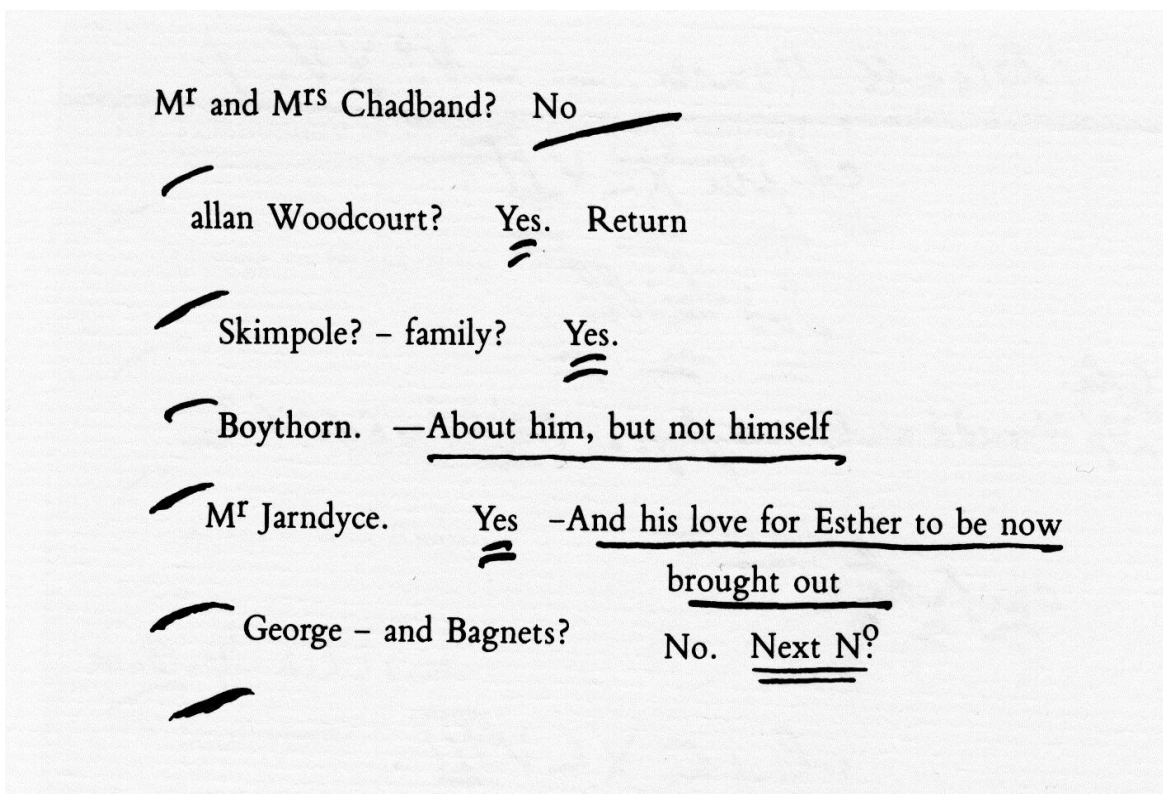


Figure 2.6. *Bleak House* memoranda, No. 14 (detail), formatted as typescript by Harry Stone in *Dickens’ Working Notes for His Novels* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>84</sup> John Sutherland, “Martin Chuzzlewig,” Review of *Dickens’ Working Notes for his Novels*, edited by Harry Stone. *London Review of Books* 9, no. 18 (1987): 26, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v09/n18/john-sutherland/martin-chuzzlewig>.

the left side lists the characters who might appear in the serial number. He would then respond to this potential inclusion with a variety of answers, including “Yes,” “No,” “Slightly,” “Not yet,” or “Carry through.” For example, in the plan for Number Seven, Dickens lays out a motley crew of minor characters and then decides on the level of prominence that each will hold in the installment (Figure 2.5). Krook (“Yes”) will be within the central line of development; Gridley will appear only peripherally (“Very slightly”); and others will be held in suspension, sometimes for just another number, like the Turveydrops (“No. Next time”), sometimes more indefinitely, like Guppy’s mother (“Not yet”). In the notes for Number Fourteen, Dickens plans the resolution to Alan Woodcourt’s extended withdrawal from the story while at sea—surely one of the novel’s longest periods of limbo: “Yes. Return” (Figure 2.6).<sup>85</sup> Woodcourt enacts *Bleak House*’s most marked and suspenseful withdrawals; indeed, the forget-me-not flowers he leaves Esther upon his initial departure are mementoes for the reader as well. Here, in the number plan, we can see that his time at sea—physically obscured behind a global horizon—is a much more expounded version of what occurs on a condensed, less literal level with those characters listed beside him, like the Chadbands and Skimpoles. Nearly every number sheet of *Bleak House* exhibits the dynamic narrative process that rubbish theory has helped us unpack: how patterns of disappearances and reappearances accommodate a particular character’s relative value to the immediate plot developments, a potentiality that evokes the reader’s cognitive and emotional investment in the narrative. Dickens’s character economies explain not only how we’re compelled to read his fiction, but also why.

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<sup>85</sup> Recall the similar importance of the sea as a character limbo device for Walter Gay in *Dombey and Son*, the first novel Dickens planned in this careful way.



The type of reading I've been describing isn't necessarily absorptive reading, but it does posit an attentive reader who is receptive to the narrative rhythms of characters and details across broad expanses of the plot. This model of reading might seem like a lot to ask from Dickens's audiences, given how recent historicizing work on Victorian reading practices has emphasized distraction not immersion. "Learning to read means, among other things, learning when not to," Leah Price writes. "The sheer bulk of many Victorian genres (both fictional and non) requires their consumers to skip and to skim, to tune in and zone out."<sup>86</sup> While such perspectives valuably challenge the dominant model of absorptive reading by reminding us of the importance of attention level, the undeniable popularity of serialization for a bulky novel like *Bleak House* complicates any claims about how overwhelming size encourages skimming. For Victorian consumers who were reading—or listening to—the serialized version of the text, the temporality of suspense between installments (one month in the case of *Bleak House*) facilitated the kind of speculative inquiry by readers as to how characters' fates developed, questions of who will return and in what way, and who or what will go by the wayside. In its delay, serialized temporality would seem to only heighten the sensitivity to the dynamic intersection of temporality and character within Victorian fiction. As Linda Hughes and Michael Lund argue, this "pleasure and excitement of anticipation," was both individual and communal: "The time between installments in serial literature gave people the opportunity to review events with each other, to speculate about plot and characters, and

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<sup>86</sup> Leah Price, "Reader's Block: Response," *Victorian Studies* 46 (2004): 233. See also Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 2000). See also Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007). Dames examines how theorists and practitioners of the novel in the second half of the nineteenth century engaged with cognitive issues of distracted, accelerated, and interrupted modes of reading.

to deepen ties to their imagined world.”<sup>87</sup> Even for those readers (Victorian and modern) encountering completed novels all at once, that threshold of mystery remains a significant readerly experience for Dickens’s fiction and, as I discuss in Chapter 4, the sensation novels of the 1860s. The limbo state of character is precisely what produces the pleasures of suspense and surprise by animating *potential* textual futures.

At the risk of sullyng narrative theory by likening it to a paradigm of waste, this chapter has ventured the claim that it is not only *Bleak House*, but the Dickensian novel in general, that organizes itself around a narrative horizon across which characters move into and out of a state akin to rubbish as the plot develops. This horizon—transgressed so often in the novel by the ghostly presences of Krook, Nemo, and Jo, as well as the physical presences of other minor characters—constitutes a threshold of novelistic uncertainty, since there exists for the reader the stimulating possibility that a character that has exited the novel’s purview may later reappear, even if in a figurative register or an altered character position. *Bleak House* exemplifies the novelistic form, which, in its ambition to represent a totalizing social milieu, organizes itself around mutually imbricated narrative economies, some open-ended, some closed. And for Dickens, the form’s inability to neatly contain that which it creates is not so much an anxiety as it is an exciting set of possibilities for fiction.

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<sup>87</sup> Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1991), 10.

### Chapter Three

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#### **Gaskell's Repurposed Forms: Domestic Economy and the Dialectics of Recirculation**

Domestic management: the original economy. Before it came to mean commodity production and national markets, the term “economy” referred to the affairs of a more local unit: the home. As Raymond Williams writes, it signified “the management of a household and then the management of a community before it became the description of a perceived system of production, distribution, and exchange.”<sup>1</sup> Annoyed by the term’s increasingly multivalent meaning, William Cobbett opens his 1820 guidebook *Cottage Economy* with a proclamation: “Economy means *management*, and nothing more.”<sup>2</sup> However palpable the encroachment of industrialism and political economy was, the nineteenth century is renowned for the explosion of new textual forms that hewed to the

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 11. See also Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> William Cobbett, *Cottage Economy* (New York: John Doyle, 1833), 1.

type of economy Cobbett affirms, texts which were devoted to describing and giving advice about the home, a realm managed almost exclusively by women. These included cookbooks, craft guides, women's periodicals, and, of course, domestic fiction—an already established genre but an increasingly realist one that was becoming more attuned to the material rhythms of the home.

Of such novelists, Elizabeth Gaskell stands as one of the most innovative portrayers of working- and middle-class women's economy. Essential to this legacy is her careful attention to how household management involved everyday frugality and the repurposing of materials into new tools and ornamental crafts. The community of thrifty women who practice “elegant economy” in Gaskell's second novel, *Cranford* (1851–53), has long stood as the *locus classicus* for Victorian patterns of household reuse.<sup>3</sup> However, these depictions exist also in her later domestic fiction, the “little background economies” of *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66), for instance, as well as her two industrial novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855).<sup>4</sup> While *Cranford* depicts the parsimony of poor, unmarried women with genteel pretensions—those who save bits of butter and make floral crafts from waste paper—*Mary Barton* portrays the more desperately frugal world of factory towns—one of pawning blankets for bread money and charitable giving to out-of-work friends.

Most remarkable about these materials is how Gaskell incorporates them into her novels' temporal fabric and how the techniques constitute an intervention in the dominant

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford/Cousin Phillis*, ed. Peter Keating (New York: Penguin, 1986), 42. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by page number.

Even though the single-volume version of *Cranford* appeared a few months after *Ruth* was published in 1853, I consider *Cranford* Gaskell's “second” novel because she began its composition and serially published the majority of it before *Ruth* appeared (which was never serialized). Regardless of how one wants to order the texts, *Cranford* is the more formally experimental and materially attuned book and thus is more significant to us here.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (London: John Lehman, 1948), 134.

school of recirculatory plotting at midcentury. Here, in the first two novels of her career, we see Gaskell searching for a method of representing the sentimental vitality of domestic objects without resorting to sensationalizing their movement in the elaborate style popularized by Bulwer and Dickens. However formally different, *Mary Barton* and *Cranford* are each case studies in the limits of recirculation as a global narrative device—a questioning of not so much its affective force or technical utility as its problematic tendency to overwhelm questions of character and politics via sheer kinetic intensity. Gaskell’s critique coalesced around the patterns of criminal recirculation typical of the Newgate novel, a genre we very rarely associate with her oeuvre, despite its influence on shaping her narrative construction.<sup>5</sup> *Mary Barton*, her debut novel, approaches these patterns with ambivalence: insofar as Gaskell has Jem Wilson’s paper valentine reemerge as the pistol wadding in Henry Caron’s murder, Gaskell borrows the genre’s melodramatic device of household things reappearing as criminal evidence. Yet, the narration reflexively critiques the heavy-handedness of its own bombshell epiphanies; its shocking reappearance muddles several narrative issues of causality within the blast radius. What are specifically jeopardized are the subtle emotional dimensions of Mary Barton’s domestic life, including courtship and family allegiance. By the time Gaskell gets to the more thoroughly domestic world of *Cranford*, she relegates Newgate tropes to the object of parody.

Freed of inherited formal constraints, *Cranford* seeks a new plan for integrating recirculation into structure. How exactly does a novel elevate domestic repurposing into a

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<sup>5</sup> To my knowledge, Jonathan Grossman is the only modern critic who reads *Mary Barton* within the tradition of the Newgate novel. His justification is not sensationalism or circulating materiality, but the elaborate court scene of Jem’s trial, a capstone event typical of the genre. See Jonathan Grossman, *The Art of Alibi: English Law Courts and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

position more prominent than descriptive background without then channeling the objects into the implausible hyperactivity typical of the Dickensian recirculation plot? The materials themselves must first evolve: Gaskell strips away their criminal contexts and multiplies the single paper valentine of *Mary Barton* into the dozens of paper and cloth crafts made by the women of *Cranford*. The more striking evolution is the text's innovative episodic structure, which captures women's everyday experience of the home, particularly the vitality and rhythms of craftwork. Generations of readers, beginning with the novel's contemporary reviewers, have of course recognized that the novel's recursive, episodic structure formalizes the characters' practices of saving and reusing domestic scraps. Indeed, the rhetorical tic among modern critics has become speaking of Cranford the town and *Cranford* the novel in one breath, as, for example, James Mulvihill does when he discusses "the local economy of Cranford/*Cranford*."<sup>6</sup> But when considered within the genealogy of the recirculation plot and alongside Victorian craft discourse, we gain new insights onto the temporal and affective aspects of the novel's famed recursivity.

The narrative principle that drives the plot and readerly experience of *Cranford* is a specific type of accumulation particular to the experience of craft itself. I argue here for a model of plot based on accumulation via reiterative accretion. This model may at first seem only a minor conceptual difference with the many statements about the novel's fragmentariness, of which Andrew Miller's is representative: "The fragments and small opportunities of *Cranford* are reassembled constantly to produce the larger fragmentary form of the episodic novel."<sup>7</sup> The critical consensus is that Gaskell's novel features a

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<sup>6</sup> James Mulvihill, "Economies of Living in Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50.3 (1995): 356.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Miller, "The Fragments and Small Opportunities of Cranford," *Genre* 25 (1992): 97.

linearity based on repetition with difference.<sup>8</sup> While this is surely true, I emphasize accumulation as an accretive process because it shows how Gaskell retains recirculation's inherent connection to pleasure even while abandoning its melodramatic incarnation. This pleasure, of course, is different than anything we've yet seen in this dissertation: the delight of familiarity built up through incremental repetition of similar events. When paper waste and repurposed curtains recur within *Cranford*, they reiterate an increasingly familiar phenomenon, rather than resurfacing as a shockingly unfamiliar one. The novel's recursivity thereby cultivates the reader's sense of intimacy with household materiality and the women who manage it. The delight of recirculation is predicated on its evenly focused, non-causal characteristics.

This particular concept of accumulative temporality played an important role in how midcentury craft books and women's periodicals were working to affirmatively reframe the narrative potential of repetitive domestic labor, and by extension female authorship. A common idea in these texts—some technical manuals, some housekeeping guides, some historical studies—was that cyclical narrative was more attuned to women's stories than men's. Male historians and novelists, they argued, had dismissed domestic economy as too tedious and redundant to serve as the primary materials for storytelling of the conventional, climactic type. Gaskell, herself an avid reader and commentator on philosophies of domestic economy,<sup>9</sup> shaped *Cranford* in such a way that repeating

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Joseph Boone, *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987); Martin Dodsworth, "Women without Men at *Cranford*," *Essays in Criticism* 13.2 (1963): 132–45; Andrew H. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 91–118; Margaret Case Croskery, "Mothers without Children, Unity without Plot: *Cranford*'s Radical Charm," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52.2 (1997): 198–220; and J. Hillis Miller, "Appolyon in *Cranford*," in *Reading Narrative* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 178–226.

<sup>9</sup> This interest is especially evident in her private correspondence. Elizabeth Langland discusses a phenomenon that many others have picked up upon: in one letter, Gaskell uses the term "elegant economy"

patterns effect a slow building out of value; its totality as a literary craft is based on the density of its patterns. In this way, *Cranford*'s achievement as a woman's novel is the creation of a new type of plotted space where handicraft and needlework could exist autonomously. Yes, you can find domestic craft in the novels of earlier nineteenth-century women writers—Maria Edgeworth, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters, for instance—but it typically either implies boredom and oppression or signifies in the flirtatious arc of a marriage plot that will subsume the female character into an unequal relationship.<sup>10</sup> As Talia Shaffer has recently shown, Gaskell was one of the very first women authors to deploy handicraft as a narrative technique.<sup>11</sup> Given this vanguard position, her radical reconceiving of the recirculation plot played a significant role in validating craft's place in narrative fiction by bringing to light a spectrum of cheerful pleasure in daily recuperative rituals.

Put simply, Gaskell grants recirculation its own intrinsic charm; it requires no augmentation via plot. Her rapid formal evolution in the late 1840s and early 50s represents a dialectical negotiation of the literary practices of the Dickens circle, of which she stands both inside and outside. *Mary Barton* and *Cranford* both suggest, sometimes overtly, that the Dickensian strategies of plotting are overly reliant on the extrinsic—that is, authorial—labor of plotting, and they thus instill his moving objects with an artificial and ostentatious vitality. Gaskell remains delighted with the kinetic life of objects, but

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to describe her *own* home. Langland writes, "Gaskell . . . conceived herself as a household manager whose managerial reach extended to the construction of her novels." See Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995), 113.

<sup>10</sup> "Sewing signals women's domestic confinement and diminishment," Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue. While the specific context is George Eliot's novels, their argument applies to a large body of Victorian literature. See Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 520.

<sup>11</sup> See Talia Schaffer, *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), esp. 61–90.



she positions them as local tropes that accumulate serially rather than as global plot schemes governed by a temporality of abruptness. We'll see how this approach gives her an important advantage: by relieving objects of such hefty narrative responsibility, Gaskell can portray the emotional valences of household objects in ways that Dickens, or even her own *Mary Barton*, couldn't. When recirculation no longer exists as a delivery vehicle for shock and disbelief, it's capable of expressing the intricacies of women's sociability.

### ***Mary Barton* and the Domestic Matter of the Newgate Novel**

How do *Mary Barton* and *Cranford* work differently from each other when they take reusability as a paradigm for novelistic *incident*—as the events that give the narratives their architectural shape? Answering this question requires approaching the texts through the residual specter of the Newgate novel, a genre few critics link to Gaskell despite its thematic and formal presence in her early novels. For *Mary Barton*, the oversight is especially surprising given that its critical history has involved a long debate over just how extensive its generic hybridity is, from Raymond Williams's claim of two (the political and the sentimental) to Catherine Gallagher's claim of upwards of seven genres (from classical tragedy to religious homily).<sup>12</sup> It's not especially surprising, however, that an industrial novel such as *Mary Barton* draws upon the plotting strategies of Bulwer and Dickens, given that they had recently established the working and criminal classes as sources of fresh storytelling interest. In Gaskell's debut, we find plot devices we never again see in her novels but ones that ran throughout the Newgate fiction of the

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<sup>12</sup> See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983); and Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction, 1832–67* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), 62–87.

1830s and almost the entire corpus of Dickens's long career. The domestic world furnishes the plot with portable objects that reappear suddenly and coincidentally into the non-domestic world; in rupturing that public/private barrier via paths of circulation initially unperceived by readers, authors exploit their readers' sensitivity to the uncanny, the familiar abruptly rendered unfamiliar. It's a formula that summarizes the provenance and effect of *Mary Barton*'s most mobile object: Jem Wilson's paper valentine to Mary, which returns as the incriminating pistol wadding in the novel's midpoint climax of Henry Carson's murder. Yet, however focused her next novel *Cranford* is on object repurposing, this kind of intricate, far-fetched plotting is nowhere to be found there aside as the object of parody. Understanding the dialectics of plot design in Gaskell's early novels means first understanding the limited compatibility of Newgate tropes with domestic settings.

In *Mary Barton*, the recirculation plot solves a structural problem at the heart of the novel, but, in its innate sensationalism, it ends up flattening out the multi-dimensional emotional qualities of domesticity which Gaskell eagerly wants to portray. Using the home as the pistol wadding's origin may allow the sentimental romance plot and the political revolt plot to fit together, but the device's artifice is emotionally at odds with women's everyday experience of the home and courtship. In other words, in the process of reproducing the grandstand melodrama of Bulwer, Dickens, and Ainsworth, Gaskell appears to realize that personal, sentimental objects fit poorly in the inherited form. Indeed, she critiques it from within the novel via her narrator's and Mary's overt questioning, often with a tone of exasperation, of both the causality of recirculation and

its emotional significance. As the home becomes more spectacular, the private lives within become less refined.

Readers' disinclination to read the Newgate novel alongside *Mary Barton* likely derives from their taking of Gaskell's narrator at her word when she denigrates the genre as low and vulgar due to its adventuring, detective impulse. It's difficult to say the degree to which we should separate Gaskell from her narrator, but regardless, when the text explicitly takes up the Newgate tradition, it does so with condescension. Just after the Carson murder, when the reader has yet to receive a clue regarding the murderer's identity, the narrator pauses to ask why, beyond cash rewards, people feel motivated to analyze material evidence's origins:

. . . besides [the reward], there is always a pleasure in unraveling a mystery, in catching at the gossamer clue which will guide to certainty. This feeling, I am sure, gives much impetus to the police. Their senses are ever and always on the *qui-vive* [alert], and they enjoy the collecting and collating of evidence, and the life of adventure they experience: a continual unwinding of Jack Sheppard romances, always interesting to the vulgar and uneducated mind, to which the outward signs and tokens of crime are ever-exciting.<sup>13</sup>

Who's the exact target of this snub? The passage contains a contradiction: it begins by recognizing that *everyone* takes pleasure in catching at the gossamer clues of a criminal mystery, but by the end says, aside from the police, *only* vulgar and uneducated minds enjoy tracking the outward signs and tokens of crime. These two activities are surely the same thing, though. Signs and tokens *are* the gossamer clues. It appears that the mid-sentence reference to *Jack Sheppard* carries such a negative charge that it upends the narrator's early-sentence attitude to the point of contradiction. Shifting into a telling pose

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. Macdonald Daly (New York: Penguin, 1996), 219–20. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

of defensiveness, she feels obligated to ascribe forensic enthusiasm to the lowest classes only.

The internal inconsistency surely reflects the literary mood of the 1840s, which, as Keith Hollingsworth and others have shown, was still anxious about the Newgate novel's massive success in the 30s, especially given the continuing popularity of derivative crime fiction during the 40s, which included *Mary Barton*'s composition (1845–47) and publication (1848).<sup>14</sup> For one thing, the market context may have contributed to Gaskell's publisher Edward Chapman's requirement that she change her title from *John Barton* to *Mary Barton*. The former would have unambiguously positioned the novel—already a sympathetic story about a murderer—within the Newgate novelists' camp, simply by virtue of titling it after a felon-hero in the style of Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* and Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford* and *Eugene Aram*. As it's usually understood, Chapman's demand represents his editorial bullying of a woman as well as his wish for the title to more accurately reflect the second half's focus on Mary. Nevertheless, hitching her polemical industrial novel so overtly to a disparaged, moribund genre risked sabotaging the book's success.

Despite internal and external renunciations, *Mary Barton*'s second half actually does depict a world much like that of a Newgate novel. This is most obvious in the thematics of homicide. It's an "all-engrossing murder" (235), we learn: those from all walks of life, not just the "vulgar and uneducated," take interest in the signs and tokens of Henry Carson's death. We hear murder ballads in the street. Old Mr. Carson pursues his

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this waning phase of the Newgate novel's life, see Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel, 1830–47: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, and Thackeray* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1963), 167–229; see also Gary Kelly, "Introduction," *Newgate Narratives*, 6 vols., ed. Kelly (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008).

son's killer because of his "craving thirst for blood" (220). Mary's aunt Esther visits the crime scene because of her "craving desire to know more," a desire that leads to her discovery of the paper wadding (232). "[T]he looming gallows" haunt Jem until his exoneration in the Manchester courts. The prosecutors display the murder weapon to hundreds of spectators in an enthralled courtroom, hungry for material confirmation. As one of Henry Mayhew's newspapermen once told him, "There's nothing beats a stunning good murder"—and readers of *Mary Barton* are hard-pressed to find a character who'd contest that.<sup>15</sup>

These are noteworthy thematic echoes, but Newgate genetics lie buried deeper—in the plot structure developed around incriminating physical evidence whose origin is the home. The device of the recovered pistol wadding that incriminates John Barton is eminently Bulwerian. On the wadding's first appearance as a paper valentine it constitutes what Bulwer would call one of those "many slight details—incidents the author had but dimly shadowed out."<sup>16</sup> Consider how Gaskell's maneuver unfolds: what are we to think early in the novel when a chapter concludes with Mary writing down a radical poem by Samuel Bamford on the backside of a valentine that Jem Wilson has sent her, and then giving it to her father? The full import seems clear at first, and it's done in an understated way: the action tacitly demonstrates Mary's romantic indifference to Jem. At this point in time, she's enamored with the wealthy, dashing Henry Carson. However, when the valentine returns many chapters later, it surprisingly emerges in narrative territory foreign to the Jem and Mary plot, removed from its original domestic space, an actant in a crime motivated not by romantic jealousy, as we're first led to believe, but by

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols. (New York: Dover, 1968), 1:223.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Bulwer, "On Art in Fiction," in *Nineteenth-Century British Novelists on the Novel*, ed. George Leonard Barnett (New York: Meredith, 1971), 95.

political ire. Mary's aunt Esther discovers the pistol wadding on the ground at the scene of the murder; much like in *Paul Clifford*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Jack Sheppard*, the fallen woman figure helps to convey the materials of the recirculation plot out of the criminal sphere and back into the non-criminal. After Esther discerns Mary's name written in Jem's handwriting, she carries the valentine-turned-poem-turned-wadding to her as a warning, mistakenly thinking it incriminates Jem. The slight detail has become the signal evidence.

But even though Newgate fiction and Gaskell both rely on domestic objects for public exposure, the temporal relationship between the romance and crime plots is significantly different in *Mary Barton*. The love stories of outright Newgate novels exist as clarifying backstories; flashbacks are required to illuminate the objects' origin. The love letters of *Paul Clifford* and the locket of *Oliver Twist* signify relationships that occurred *before* the time of the story—often many decades before—and are thus subordinate to the criminal storylines. So, although they do carry an emotional charge, it tends to be one-dimensional. We may learn that love is a motivating plot force, but these object are otherwise impoverished in their reference to the complexities of interpersonal desire and domestic life. *Mary Barton*'s valentine, on the other hand, is a metonymy for romantic desire that has been and will continue to be visible, openly discussed, and contemporaneous with the criminal plot. This temporal coexistence allows the valentine to accumulate a much more complex set of affective associations before Gaskell sweeps it into the recirculation plot.

Being so imbued with domestic meaning, it would be a mistake to write off the repurposed paper as just a borrowed plot device of a fledgling novelist. It travels in a

circuit into, out of, and back into the Barton household, with each step a new emotional resonance becoming compounded with Jem's original expression of romantic attachment. It becomes scrap paper inscribed with an proletarian poem, animate with the spirit of class camaraderie and the filial warmth with which Mary transcribes it; it becomes pistol wadding for an act of retributive violence; it becomes residual evidence, suggesting an incorrect hypothesis of guilt; it becomes, finally, the "tell-tale paper" whose significance only Mary divines, and confirms irrefutably by placing the scrap alongside the unsullied remainder of the valentine still in the Barton home (245). Mary's near paralysis ("petrified by some horror abruptly disclosed") upon re-receiving the paper is thus not simply the epiphany of her father's guilt but the uncanny realization that a sentimental, crafted object—a valentine "all bordered with hearts and darts"—could become the physical accessory of a murder, and thus transform into a "dread, terrible piece of paper" (113, 242). In a baffling chain of events, political assassination has originated from the intimacy of the home. As reinforcement of this improbable provenance, the wadding lists Mary's name *and* her home address.

However, Gaskell acknowledges that the act of channeling such an affectively loaded object into the reappearing object trope risks flattening this multi-dimensionality. She exposes this problem by questioning the valentine-wadding's relationship to the narrative causality of her own novelistic world. It's true, of course, that aggressively yanking domesticity into the context of political assassination allegorizes the greater entanglement of politics and domestic life. It's also true that the novel's reflexivity regarding the trope deliberately presents that entanglement as inexplicable. Mary understands in general terms how the paper came to circulate back to her, but she refuses

to seek out information about its forensic trail. Moreover, it doesn't help her rationalize her father's action. Over and over again, she'll admit exasperation about causality. "She felt it was no use to conjecture his motives" (244).

To further emphasize this muddled causality, Gaskell painstakingly extends the circulation trope to another prominent letter, one that logically *should* have served as the wadding. That is, she creates a second scrap of recirculating paper—one that materially *does* relate to the factory strike—only to substitute the unrelated valentine and thus deliberately disrupt the reader's familiarity with the plot device. She forces readers to ask why John Barton needs to raid the bedroom paper stash, and she then refuses to give an answer. Consider this parallel scene: during the labor negotiations that precede the assassination, young Henry Carson draws a haggard caricature of the striking workers, privately shows his colleagues the paper, and throws it in the fireplace where it fails to burn. A worker recovers it, shows *his* colleagues, and, now inflamed by the callous drawing, they draw lots to determine who will commit the murder. They draw lots, in fact, using that very paper! "A number of pieces of paper (the identical letter on which the caricature had been drawn that very morning) were torn up, *and one was marked*" (190, emphasis original).

We can practically hear Gaskell winding up her novelistic machine here; the material connectedness is remarkable. It's actually too remarkable—and for a reason. The narration announces here that *this* paper should rationally be the novel's operative object. As Jonathan Grossman observes, "the assassin, after all, self-consciously walks away with it."<sup>17</sup> If true, the recirculation sequence would be streamlined, the plot neatly

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<sup>17</sup> Grossman, *The Art of Alibi*, 117. Grossman posits that Gaskell makes the substitution as a warning to middle-class readers about the growing power of working-class self-representation to incite violence.



expressing an ideological argument that proletarian reprisal follows bourgeois insensitivity. So why go to such effort in narrative seeding only to make the substitution? Gaskell sets up orderly causality only to sabotage it. It's more than just a tease about plotting trends and readers' expectations, as it was in Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard*. The substitution of papers makes the romantic and political plots structurally cohere, but it deliberately fails to make that coherence completely explainable. The substitution solves a plot impasse despite having—emphasizing, in fact—a more plausible solution. Put differently, Gaskell achieves structural coherence at the cost of rational coherence. In this way, the valentine-wadding simultaneously discloses and muddles the weird entanglement of love, shame, allegiance, and desperation that links Mary, her father, Jem, and Henry.

Our thing-based perspective illuminates a long-standing critical problem about causality and generic compatibility in *Mary Barton*. We come now with fresh eyes to the claim that the text features irreconcilable plots, an argument made most famously by Williams in *Culture and Society* (1958). There, he argued that midcentury industrial novels begin with the radical promise of a proletarian-centered narrative only to allow “the familiar and orthodox plot of the Victorian novel of sentiment” to subsume it.<sup>18</sup> By substituting a romantic solution for the social problem, *Mary Barton* ends with “a canceling of the actual difficulties.”<sup>19</sup> Generations have grappled with Williams's binary plot thesis. For example, feminist critics like Hilary Schor argue that Mary's plot doesn't

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(The Chartist poem is copied on the valentine-wadding.) He also notes that as these texts become objects of force, they “exceed traditional ideational symbolic solutions” (117).

<sup>18</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 89. A less developed, and less-often cited, version of this argument can also be found earlier in the decade in Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), 202–23.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 91.

divert the proletarian plot but instead echoes it via themes of domestic inequality and women's public voice.<sup>20</sup> Others have contested the notion that the novel has only two generic strands. In one of the most durable readings of the novel, Catherine Gallagher identifies not two, but a half-dozen genres at play. She argues that Gaskell shifts between multiple genres in an attempt to solve paradoxes in narrative causality within the John Barton story. Was the murder tragically inevitable? A function of chance? An act of free will? Pardonable revenge? Explaining the crime proves an impossible task for one genre alone, and still unmanageable for several. "Causation," Gallagher writes, "becomes an explicit theme in the book, one that haunts and perplexes the narrator."<sup>21</sup> In the end "A dominant impulse in *Mary Barton* . . . is to escape altogether from causality, to transcend explanation."<sup>22</sup>

Objecthood grapples with these same issues of causality. The pistol wadding has insufficient explanatory force for anything beyond its own circulatory truth. By advancing her story through the sheer kinetic force of plot, Gaskell acknowledges her inability (and renounces her obligation) to fully explain the wadding's causality. We, like Mary, receive enough information to understand its kinetic transit, and with that realization achieved, the book enforces what Gallagher calls the later chapters' "moratorium on reasoning" about John's motives, which includes a moratorium on object

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<sup>20</sup> See Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 13–44. Schor concentrates on Mary's court appearance and the development of women's uncensored public speech.

Other notable responses to this problem of narrative modes include Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 62–87; and Carolyn Lesjak, *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 29–61.

<sup>21</sup> Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 67.

mysteries that might explain those motives.<sup>23</sup> The implication is that the object device is flimsy, limited in its ability to illuminate any themes larger than itself or its immediate material contexts. This was never an issue for Newgate novels because they used stolen property as plot devices to comment on the politics of property ownership. But in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell refuses to highlight any clear or logical link between paper valentines and political assassination—other than perhaps the obvious one of her own narrative construction.

This is not to say that the wadding lacks potency. Even though Gaskell flags the valentine-wadding's failure in narrative explication and emotional subtlety, the shock it delivers to Mary and readers does have a particular advantage for the industrial novel genre and its desire to convey the lived experience of the proletariat to middle-class readers. At the very least, the recirculation plot succeeds in imbuing the narrative with a mood, an intense sense of dread and melancholy regarding the helplessness and fatalism of working-class life. The generically specific benefit here is that it supplements the political economy dialogues in the text that are factually robust but emotionally impotent.<sup>24</sup> Arnold Kettle speaks for many when he complains that these long, sometimes tedious digressions between characters are a symptom of “the incompletely fused element of didacticism” typical of the industrial novel.<sup>25</sup> When plot slows in *Mary Barton*, the book often fills the stasis with Chartist dialogues that methodically trace the effects of Manchester poverty back to callous factory owners and oppressive economic policies.

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<sup>23</sup> Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 87.

<sup>24</sup> For a recent study of the social problem novel and its affective strategies, see Carolyn Betensky, *Feeling for the Poor: Bourgeois Compassion, Social Action, and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Arnold Kettle, “The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel,” in *From Dickens to Hardy*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), 170.

This is the novel's main argument, but expository rhetoric is limited in its ability to convey what this relationship *feels* like on a visceral level. The narrator's pathetic description of illness and filth accomplishes some of this affective task, of course, but the supercharged plot enigma of the uncanny, terrifying wadding makes the emotional point much more forceful, even if it holds a tenuous place in the narrative logic.<sup>26</sup> What it lacks in precision it compensates for in intensity.

All of this indicates Gaskell's carefully managed invocation of Newgate patterns toward more domestic ends, even including the end of critiquing the genre's limits. *Mary Barton* is, of course, not a Newgate novel. After the novel's midpoint, the ostentatious forensic drama of the dueling paper scraps tapers off and disappears completely after the acquittal of Jem. The text's full abnegation of mystery and detective patterns—and the Newgate genre in general—is clearest in the offhand explanation of the murder weapon that comes in the denouement. Previously the gun constituted the central forensic question left unanswered: how and why did John use Jem's gun? Answering it proves completely unnecessary to exonerating Jem, though. He only needs an alibi from Will Wilson. As readers, we're almost lulled into forgetting about the gun and the causal chain that makes sense of it. The banal answer—it was a friendly loan—comes in the penultimate chapter as a concession to the curious, irrelevant to any final events. What

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<sup>26</sup> Gaskell's strategy here helpfully shows the distance between *Mary Barton* and the narratives of Harriet Martineau, the preeminent early Victorian writer of economic morality tales, most famously *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–34). Martineau would take an economic thesis about industrial class relations, put it into story form to make it more palatable, and narrate events in reverse chronological order to foreground the moral steadfastly. They lack suspense, surprise, and contingency; they make clear arguments in unexciting ways.

Gaskell even complained about knowing from the start how Martineau's stories would end. In an 1841 letter, she wrote, "The *story* is too like a history—one knows all along how it must end." This complaint was about Martineau's novel, *Hour and the Man* (1839), although it's arguably just as accurate of the *Illustrations*'s short, inverted form. See *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, eds. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1966), 47.

previously was a “gossamer clue” has drifted into an afterthought. The domestic, familial narratives of Mary and Jem’s romance and John Barton’s penitence have fully supplanted the detective and political strands of the story.

I read these fluctuations as Gaskell’s recognition that object mysteries are limited in their ability to capture the emotional life of the home. I read them, that is, as strategic. Gaskell was an inexperienced novelist in the 1840s, but as much of the best feminist criticism on her has argued, critics risk committing a considerable act of condescension if they assume she lacked formal self-consciousness at this point. They also risk missing the extent of the humor in Gaskell’s parody of crime fiction tropes that emerges in *Cranford* a few years later. If sensationalized objects are structurally useful but thematically problematic in her industrial novel, they are so out of place in her subsequent domestic fiction that they exist only as phantoms and gags.

### **The Tell-Tale Mutton**

*Cranford* takes *Mary Barton*’s dissatisfaction with Newgate devices and converts it into fuel for burlesque. By parodying the Cranford women’s unsubstantiated panic about law-breaking, Gaskell ridicules both sensational crime stories and the process of detection that accompanies them—almost as if she’s playfully mocking her own plotting in *Mary Barton*. *Cranford* is a crimeless novel with a burglary mystery. The joke, of course, is on the paranoid ladies of Cranford, who are ever-vigilant about protecting the elegant economies of their homes from murderers and thieves—especially imaginary ones. In the chapter titled “The Panic,” rumors sweep through the village about a series of break-ins that have supposedly occurred in Cranford. These immediately give rise to a

state of alarm that draws upon the legends popularized by the *Newgate Calendar*, especially with the older residents of the town. Upon the rumors' arrival, the narrator Mary Smith complains, "[Miss Pole and Miss Matty] rummaged up, out of the recesses of their memory, such horrid stories of robbery and murder" (141). Tales quickly spread about "carts that went about in the dead of night, drawn by horses shod with felt, and guarded by men in dark clothes, going round the town, no doubt in search of some unwatched house or some unfastened door" (138). More than public violence, these stories seem to be most threatening for their potential to show how vulnerable domestic space might be, that most hallowed of zones in *Cranford*. Readers know the drill: the next task is to find and follow the signs and tokens of the crimes.

But what better way to deflate the sensationalism of crime fiction than by blaming it all on the cat? What better way to mock the fever-pitch search for causality than by reducing it all to stolen mutton? In the end we learn that the panic of Misses Pole, Matty, and others is founded on little other than a series of coincidences involving pilfering by local pets. When the town doctor, Mr. Hoggins, tries to disabuse Miss Pole of the rumor that he's been robbed by ruffians, her refusal to believe his tame but true version of events exposes the real perpetrator behind the housebreaking. She incredulously recounts to the ladies Hoggins's correction to her hypothesis:

[He told me] I must have heard an exaggerated account of some petty theft of a neck of mutton; which, it seems, was stolen out of the safe in his yard last week; he had the impertinence to add, he believed that that was taken by the cat. I have no doubt, if I could get to the bottom of it, it was that Irishman dressed up in women's clothes, who came spying about my house. (146)

Reaching out to clutch at the gossamer clues, Miss Pole eventually must concede that there is no actual crime. No tell-tale mutton will ever reemerge. It just so happens that

within twenty-four hours Carlo the aged dog dies, a cat steals some meat, and some crushed bushes are misinterpreted as burglars' footprints. In a novel in which Gaskell has displaced sensationalism, detection itself is the target of parody. Not only did a cat steal your mutton; your own cat did.

The farcical endpoint of *Cranford*'s parody is Mrs. Forrester's story about her cat eating and vomiting up her lace, a bizarre anecdote that simultaneously mocks spinster frugality and Newgate plots of stolen property reclaimed. The perpetrator of the theft is, again, a housecat. After Mrs. Forrester leaves the lace to soak in milk, the cat makes her move: "on my return, I found pussy on the table, looking very like a thief, but gulping very uncomfortably, as if she was half choked with something she wanted to swallow, and could not" (125). After a bit of time and tartar emetic, the lace reappears from the feline's stomach: "I could have kissed her when she returned the lace to sight, very much as it had gone down" (126). Here is the weird cousin of *Cranford*'s elegant economy—household management so parsimonious it recovers what has already been ingested, though not yet digested.<sup>27</sup> Should we call this the regurgitory economy? The spoof is made more delightful by the fact that Mrs. Forrester proudly displays the lace on her collar (so close to one's nose) as verifiable evidence of the stolen-but-recovered property. Gesturing to her collar, she concludes, "But now, your ladyship [Lady Glenmire] would never guess that it had been in pussy's inside" (126). We are witness here to Gaskell's gross, satirical rendering of the Newgate phenomenon that Martin Meisel called "the

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<sup>27</sup> Jill Rappaport calls the anecdote "a humorous case study for the indestructability of matter, despite its circulation and its changes in form" (*Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012], 72).

sensationalism of the authentic material witness.”<sup>28</sup> Framed by Mrs. Forrester’s story and displayed for inspection, the lace has returned to tell its tale. The scene’s bathos relies also on the ironic contrast of Lady Glenmire as the titled auditor, a glamorous character embedded in a decidedly non-glamorous world. The conversation ends there, with no response from the listening crowd. It’s quintessential Cranfordian understatement: non-commentary following a ridiculous story told proudly.

*Cranford* creates amusing incident by mocking characters’ expectation for dramatic incident. This is the novel’s ironic structure. There is detection but no crime. The mildness of the parody separates it by a great divide from a more outright crime-fiction sendup like Thackeray’s *Catherine* (1839-40). While also a comedic satire, his text is a strident, sustained, and morally driven attack on the Newgate genre, published during its scandalous apogee. The internal targets are the criminals themselves, worthy of attack for their destructive and antisocial behaviors. In *Cranford*—there being no criminals—the targets are the anxious women, guilty of little more than gullibility. The parody comes in the form of affectionate jest, not righteous sarcasm.

Nevertheless, Gaskell’s critique is still in earnest, and it centers on problems of authorship and gender. *Cranford* asks the reader to look at crime from the insular perspective of the home, and to thereby recognize crime fiction’s awkward fit with faithful accounts of domestic life. The joke is that the women’s perspectives are *too* domestic and provincial, but the framing suggests Gaskell’s increasing skepticism about the home playing such an outsized role in supplying materials and energy for public plots. In *Mary Barton* recirculating objects exposed the intersection of private and public as

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 249.



haunting and dangerous, but ultimately the plot jeopardized rather than strengthened the representation of Mary's subjective experience or her father's motivations. Channeling emotionally complex objects through pre-formulated recirculation mechanics strips away their layers of domestic sentiment, especially those particular to women's everyday experience of the home. The Newgate schematic is, in many ways, a man's distorted take on domestic material culture. It warps the meaning of objects by forcing them into a more ostentatious and dramatic role than they realistically play, and in doing so, implies that this is the most meaningful way they can be made to signify in a novel. And so, when *Cranford* is not busy poking fun at these patterns, it sets out to work forging a new narrative position for this material world.

### ***Cranford*, Handicraft, and Accumulative Temporality**

*Cranford* substitutes the gossamer threads of mystery for actual gossamer. Admittedly not gossamer by name, but the novel's world is one of silks, laces, and cottons, along with other common household materials like paper, string, and rubber. Its parody of stolen goods actually serves as a foil for this otherwise robust, non-criminal economy of homemade crafts. The novel is renowned for depicting several local modes of recuperation: the repurposing of raw materials to make new handicrafts, the reuse of items for common domestic tasks, and the gifting of homemade products among small friend groups. Much of what remains to be said in this chapter about Gaskell, plotting, and domestic objects takes us deep into this kaleidoscopic physical world, toward which *Mary Barton*'s decorated valentine only hinted, and did so toward much different ends. *Cranford* may be the most plausible Victorian literary depiction of domestic materiality

given that it refuses to invest curtains, paper, or butter with exaggerated drama or send them on implausible journeys—through the barrel of a gun, for instance. What the novel captures, instead, are patterns of object use that express a deeper sense of *women's* experience and daily rituals of the home: the cyclicity of handicraft projects; the non-ostentatious nature of domestic reuse; and the sociable communities of females who drive these circuits. These were topics of enthusiastic discussion in needlework and household management guides written by and for women, and it's there that we'll find the principles of accumulative temporality that underwrite *Cranford's* episodic structure.

It bears repeating that Victorian handicraft's dominant temporal structure was small-scale repetition—both in the material sense of recuperation and the temporal sense of regularly performed tasks. The female discourse that developed around it in the nineteenth century helped to frame these qualities as narrative values distinct from male-centered historiography and storytelling. Female commentators argued that domestic labor's lack of showy heroism and drama had erroneously led male writers to dismiss women's work as too redundant and trivial to carry narrative interest aside from providing a static backdrop of home life. *Cranford* is Gaskell's rejoinder to this perspective. It's a domestic novel without marriages. It's an episodic novel without picaresque adventures. It isn't a novel of pure stasis, though. *Cranford* forges a middle way between two polarities of representing domestic thing culture in narrative, by neither consigning objects into the ambient background nor elevating them to the status of novel-length plot devices for public revelations, as *Mary Barton* ventured waveringly. Theorizing this middle way requires a careful examination of repetition as a historically gendered construct.

My goal in looking at contextual materials is not to trace the historical origins of *Cranford*'s objects; it is to draw out craft writing's underlying messages about women and storytelling design. Two arguments, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, exist in these texts that have ramifications for Gaskell's novel writing. First, household economic cycles index (via temporal correlation) and influence (via circulation) public events in ways that only female writers recognized. Private objects serve as referents to political events, allowing public change to be measured according to things' evolving stages of repurposing within a home or women's community. Handicraft thus extends the reach of the home rather than confirming its insularity. While this trope works within *Cranford* as a local tactic, the second characteristic relates to novelistic form as a more abstract whole. Handicraft discourse insisted that its creative process could not be understood by examining single scenes of labor and recuperation, since the perspective ends up capturing what appears to be mere mechanical repetition. Only when one conceptualizes craftwork in multiple stages (and ultimately as a finished design) do these small-scale repetitions reveal their greater logic of accumulation—the slow building up of a unique design from small, nearly identical steps.

These narrative tenets, however, remain abstract until we understand exactly how women practiced handicraft and what materials they were using. We owe much to Talia Schaffer's *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (2011) for bringing to light the material complexity of this world, which modern readers otherwise have difficulty understanding with *Cranford* alone. She begins by noting that most modern readers have problematically dismissed domestic handicraft as blandly bourgeois and kitsch. The devaluation is made easy by the critical tendency to privilege

the fin-de-siècle Arts and Crafts movement—a critical darling of Victorianists and a movement that was explicitly reacting against handicraft. Diving deeply into this neglected archive, she shows how handicraft practitioners proudly reused household scraps, a process that imbued the transformed objects with personal, sometimes paradoxical values: “Made of scraps that women salvaged and recycled, unsalable in ordinary stores because of their amateurish construction and inadequate execution, the handicraft remained within the sentimental realm of the home.”<sup>29</sup> If, at one time, household materials had entered the home as a store-bought shawl or commercial invoice, their repurposing into craft stripped away this market resonance, even if their design mimicked other mass-produced commodities. Schaffer explains, “Mid-Victorian handicrafts often transform bits of household trash into a simulacrum of an expensive commodity.”<sup>30</sup> Once produced, the fate of these objects could include clothing, household decoration, or future circulation as products in charity bazaars or as gifts to friends and extended family.

This vast archive of women’s writing also documents an emerging Victorian conversation about how household reuse comprised a *uniquely* female mode of recirculation. I emphasize uniquely because the notion that domestic repurposing possessed an equivalent interest as industrial and criminal recirculation was met with resistance. In many ways, household management texts are a counter-archive, and understanding the tenets of accumulative temporality begins with this opposition and what it indicates about media and gender during the period. Quite simply, generalist periodicals either ignored the topic or treated it with condescension, favoring instead to

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<sup>29</sup> Schaffer, *Novel Craft*, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Schaffer, *Novel Craft*, 28.

cover the modes of recirculation that possessed more obvious narrative patterns, such as black market and industrial phenomena, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 2 respectively.

When authors *did* touch upon the topic, they focused on how domestic objects are renewed not by women's labor but by industrial processes—how, in other words, used objects left the home, were transformed by the factory, then re-entered as new or refurbished products. This attention was partly because magazines' staffs were largely male and partly because the repurposing that occurred within the home—quotidian and regular by definition—lacked the sparkle and novelty of technological circuits. But even in the generalist periodicals that showed regular interest in recycling *and* employed female writers, coverage was sparse. When Harriet Martineau agreed to write a series of articles on domestic objects for *Household Words* in the early 1850s, she premised every article on the role of manufacturers. When writing on wallpaper, she gives a tour of a wallpaper factory. When discussing shawls, she explains new mechanical development in weaving.<sup>31</sup>

The coverage instead appeared in needlework and craft manuals and certain newly established women's magazines. The class demographics of these publications raise a second archival complexity. The periodicals tended to be targeted specifically toward working-, middle-, *or* upper-class women, but the ladies of *Cranford* do not neatly fit in one of these categories. They have genteel backgrounds, but their penury means their household economy resembles a lower-middle-class family. The high-society fashion magazines and drawing-room journals of the Regency and early Victorian period thus hold less relevance than the household advice books that evolved first for the

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<sup>31</sup> See Harriet Martineau, "Household Scenery," *Household Words* 5:125 (14 Aug 1852): 513–19; and Martineau, "Shawls," *Household Words* 5:127 (28 Aug 1852): 552–56.

working classes.<sup>32</sup> (In *Cranford* the Barker sisters, who pride themselves upon their “aristocratic connexion,” are the only women who own fashion books (105).) However far from agrarian laborers the main characters are, William Cobbett’s *Cottage Economy* (1820) is germane for the way it emphasizes *regularity* and *recuperation* as key to a stable household.<sup>33</sup> It is an *ur-text* on domestic frugality. Focused on husbandry and cooking, the guidebook imparted an ethos of practical recycling: why throw out used materials if you can reuse them? Among other things, it instructed readers on making children’s hats from straw and candles from bee’s wax.<sup>34</sup>

By midcentury, magazines and books written by and for middle-class women began featuring affirmative discourse about the routines of handicraft and housekeeping. In a challenge to the evangelical middle-class periodicals that preceded them, these works focused on practical issues that were relevant to women of modest to moderate means who had at least some luxury time to devote to domestic crafting. Here, then, is the most relevant source material for understanding *Cranford*, given that these readers’ livelihoods didn’t depend entirely on frugal strategies, as was the case with Cobbett’s core readership. The texts emphasized Victorian women’s mastery of basic domestic objects like paper, cloth, food, wire, plants, and even hair. *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* (1852–

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<sup>32</sup> Fashion magazines were expensive, published monthly, and aimed at affluent women who bought rather than made their clothing. Drawing-room journals were miscellanies that addressed women specifically, but again, an upper-class readership. For descriptions and examples of both, see *Victorian Women’s Magazines: An Anthology*, eds. Margaret Beetham and Kay Boardman (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 10–31.

<sup>33</sup> Time management remained a constant focus in Victorian advice books. For instance, the introduction to the first installment of *The Magazine of Domestic Economy* claims “the disposition of time, the most fleeting and yet most valuable of our possessions, is in reality the groundwork of happiness, . . . there can be no economy, unless the principle be well understood” (See *The Magazine of Domestic Economy*, Volume the First (London: Orr and Smith, 1836), ii).

<sup>34</sup> Although very popular and written for a working-class audience, Harriet Martineau’s *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832–34) are less connected to this guidebook tradition. Unlike *Cottage Economy* and her own essays in *Household Words*, the *Illustrations* were starved for material details. Their goal was to explain abstract *laissez-faire* tenets, not advise about craft recycling. Their form was the economic fable.

77), the first cheap monthly magazine targeting middle-class women, was representative in that it focused on the intersection of quotidian duties and ornamental tastes. The effect was to “shift woman’s center of power from an abstract morality to ‘materiality and detail,’ toward a miscellany of homemaking ingredients.”<sup>35</sup> This style of writing would later develop into some of the most influential Victorian guidebooks and cookbooks, including *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (1861) and *Cassell’s Household Guide: Being a Complete Encyclopaedia of Domestic and Social Economy* (1869).<sup>36</sup> In all of these you’ll find guides to making the kinds of paper and cloth crafts that exist (or might exist) within the world of *Cranford*: wool stitching patterns on canvas, flower replicas formed with waste paper, sea coral made from wax and wire, architectural miniatures from old cork, embroidery composed of fish scales.

While all of this writing sought to correct the dearth of coverage on women’s everyday work, the more polemical, feminist versions pointed out how this dearth was the direct result of male prejudice against unassertive, non-teleological labor. The most outspoken was Elizabeth Stone, who not only wrote the first history of needlework in English but an industrial novel as well, one which some have speculated was a direct influence on Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*.<sup>37</sup> In *The Art of Needlework* (1840), Stone loudly proclaims that male authors have expunged the importance of women’s domestic craft

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<sup>35</sup> Kathryn Ledbetter, *British Women’s Victorian Periodicals: Beauty, Civilization, and Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 26. An excellent collection of essays on gender ideology in these texts is *Gender and the Victorian Periodical*, eds. Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> Here’s a testament to durability and influence: although Mrs. Beeton’s original book isn’t still in print, Isabella Beeton and Gerard Baker’s 200-recipe revision of it is: *Mrs. Beeton: How to Cook* (London: Orion, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Stone’s industrial novel about Lancashire spinning communities was called *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord* (1842). For an analysis of its conflicted political allegiances, see Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), 71–84. For its influence on *Mary Barton*, see Michael Wheeler, “Two Tales of Manchester Life,” *Gaskell Society Journal* 3 (1989): 6–28. See also Suzanne Daly, *The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2012), 50.

from history by glorifying only masculine narratives of destruction and climactic action. By using the trope of the sword versus the sewing needle, she contends that although needlework lacks the violence and drama of men's deeds, its "conservative" nature—continually making new things out of old or raw materials—has a significant but unacknowledged position in history and social life beyond the boundaries of the home. There are stories to be told about it; we just need to broaden our sense of what narrative can be:

The progress of real civilization is rapidly putting an end to this false *prestige* in favour of the "Destructive" weapon [the sword], and as rapidly raising the "Conservative" one [the needle] in public estimation; and the time seems at length arrived when the triumph of female ingenuity and industry, "THE ART OF NEEDLEWORK" may be treated as a fitting subject of historical and social record—fitting at least for a female hand.<sup>38</sup>

Unburdening needlework from the charge of being trivial, Stone sets out for four hundred pages to document how women's work and social history have been intertwined from the Egyptians to the Victorians.<sup>39</sup> What her book argues so cogently is that male discourse has cast domestic work as being mere repetition, and, in lacking momentous incidents, was unsuitable for a prominent position within diachronically structured plots. When historians or novelists *do* grant visibility to women's crafts, they do so as descriptive background to the historical epic or *bildungsroman*. Meaningful incident takes place outside the home. Home is where the male hero comes to temporarily escape plot—a place where women's work remains static, second-order, and politically insignificant.

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<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Stone, *The Art of Needlework, from the Earliest Ages* (London: Harry Colburn, 1840), v–vi.

<sup>39</sup> The contemporary field of feminist material culture continues to follow Stone's call to action, as evident in the justification for a recent essay collection: "The authors in this collection shine light on the marginal spaces—whether cloistered convents, private homes, or professional sites—and marginalized practices—embroidering, lacemaking, knitting, quilting, rugmaking, machine stitching, and textile production—to recover and insert women into the fissures of the historical record." See *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750–1950*, eds. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 2.



*Cranford* is a fully realized example of Stone's point that private conservation stories have the ability to narrate public events. Public and political incidents develop by way of rising action, suspense, and climax. In contrast, domestic objects evolve in cyclical rhythms; they are reused but each time with some degree of difference from the previous. *Cranford* doesn't conflate the two spheres—that is, it doesn't implausibly thrust its women into the heart of Drumble banking or colonial India—but it does use stories of repurposing as temporal measurement tools for such events. Rather than minimizing the novel's scope, the domestically confined nature of recirculation in fact widens it by creating a set of proximate, concrete reference points through which to understand the otherwise abstract concepts of global travel and finance capitalism.<sup>40</sup>

The relationship is clearest in the subplot of Peter Jenkyns, which Miss Pole explains with reference to the history of her household linens. The repurposing of her shawl into a curtain makes temporal and geographical sense of the Peter plot and global concerns more generally. Mary reports Miss Pole's version of Peter's history as follows:

The only fact I gained from this conversation was that certainly Peter had last been heard of in India, "or that neighborhood;" and that this scanty intelligence of his whereabouts had reached Cranford in the year when Miss Pole had bought her Indian muslin gown, long since worn out (we washed it and mended it, and traced its decline and fall into a window-blind, before we could go on);—and in a year when Wombell came to Cranford, because Miss Matty had wanted to see an elephant in order that she might the better imagine Peter riding on one; . . . (164)

For Miss Pole the shawl-curtain registers time and space, both far removed from the moment of her speech. Rather than break the limited first-person perspective of Mary Smith to show Peter in India, *Cranford* translates a global idea into a domestic thing to make it more legible. It's one of those amusing details that readers have long cited as part

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<sup>40</sup> Focusing on Mary's letter to Peter Jenkyns, John Plotz makes the complementary point *Cranford* is "a striking example of the Victorian novel's success in producing a public form of portable privacy". See Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), 11.

of the novel's durable "charm." But it's also a commentary on gender, via an educated reference to Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89): "trac[ing] its decline and fall into a window-blind." The heteroglossic mix of political history and domestic management discourses, merged without grammatical distinction, expresses a complaint about women's exclusion from the historical record, exactly the sort of writing that someone like Stone would have been considering in her protest of needlework's erasure from history.<sup>41</sup> In the face of this exclusion, the shawl-curtain's function is to render extra-domestic affairs legible and tangible.

It may be tempting to say that the conversion of global events into local objects nullifies the significance of the outside world and further cloisters the women.<sup>42</sup> Like every other Gaskell novel, *Cranford* pits the abstract workings of global economies against the tangible operations of household ones. However, the majority of the repurposing episodes indicate domestic transformation does not come at the expense of public sphere knowledge. Mary and her friends may busy themselves with "cutting out and stitching together pieces of newspaper" to protect a new carpet for a dinner party, but that's only after several families have read and circulated the shared subscription of the *St. James Gazette* (53). Similarly, Gaskell may be making a crafting joke when she writes the Town and Country bankruptcy turns all its banknotes into "waste paper" (176), as if to imply the women only understand money as raw crafting materials. But, of course, that

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<sup>41</sup> The maneuver here is something like *social* free indirect discourse, rather than *characterological*. The mixed utterance of two social milieus occurs in a single sentence without a grammatical marker distinguishing the two discourses. The standard discussion of *heteroglossia* is Mikhail Bakhtin, who describes when "the speech of another is introduced into the author's discourse (the story) in *concealed form*, that is, without any of the *formal* [grammatical] markers usually accompanying such speech, whether direct or indirect." See Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 303.

<sup>42</sup> Older readings of the novel are more likely to label the women's world as insular and naïve. See, for example, Dodsworth, "Women without Men at *Cranford*."

episode ends up being the prelude to Miss Matty's own successful commercial venture as a tea and sweets merchant. Craft discourse actually makes space for the linear plots of public life rather than excluding them. It makes them newly decipherable. Both of the book's conventionally climactic narratives—Peter's return from abroad and the bank's failure—are interwoven with the more recursive, episodic events involving recirculation.<sup>43</sup> Nested in the daily rhythms of material culture, Gaskell grants these linear narratives room to exist but not enough to hijack the episodic structure or overshadow the women's lived experience. Surely, then, it would be a mistake to believe Gaskell retreats entirely from public concerns in *Cranford* as a way to make amends for her polemical class message in *Mary Barton*.

If Gaskell sometimes legitimizes household recuperation by linking it to public life, she just as often lets these recursive cycles stand on their own. Much of *Cranford* is content to show how local reuse can sustain stories without reference to beyond the community. An object like the shawl-curtain may derive its singular power from its reference to Peter, but Gaskell was just as aware that *all* the text's accumulating anecdotes about elegant economy added up to a sum greater than its individual parts. And, crucially, this pattern of development occurs without the conventional structure of rising action and climax. We again need to return to contemporary craft writing for this second characteristic, specifically its insistence that craft's impact is visible only in its compound form.

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<sup>43</sup> Though several have examined the existence of these linear narratives in *Cranford*, the best analysis of them is Andrew H. Miller's take on "the complex play between its recursive movement and the linearity of the novel's more familiar plots." See Miller, *Novels Behind Glass*, 93.

Again, Elizabeth Stone's work provides us with the most outspoken version. She doesn't try to call domestic work non-repetitive. She positively reframes it as an alternative narrative structure defined by accumulation:

[T]hese splendid results are not the effect of great exertions—of sudden, and uncertain, and enthusiastic efforts. They are the effect of a course, of a system of minor actions and of occupations, *individually* insignificant in their appearance, and noiseless in their approach. . . .

They involve a routine of minor duties which often appear, at first view, little if at all connected with such mighty ends. But such an inference would lead to a false conclusion. It is entirely of insignificant details that the sum of human life is made up; and any one of those details, how insignificant soever *apparently* in itself, as a link in the chain of human life is of *definite* relative value. . . . It is not the independent intrinsic worth of each isolated action of woman which stamps its value—it is their bearing and effect on the mass. It is the daily and hourly accumulation of minute particles which form the vast amount.<sup>44</sup>

The humbleness of women's daily work doesn't mean that its compound effect is humble. Stone in fact reduces needlework to the atomic level of the particle to stress that its value, shape, and consequence rests upon the agglomeration of minor components reiterated over time. The claim here is actually a materialist version of the twentieth-century psychoanalytic feminist arguments that women embody different temporalities than the linear time of men. In its most famous formulation, Julia Kristeva defines the two female modalities of time: cyclical time (tied to biological and household phases) and monumental time (the sense of eternal life-giving attached to womanhood).<sup>45</sup> However incompatible bourgeois handicraft and radical feminism seem now, they share a fundamental understanding of gendered temporalities.

The more technical books promoted the idea that while individual steps are repetitive and may seem identical, the final product will eventually reveal a unique,

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<sup>44</sup> Stone, *The Art of Needlework*, 5–6.

<sup>45</sup> See Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), 187–213.

individualized craft. At the atomic level, craft guidebooks are essentially about repeating small steps—wax dipping, say, or wool stitching—hundreds or thousands of times to create a macro-pattern that represents a particular natural form. (The idea remains, of course, as any modern knitter will tell you.) A brief look into a book like *The Lady's Album of Fancy Work* (1850) will show you that “repeat” is one of the most common verbs in the instructions.<sup>46</sup> However obvious this point seems, it's a linguistic confirmation that every unique, completed craft takes shape via miniscule repetitions of the needle. In the 1842 *Handbook of Needlework*, before getting into the minutiae stitch patterns, the author assures the reader that these are responsible for the “endless variety of form which [crafting] assumes.”<sup>47</sup> Speaking of new tapestry styles that came to England in 1830s, another writes that “[tapestry work] may be called mechanical, and so in a degree it certainly is; but there is infinitely more scope for fancy, taste, and even genius here than in any other of the large family of ‘satin sketches’ and embroideries.”<sup>48</sup> Consider these descriptions alongside a modern evaluation of *Cranford*'s form: “The design is like an allegorical emblem or like a coat of arms made of a subtly repeating pattern that becomes visible through its repetition.”<sup>49</sup> The fact that J. Hillis Miller could describe the novel in this way with no cited research on craft guides speaks to Gaskell's success in converting craft principles to a structure of episodic accumulation.

We sense this achievement in the way that *Cranford* professes at the local level to depict mere stasis, but ends up capturing subtly different events whose significance

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<sup>46</sup> See *The Lady's Album of Fancy Work* (London: Grant and Griffith, 1850).

<sup>47</sup> Miss A. Lambert, *The Handbook of Needlework* (London: John Murray, 1842), 15. Lambert continues: “No feminine art affords greater scope for the display of taste and ingenuity than that of needlework” (15).

<sup>48</sup> Stone, *Art of Needlework*, 401.

<sup>49</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “Appolyon in *Cranford*,” 85.

becomes clear only as successive installments reiterate the themes. Take Mary's commentary on the inconsequentiality of events in *Cranford*, for example, an often-quoted passage from the text. It comes, I would argue, with a sly wink to the reader—less an absolute truth than a recognition that the novel conceives of incident in ways usually marginalized to domestic management discourse. What appears at first to be a complaint about monotony paradoxically slides into an anecdote about newspaper repurposing and a dinner party:

My next visit to Cranford was in the summer. There had been neither births, deaths, nor marriages since I was there last. Everybody lived in the same house, and wore pretty nearly the same well-preserved, old-fashioned clothes. The greatest event was, that Miss Jenkynses had purchased a new carpet for the drawing room. . . . We were very busy, too, one whole morning, before Miss Jenkyns gave her party, in following her directions, and in cutting out and stitching together pieces of newspaper, so as to form little paths to every chair, set for the expected visitors lest their shoes might dirty or defile the purity of the carpet. (52–53)

Here, in the first serial number, Mary prefaces her description of an idiosyncratic style of repurposing with a disclaimer about uneventfulness. But, it *is* a singular event, and moreover, these sorts of “uneventful” incidents with paper, string, and the like will accumulate, each slightly different than the last. For Schaffer, moments like these indicate that *Cranford* is a “meditation on ephemerality,” Gaskell’s anxious recognition of her own text’s transience as both a historical novel and a physical book.<sup>50</sup> While this certainly seems true for individual scenes, the book’s accumulation of “uneventful” or ephemeral scenes ultimately establishes a greater durability. Because the many repurposing episodes are distinct yet part of the same category, the novel cultivates familiarity rather than redundancy or stasis. The meaning of “elegant economy” becomes clear only as episodes of it—recognizable but slightly different—accumulate.

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<sup>50</sup> Schaffer, *Novel Craft*, 23.

Because it's a cumulative effect, we also sense this achievement in abstract ways that can't be validated with reference to single passages. *Cranford* is neither a set of linked short stories nor a conventional novel. You could conceivably rearrange some of the early and middle numbers without sacrificing meaning or design, but you couldn't subtract any of the numbers without palpable loss. In this way *Cranford* is monolithic—conceivable only as a non-teleological collective. Readers remember it less for plot points than for its success at capturing the ethos of a community of women united in age, marital status, and frugality. Only episodic repetition ensures readers comprehend the meaning of Mary's comment in the first installment, a comment that turns out to be the novel's thesis: "Things that many would despise, and actions which it seemed scarcely worth while to perform, were all attended to in Cranford" (54). The partner thesis to Mary the character's claim is Gaskell the female novelist's: domestic routines have been spurned as novelistic material by centuries of male writers, but in attending to them through an innovative narrative structure, readers come to a sense of their compound value. What might at first seem like unremarkable material accrues emotional rewards through multiplication of incidents.

### **String : Gaskell :: Rubber Band : Dickens**

Popular writers on handicraft were contesting a general male pattern that existed in writing for centuries, but Gaskell's challenge to the Victorian literary milieu was more specific in both target and execution. We've seen how *Cranford*'s reiterative episodes capture women's everyday life while also carrying an accumulative type of storytelling interest which sought out alternative gains to those of climactic plotting. The principal

figure against whom Gaskell was positioning herself was actually the man who began by encouraging her career and providing the publication venue for *Cranford*: Charles Dickens. Gaskell's target was not Dickens himself but an approach to narrative construction that, by the 1850s, was distinguishable enough to be called Dickensian. *Cranford* is a novel written from *within* the Dickens circle that positions itself *outside* the circle's literary practices, a dialectical swing away from *Mary Barton* which will eventually resolve in *North and South*. The literary stakes of Gaskell's challenge to linear narratives—particularly the showy, sensational sort—thus become clearer when we approach the novel through the lens of Dickens's influence at midcentury. Their divergent uses of recirculation provide an advantageous viewpoint through which to understand their strained editorial relationship, their conflicting views on engrossing storytelling, and the differing models of social collectivity that these forms suggest. These dimensions all pass through the Victorian literary discussions about what constitutes novelistic incident, a debate much more far-reaching than the Newgate row over criminal melodrama with which this chapter began.

*Cranford* does something remarkable: it embraces reusable materiality but refuses to embed recirculating objects deep into its plot structure. Recirculation carries an intrinsic charm for Gaskell—the very deed is pleasing—whereas in Dickens's novels a large amount of objects' dynamism derives from an *extrinsic* source: the authorial labor of intricate plotting. The juxtaposition throws important formal distinctions into relief. First, Dickens is an exceptionally fussy plotter. He's dramatically ostentatious and hyperactive in his shaping of story arcs, which as we saw in the previous two chapters, enables dazzling effects in the fields of objects and characters alike. The risk of this



obsessiveness, *Cranford* suggests, is that his structural techniques perform such flexible work that they appear too obviously designed to engross the reader with thrilling incident. By contrast, Gaskell is attuned to the more placid, rhythmic undulations typical of women's provincial life, a realm that nonetheless interacts with recirculating materials on a daily basis. In her world, suspense fades; it loses narrative priority. As a contemporary reviewer in the *Examiner* wrote, *Cranford* progresses "with hardly the help of any artifice the novelist most relies upon," a gesture to a corpus that would include even her own *Mary Barton*.<sup>51</sup> *Cranford* confines the kinetic process to the temporal boundaries of the episodic sketch, or in some cases the fleeting anecdote within the sketch. And by stripping away the implausibility and shocking drama of global recirculation, Gaskell has room to explore the sentimental and sociable dimensions of domestic objects that *Mary Barton*'s form wouldn't allow.

Even at the moment of *Cranford*'s birth, Gaskell and Dickens's disagreements over narrative methods had already begun. Their interpersonal relationship prior to and during the publication was an increasingly strained one of a domineering male mentor and resistant female mentee. Dickens had invited Gaskell to write for his magazine *Household Words* after being impressed with *Mary Barton*, and while the opportunity certainly brought greater visibility and financial compensation to Gaskell, their relationship soured in very little time.<sup>52</sup> Their quarrels often arose over editorial control of Gaskell's storylines. Based on an examination of their correspondence, Elsie Michie

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<sup>51</sup> This review is reprinted in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Angus Easson (London: Routledge, 1991), 196. The author also remarks, "If we told you it contained a story, that would be hardly true" (195).

<sup>52</sup> Even before the first installment of *Cranford* appeared in December 1851, Gaskell and Dickens had already quarreled about proposals to solve prostitution and Dickens's publication of a ghost story Gaskell had told him without permission. For Gaskell's complaint about the ghost story, see Dickens, *Letters* (Nov. 25, 1851), 545–46.

has argued Dickens presented himself as a patient disciplinarian and her as a wayward, deviant woman writer.<sup>53</sup> His most heavy-handed intrusion into *Cranford* came in this first December installment, which features Captain Brown's death by train accident on account of his absorption in Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*. In the editorial stage, Dickens changed the book from his own to Thomas Hood's *Poems*, though. (In the first complete edition, Gaskell would restore the reference.)

The Captain Brown episode, focused as it is on reading and an alien male figure in Cranford society, shows Gaskell working out the female novelist's position and techniques in a literary market dominated by males, none more prominent in the 1850s than Dickens himself. Putting the issue of editorial alteration aside for the moment, here is what occurs: waiting for the train, Captain Brown is deep in perusal of the most recent installment of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, which he has been praising loudly to the women for many months. Absorbed in the text and oblivious to his surroundings, he looks up from his book just in time to see a child teetering on the platform edge as a train speeds into the station. Lunging to save the child, he dies from falling into the train's path. Eileen Gillooly sees Gaskell's killing of Captain Brown as a coded insult: "Gaskell's digs at Dickens—impugning his authority as a literary model, parodying his plot device for getting rid of Carker [in *Dombey and Son*], murdering him by association—all indicate her growing resentment of Dickens in this first episode of *Cranford*."<sup>54</sup> Elsie Michie is especially perceptive about the multiple interpretations in Gaskell's attribution of the death to Dickens: "That detail has the peculiar double-edged quality characteristic of so

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<sup>53</sup> See Elsie B. Michie, *Outside the Pale: Cultural Exclusion, Gender Difference, and the Victorian Woman Writer* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 79–112.

<sup>54</sup> Eileen Gillooly, *Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender, and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999), 161.

many of Dickens's comments to Gaskell. As an image, it compliments Dickens by suggesting that he is an all-engrossing storyteller; but, at the same time, it conveys a covert sense of aggression against him."<sup>55</sup>

All-engrossing storytelling of the Dickensian type, I would argue, is not the flipside of Gaskell's aggression but its motivating force. The Captain Brown episode introduces a critique of over-involved plotting that *Cranford* later develops through the idioms of household reuse. We thus need to examine how the narratological qualities of suspense and absorption come to be blamed for this accident, since they establish the intertextual stance the entire novel will take toward Dickensian plotting, particularly object plotting. Captain Brown's death via reading makes explicit what the rest of *Cranford* does in practice: abandoning ostentatious construction. Reading Dickens is absorbing because of his exciting plots and showy style, and the reader's resulting infatuation can make it difficult to square the rhetorically mesmerizing text with the more even-tempered real world. While it's clear that Gaskell sides with Boz over Doctor Johnson in Captain Brown's quarrel with Mrs. Deborah Jenkyns about literary style, she also implies engrossing storytelling has a positive limit. Beyond a certain point, it becomes distracting, artificial, even obnoxious. Mrs. Jenkyns's remark that "poor Captain Brown was killed for reading—that book by Mr Boz, you know" is surely a joke at her own expense, but the neutral reports of the Captain's reading deportment consistently emphasize absorption's hazards. The only detail of the accident from the country newspaper we hear is that "the gallant gentleman was deeply engaged in the perusal of a number of *Pickwick*" (57), but even before the accident, the women perceive something even worse: Captain Brown's infatuation with Boz's zippy stories leads to publicly

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<sup>55</sup> Michie, *Outside the Pale*, 96.

disruptive performances. Spotting him reading on the street, Mary Smith remarks, “He was rather ostentatious in his preference of the writings of Mr Boz; would walk through the streets so absorbed in them, that he all but ran against Miss Jenkyns” (53). All the things the Amazonians feel uneasy about are coded masculine: add Dickens’s fiction and public reading to a list that already includes the vulgar discussion of money.

In exorcising hyper-absorption from her own novel, Gaskell makes a statement about plot that marks her territory as apart from Dickens’s reliance on incident, of which object-based incident is the most egregious style. Her critique is part of what Hilary Schor identifies as the novel’s exploration of how narrative structure itself can be positively gendered female: “*Cranford* asks clearly what the voice of the woman writer can be; how a woman can speak in this new environment; what female narrative, dispossessed and displaced, can look like.”<sup>56</sup> Schor goes on to describe “the peculiar uses of parody and textual revision that will be the achievement of *Cranford* and its feminized text.”<sup>57</sup> What Gaskell’s first installment does is process Dickens (via the proxy of Captain Brown) through her episodic structure and ironic tone. He doesn’t fare well, however unserious the character’s death is. (Cranford society in general has the “unsettling power to obliterate men,” Nina Auerbach writes.<sup>58</sup>) Even though some evidence suggests Gaskell originally planned this installment as a standalone sketch, Captain Brown’s death still stands as a sensational episode that serves to banish further sensational possibilities in the novel to come.<sup>59</sup> With the next installment, the text proceeds to its characteristic

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<sup>56</sup> Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace*, 84.

<sup>57</sup> Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace*, 95.

<sup>58</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 78. Hilary Schor remarks that the train accident story “makes Dickens himself seem the murdering engine” (Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace*, 94.)

<sup>59</sup> I don’t mean to say that Gaskell’s *intentions* about structure or anti-Dickensian symbolism were fully formed at this point. There is a question about whether Gaskell intended on writing anything beyond

even-keeled style. To find any actual violence or “corpse,” as we do in this first number, seems unthinkable beyond this point. The closest we get are Newgate rumors and cat jokes. Captain Brown’s fate asserts Gaskell’s capability as an self-governing author—a preliminary clearing-of-the-air, so to speak. Gaskell thereby affirms her commitment to the fragmentariness of daily life (and of narrative) in which not knowing the affairs of the next day (or next installment) isn’t a threshold for producing suspense and readerly obsessiveness. It produces the pleasure of daily encounters with fresh things that are nonetheless familiar.

Dickens’s replacement of his own novel with Hood’s *Poems* thus drastically changes the meaning of the episode because it replaces a serially released narrative text with a single-volume collection of lyric poems. Almost by definition, such a poem collection cannot create absorption based on incident and suspense, whereas this is the bread and butter of Dickens’s fiction. However enthralling Hood’s poems may be, the forced substitution strips away Gaskell’s topical satire of technique: absorptive reading, the kind encouraged by Dickens’s dramatic, inwrought style, is so far removed from the real world that its distractions can cause deadly accidents. In a moment, I’ll address the objection that *Pickwick* is a picaresque tale and thus is a poor example of a cohesive narrative arc. The more relevant intertext, we’ll see, is Dickens’s carefully structured mystery novel *Bleak House*, serialized at the same time as *Cranford* and fixated similarly on material reuse. To get there, however, I want to first show how the narrative

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this first installment—about whether, in other words, she planned to write a single sketch or the series of linked sketches that ended up constituting the completed novel. If we believe her comments to John Ruskin over a decade after *Cranford*’s composition, she meant it to be a single sketch. See her February 1865 letter, in *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell*, 748.

implications of the Captain Brown incident correspond to Mary Smith's musings on the two types of reusable household items available for binding elements into a whole.

Gaskell represents the differences between her and Dickens by describing reusable household items as *symbols* of plotted form. What's the difference between a string and a rubber band? Why does it matter? I ask because Gaskell does too, and does so as an allegorical way of differentiating her novel from the more pliant form of Dickens. String pieces, always a fixed length, tie together separate items or connect to other string pieces. Rubber bands, elastic and expandable, hold together items by virtue of their inherent tension, discernable when they are manipulated and expand beyond resting position. Mary Smith bases her meditation about the two physical things on these distinctions, and her contentment with string, but hesitancy about using rubber bands, reiterates misgivings about Dickensian plotting that she first expressed with the death of Captain Brown. Mary writes the following about her idiosyncratic habits of salvaging string and bands:

I am not above owning that I have this human weakness myself. String is my foible. My pockets get full of little hanks of it, picked up and twisted together, ready for uses that never come. I am seriously annoyed if any one cuts the string of a parcel, instead of patiently and faithfully undoing it fold by fold. How people can bring themselves to use India-rubber rings, which are a sort of deification of string, as lightly as they do, I cannot imagine. To me an India-rubber ring is a precious treasure. I have one which is not new; one that I picked up off the floor, nearly six years ago. I have really tried to use it; but my heart failed me, and I could not commit the extravagance. (83)

First, note that Mary doesn't tie her strings together; she twists them around each other to create something like an gradually expanding braid or helix shape—yet another sign that accumulation, not linear fragmentariness is the operative form of *Cranford*. But the distinction in question here is each item's energy and potential for sustaining the

continuity of the materials to which it's applied. String's uniting function relies on an adjoining point of attachment. The rubber band, however, is a more resourceful item; when stretched, its tensile, kinetic pull is much stronger than string's ability to unite via knotting.<sup>60</sup>

These qualities are what lead Mary to call rubber bands "a deification of string," and the extravagance of using one symbolizes *Cranford*'s resistance to intricate, involuted plotting, in particular Dickens's celebrated *imbroglios* that require so much authorial manipulation to hold together. The humble string is an emblem of the episodic novel: self-contained stories arranged in sequence and united by shared characters and setting. In contrast, the rubber band represents the carefully organized suspense novel: a temporally-layered form reliant on manipulatable kinetic energy and capable of stretching out to cohesively accommodate a vast set of characters and objects and hold them in positions so as not to fall out of the plot. Mary Smith doesn't insult the rubber band, though. Via her proxy, Gaskell recognizes the plotting method's dazzling power. *Mary Barton*'s valentine-wadding (another item defined by loaded kinetic energy) was her first novel's rubber band, as it were, albeit one that held together only the middle portions of the plot. In *Cranford* Gaskell shows increasing uneasiness about such kineticism. The rubber band is worth having at her disposal, but is it worth using? After *Mary Barton*, can she do it in good faith? Can she commit such an extravagance?

The rubber band and the string are recirculating objects as much as they are symbols for the recirculation plot, of course, and they thus lead us squarely back to the

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<sup>60</sup> Although dozens of critics have seen the string in this quote as representing Gaskell's own novel, very few have identified the rubber band with Dickens. J. Hillis Miller reads the rubber band's vigor not in the structural terms of plotting but as a coded reference to his editorial intrusion. See Miller, "Appolyon in *Cranford*," 186.

physical world of household reusability and craft. The narrative structures each item emblemizes are comprised and shaped by reclaimed objects much like themselves. Here, on the everyday level of novelistic materiality, we see how, in practice, objects work differently between the two. The rubber band school of plotting requires a certain degree of object enchantment—a deification, as it were. Dickens makes things come alive; this critical truism applies not just to his knack for personification but to a broad-spectrum kineticism. He endows objects with the force of personality *and* movement. Dickensian things seem always wrapped in rubber, tensile and loaded with what material physics calls *potential energy*, even when appearing static. Trust in the reality effect at your own peril.

Gaskell, however, is skeptical about overreliance on such metaphorical rubber; the fates of so many domestic objects in *Cranford* underscore this aesthetic approach. First, ask what these string pieces *do* in the novel's plot. Relatively little. They contribute instead to characterization and thematic development by exemplifying frugality and Mary's particular habits that place her within the recuperative logic of the elegant economy that, as I said before, comes into focus through the accumulation of instances. But the scraps bring no epiphany at *Cranford*'s midpoint or conclusion. Their position exists within the single chapter only, not in the narrative substratum where authors like Bulwer and Dickens, and later Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and Arthur Conan Doyle, might temporarily conceal an object's movement for some grandstand reappearance. For example, contrast the fate of Lady Dedlock and Captain Hawdon's love letters in *Bleak House* with Miss Jenkyns's love letters, both stories which appeared in mid-1852. *Bleak House*'s letters—which are previously secreted away by Nemo and



stolen by Krook—are burned, but they’re damaged in only superficial ways, allowing them to continue passing, half-burnt and still legible, between several more hands, all toward disclosing the character-connection mysteries that predate the novel’s story time. (My syntax is symptomatic: describing Dickensian recirculation requires much longer sentences.) Gaskell used a version of this burnt-but-not-destroyed device in *Mary Barton* with the insulting drawing of the working-class leaders. In *Cranford*, Miss Matty digs out her mom’s old letters, reads them as a loving tribute, and then burns them. Completely. What remains is not some durable physical prop, but instead the bits and pieces of information from these letters, which accumulate relevance in later conversations, all the way up to Peter’s return from India. The recursivity that Gaskell thrives on is one of affective returns—in the case of the old letters, those of nostalgia, empathy, and the bittersweet way in which friends and siblings come to take the place of lost parents.

Think back to Miss Pole’s shawl for further evidence. Gaskell wants to highlight the satisfaction felt at seeing a worn-out thing put to fresh use as well as its ability to temporally index events across the globe. But it’s never recycled into a telltale rag at the novel’s climax, and certainly not into a consequential parchment. Similarly, no shocking news about Peter Jenkyns’s fate ever appears to unsuspecting characters via the *Saint James Gazette*, the newspaper that circulates among a group of Cranford families. For any well-versed reader of Dickens, it’s not hard to imagine how he might have treated Miss Matty’s candle-lighters that she makes from her weekly invoices and bills. How is her catastrophic bankruptcy via the Town and Country collapse avoided or mollified? By some forgotten or concealed clue on an old bank statement, of course. Urgently sorting through her remaining spills would generate the epiphanic resolution made possible by

the novel's earlier attention to domestic frugality. These are the techniques that require the rubber band—the integration of different temporal and spatial planes via objects to achieve plot cogency and climactic revelation. When Dickens does take up needlework at the decade's end in *A Tale of Two Cities*, don't forget its function: Madame DeFarge's knitting is code for the list of those to be killed.

*Bleak House* is such an illuminating intertext for *Cranford* because they share publication periods and preoccupations with paper and cloth lifecycles, but they differ radically in the way those lifecycles signify within plot structure.<sup>61</sup> The open, mega-urban, industrial economy of Dickens's novels demands the prodigality of waste, only some of which will recirculate back into functional significance. The dramatic spikes from rubbish to durability were sudden and relatively rare, and, crucially, rubber band-like plot mechanics enabled them. Objects *need* to disappear and undergo uncertain fates in Dickens's world. This is its material-formal logic. How different is the transparent, circumscribed economy of *Cranford*—and what a different type of pleasure it elicits! Here, once items arrive in households, they tend not to leave or go missing, and if they do, they simply travel to neighbors' homes. Gaskell endows them with a more evenly focused sense of pleasure, and readers are made aware of the movements, such as the paper routes of the *Saint James Gazette*, Thomas Holbrook's gift to Miss Matty of a poetry collection, or simply Miss Matty's gratis dispersal of candy to the local children. When a reader loses sight of an object in *Cranford* the reason is quite simple: narration has a necessarily limited purview. Rubbish is a material category not a narrative phase.

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<sup>61</sup> *Cranford*'s publication in *Household Words* spanned from Dec. 1851 to May 1853; installments appeared irregularly, with as many as eight months and as few as two weeks between numbers. *Bleak House* came out from March 1852 to Sept. 1853 in regular monthly installments. Gaskell's choice of *Pickwick Papers* is in part because *Cranford* is a historical novel set in the 1830s, when *Pickwick* was responsible for launching Dickens's career.

Used items never fall into the long rubbish period of invisibility and latency. In Gaskell's world when characters exhaust the original functions of paper, clothing, or other objects, they immediately sweep them into a new position within the economy, via repurposing, reuse, or gift.

We thus see that temporally *Cranford* is a future-oriented novel, powered by the idea of renewal and unencumbered by past, unresolved institutional plots. Its surface-level concern with aging women, moribund traditions, and the encroachment of finance capital can obscure this deeper logic at times. Its lack of mystery plots and its consistent association of reused things with joy frees it from a typical Victorian obsessiveness about recirculation's connection to the past. Parchment is not valuable for its legal provenance or its forensic backstory. It holds value for its future transformation within the home. In fact, the *erasure* of its legal past is an essential step in its transition into a newly valued craft. Miss Matty's weekly habit of transforming her bills, invoices, and notes into decorative candle-lighters demonstrates this process and the enthusiasm that accompanies it. She isn't trying to unearth old legal and financial documents buried in waste paper; she's reimagining those documents *as* waste paper and thus as the valuable raw material for future handicrafts. And their creation is ongoing, part of the novel's formal investment in accretive value. Unencumbered by the demands of backstories and plot springs, they signify the elegant economy's forward-looking logic of renewability. We can extend that even further to say that they signify the novel's own renewability: Gaskell in fact revived her world ten years later with an installment called "The Cage at Cranford" (1863) published in Dickens's periodical *All the Year Round*. "Have I told you anything about my friends at Cranford since the year [1853]?" Mary Smith asks at its beginning. "I

think not.”<sup>62</sup> Gaskell could return to these friends without threatening the integrity of the original text’s story.

Relieving domestic objects of the burden of carrying out complex storylines means material culture has more room to explore the emotional economy particular to tightly knit women’s communities. The novel features cycles of gift-giving among friends that parallel the rhythmic patterns so important to women’s handicraft discourse. (“The Cage at Cranford,” in fact, is based on another gifting episode: a Parisian cage given by Mrs. Gordan, née Jessie Brown, to Mary Smith.) When the original *Cranford* concludes by touting “the old friendly sociability in Cranford society” (218), it’s pointing to the maintenance of this emotional economy. Jill Rappoport’s helpfully illuminates the parallelism of material and emotional economies among women: the gifting of self-made craft items, she argues, created a self-contained community of gift-givers which helped develop social cohesion via a community flow of “sympathetic circuitry.”<sup>63</sup> She reads it in the particular context of emergent thermodynamic theories about the conversion and conservation of energy, the first law of which was that no energy is ever created or destroyed; it’s simply redistributed. “[G]ift practices operate according to a principle of conservation. What goes around comes around: the sum of sympathy never diminishes.”<sup>64</sup> Thermodynamic context aside, the notion of a *conservative* economy based on the recirculation of positive feelings is especially legible in *Cranford* because of Gaskell’s *unsensational* depiction of domestic objects. When Miss Matty is brought low

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<sup>62</sup> “The Cage at Cranford” (Appendix B), in *Cranford* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 327. The text says 1856, but textual scholars agree this is an error. No addition of the completed novel appeared before this 1863 release.

<sup>63</sup> Jill Rappoport, *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 71.

<sup>64</sup> Rappoport, *Giving Women*, 70.

by the failure of her bank, the women come together to donate money of her behalf. Once she's solvent and closes the store because of her brother's support, she gifts tea, muslins, and necklaces back to her Cranford friends.

Zooming out, Dickens's and Gaskell's uses of recirculation express different visions of collectivity among the social groups that handle those objects. On the one hand, Dickens uses stolen goods, reemerging love letters, and recycled rubbish to call attention to hostile gulfs between social groups; objects are powerful tools because they unveil material and economic interconnectedness *despite* this lack of social intermingling. *Bleak House* may use rediscovered letters to answer its own question ("What connexion can there be . . . ?"), but it never unites all connected parties into a new group bonded by affective ties.<sup>65</sup> This is why *Bleak House* is a tragedy, despite Esther's marriage to Woodcourt at its end. Great gulfs remain, but at least object movement has exposed them. On the other hand, Gaskell's recirculation functions in a more socially positive way within groups who already inhabit a similar place and socioeconomic status. Although some recent critics have read Gaskell's sociability as a cover for an individualist ethos, repurposed domestic materials repeatedly strengthen the existing bonds of the community.<sup>66</sup> The smaller milieu accounts for this difference, but so does the episodic plot. *Cranford*'s progress is not a suspenseful disclosure of the connections between

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<sup>65</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Nicola Bradbury (New York: Penguin, 2003), 256.

<sup>66</sup> The most skeptical reading of feel-good community in *Cranford* is Amanpal Garcha, *From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012). Garcha connects moments of descriptive stasis with "the market values of individuality and asociality" (188). In *Giving Women*, Rappoport is not nearly so severe, but she does unearth a dimension of self-interest that exists in gifting by elaborating on Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift recipient's debt.

John Kucich identifies a deep conviviality *between* classes in Cranford, one that paradoxically affirms distinctions. The "reverse slumming" of both Mary Smith and Captain Brown with the genteel Amazonians "infuses a collectivist ethos into class society without eliminating stratification" (473). See Kucich, "Reverse Slumming: Cross-Class Performativity and Organic Order in Dickens and Gaskell," *Victorian Studies* 55 (2013): 471–99.

dispersed characters, but a solidifying of those that are known from the start. Circulation is an end in itself in *Cranford*: object movement is imbued with a charming delight that pollinates the pleasure of other residents.

The reach of this sociability is extraordinary. Even Miss Matty's bankruptcy auction—an event that Victorian fiction consistently associates with embarrassment and divisiveness—has a comfortable place within the material network. The forced public sale of personal possessions is a trope that almost always signaled public shame. Examples abound: the Sedleys in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*; Rosamond and Lydgate in Eliot's *Middlemarch*; the Dombeyes in Dickens's *Dombey & Son*. In Richard Altick's words, auctions “entailed a grim violation of the sanctity that contemporary domestic mores prized over all others—a desecration, not a consecration, of the house.”<sup>67</sup> But in *Cranford*'s small world, the auction instead reinforces long-standing friendships. Miss Matty's bankruptcy auction disperses her property only so far as her friends, a point Gaskell accentuates by disclosing that some purchasers are in fact cordially buying back former property. The rector, for instance, buys her extensive book collection, and the remarkable fact here is that Miss Matty inherited those books from her father, the former rector, and the current rector plans to return them to their original shelves:

[The rector] had written a very kind letter to Miss Matty, saying “how glad he should be to take a library so well selected as he knew the late Mr Jenkyns's must have been, at any valuation put upon them.” And when she agreed to this, with a touch of sorrowful gladness that they would go back to the rectory, and be arranged on the accustomed walls once more, he sent word that he feared he had not room for them all, and perhaps Miss Matty would kindly allow him to leave some volumes on her shelves. (201)

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<sup>67</sup> Richard Altick, “Speculation and Bankruptcy,” in *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), 666. See also Elizabeth Coggin Womack, *Secondhand Economies: Recycling, Reuse, and Exchange in the Victorian Novel* (Ph.D. dissertation, Rice University, 2010), 129–63.

The auction is yet another chance to highlight Cranford's kindness and solidarity, extending even beyond the women to the greater community.

What does it mean, then, that Gaskell's most formally innovative and self-aware novel is not representative of her oeuvre, the rest of which is conventionally novelistic in incident and teleology? At the same time as *Cranford's* composition, she was also writing *Ruth* (1853), a female *bildungsroman* about a fallen woman's trials as a governess and her redemption through Christian good works. It's with the publication of *North and South* in 1854–1855, though, that Gaskell seems to first arrive at a dialectical resolution of *Mary Barton's* and *Cranford's* two plot schemes. *North and South* returns to the teleological novel form and again uses objects in instrumental positions in the story of class relations and Margaret Hale and John Thornton's romance. However, she casts off the artifice of Bulwerian-Dickensian plotting, and focuses instead on *Cranford*-like episodes of sociable object transfers, particularly gifting as social adhesive. These materials function as tokens of hospitality and good-heartedness between the Hales and families both downwards and upwards along the social gradient. We see the former with the memento Margaret receives from Bessy Higgins's sister as a keepsake gift by which she can remember her departed friend. We see the latter with the waterbed that the Thorntons lend to Mrs. Hale during her convalescence from illness, an instrumental gift in allaying the political division between the two families, which stands as the primary obstacle to the marriage plot. Thornton's gifts of fruit to Mrs. Hale accomplish something similar by showing him in a positive light: "Mrs. Hale was excessively surprised; excessively pleased; quite in a tremble of eagerness. Mr. Hale with fewer words expressed a deeper gratitude. . . . [Margaret] went for a plate in silence, and lifted the fruit

out tenderly, with the points of her delicate taper fingers. It was good of him to bring it.”<sup>68</sup> Gifted fruit carries no backstory. It advances the plot only by way of looking toward the narrative future and the accumulation of good will required to finally bring Margaret and John together.

Gaskell’s fiction engages with traditional novelistic questions of sequence and causality not by avoiding but by reimagining a dominant school of plotting headed by Victorian male authors. When Mary Smith writes that “Great events spring out of small causes,” the meaning is completely different than what Bulwer and Dickens would’ve meant by the maxim, even though it echoes their language of prearranged sequencing (118). As late as *Wives and Daughters* (1864–66), Gaskell’s final, uncompleted novel, she continues developing the notion of an accumulative causality that exists independent of the recirculation plot device. “[F]ate is a cunning hussy,” the narrator reflects about her protagonist’s development, “and builds up her plans as imperceptibly as a bird builds her nest; and with much the same kind of unconsidered trifles.”<sup>69</sup> Gaskell’s legacy is the appreciation of a dynamic object world whose causality is organic and incremental.

Her legacy, more importantly, is the reformatting of recirculation patterns into a less sensational, more psychological mode of realist fiction that we tend to consider as antithetical to the Newgate, sensation, and detective novel genres. A telling response to *Wives and Daughters* comes from Henry James, who observes with great appreciation how it serves up copious details about characters that only become significant later in the story. They come to signify on the level of character development not plot mystery, a

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<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. Angus Easson (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 215.

<sup>69</sup> Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, 84.



quality that aligns the novel with the psychological realism that James would go on to pioneer. He writes,

In the early portion especially the details are so numerous and so minute that even a very well-disposed reader will be tempted to lay down the book and ask himself of what possible concern to him are the clean frocks and the French lesson of little Molly Gibson. But if he will have patience awhile he will see. As an end these modest domestic facts are indeed valueless; but as a means to what the author would probably called a 'realization' of her central idea, *i.e.*, Molly Gibson, a product to a certain extent, of clean frocks and French lessons, they hold an eminently respectable place. As he gets on in the story he is thankful for them. They have educated him to a proper degree of interest in the heroine. He feels that he knows her the better and loves her the more for a certain acquaintance with the *minutiae* of her homely *bourgeois* life.<sup>70</sup>

That James could write this about an unfinished novel is especially remarkable. The missing final chapters of *Wives and Daughters* are a minor problem, given that its "realization" relies on the ongoing evolution of character via accumulative detail rather than on the late-stage revelation of material interconnectedness. By contrast, when Dickens dies in 1870 leaving *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* unfinished, the interpretive problems are anything but minor. James helps tease out how Gaskell has inflected the Bulwerian plot scheme into the characterological register.

*Cranford* is Gaskell's early-career turning point in this process. In its close focus on communities of women, the novel demonstrates the complexity of everyday domestic activities, thereby granting later, traditionally plotted novels (her own and others') with a validation of handicraft that hadn't previously had a harmonious place in plotted writing. She shines new light on a spectrum of pleasure that exists within the home's daily rituals of recuperation. As an internal dissenter in the Dickens circle, Gaskell expands our sense of narrative recirculation by reminding readers of its intrinsic elegance.

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<sup>70</sup> Henry James, Rev. of *Wives and Daughters*, in *Notes and Reviews* (Cambridge, MA: Dunster House, 1921), 156.

## Chapter Four

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### **The Opaque Intrigue of *The Moonstone*: Diamonds, Sensation Plotting, and the Instability of Possession**

Diamonds rarely stay put in Victorian fiction—and that circulation seldom stops at a simple retail purchase. Instead, one might read of a diamond swiped by a hotel worker, fed to a goose to elude the police, but lost in a fowl market before being recovered by a private detective. Or, a whole necklace of them might be falsely claimed as a gift from a dead husband; they might then be secured in a portable strong box, twice claimed as stolen—but only once truly—and in the end dispersed into the European black market. Alternatively, a particularly large one might be taken from India by an English soldier, bequeathed to a niece, stolen unconsciously under the influence of opium, pledged consciously to a bank, and recovered finally by Indian priests who restore the stone to its religious homeland. Or finally, dozens of them might be brought together by a jeweler, assembled into the world's most extravagant necklace, but being so extravagant

as to be unsellable, the stones might remain together “[f]or a season only; and then—to disperse, and enlist anew *ad infinitum*.”<sup>1</sup>

It was Thomas Carlyle who imagined this final scenario of diamonds forever on the move within an economy, as described in his 1837 historical romance, “The Diamond Necklace,” based loosely on Marie Antoinette’s jewelry. Many subsequent Victorian authors would come to recognize the unique intrigue of diamond circulation. The immensely high market value of the precious stones paradoxically made them unsuited for conventional markets, especially in the literary imagination. Sought after by thieves, wives, and priests, the jewels instead tended to change hands by alternative modes of exchange: larceny, gifting, pawning, or accident. Combine these characteristics with diamonds’ physical durability—unlike paper, clothing, or metal, they don’t deteriorate with time—and it’s easy to see why Carlyle and others found them to be a fitting emblem of endless, recursive circulation. Narratives as generically diverse as the others described above—Arthur Conan Doyle’s “The Adventures of the Blue Carbuncle” (1892), Anthony Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871–73), and Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), respectively—all capitalize upon this peripatetic durability to plot their larger stories.

Of all these, Collins’s *The Moonstone* is Victorian fiction’s most complex tale of a jewel’s dynamic movement, in this case comprising a global circuit, beginning with the stone’s dispossession in India by the English and concluding with its restoration via the hands of the three Brahmins who have tracked it through London and Yorkshire. The events that occur between these two actions comprise the diamond’s convoluted,

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle, “The Diamond Necklace” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 23. Emphasis original.

unpredictable course as it changes hands multiple times, transfers around which Collins builds the novel's character drama and detection plot. *The Moonstone's* position within the literary genealogy of object recirculation is most obviously visible in its narrative of property restoration: the return of imperial plunder to its religious origin. But however conclusive the diamond's return to India might seem, the novel's epilogue undercuts the idea of stable or permanent ownership. Its final sentences are spoken, notably, by Mr. Murthwaite, the English character most knowledgeable about the jewel: "So the years pass, and repeat each other; so the same events revolve in the cycles of time. What will be the next adventures of the Moonstone? Who can tell!"<sup>2</sup> Although the novel itself will never track any second adventure, Collins recognizes that his narrative captures only one cycle of a larger historical pattern—one that holds the potential for circulation *ad infinitum*. Every character's grasp on the diamond tends to be ephemeral, imperiled, or otherwise contingent. If the novel leaves the diamond's second adventure untold, then what it *does* track within its covers is the intrigue of a sacrosanct, itinerant object that frequently resurfaces in different locations and in different hands than those who held it previously.

Diamond circulation is inherently laced with questions about the control, consciousness, and agency of narrative actors who seem to be more the medium of circulation than the directors of it, and in this way, Collins's *Moonstone* is a material instance of the sensation novel genre's fascination with plot at the expense of character and subjectivity. This chapter examines non-novelistic coverage of diamonds in order to

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<sup>2</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, ed. Sandra Kempt (New York: Penguin, 1998), 472, hereafter cited parenthetically within the text. Consider the parallel conclusion to Carlyle's "The Diamond Necklace": "The Necklace was, and is no more: the stones of it again 'circulate in commerce,' some of them perhaps in Rundle's at this hour; and may give rise to what other Histories we know not" (167).

show how Collins reformats historical narratives of global dispossession and recurrence within the narratological contours specific to the sensation novel of the 1860s. The material circulation *of* diamonds and narratives *about* diamonds share several linked features which reveal Collins's inflection of object kinetics into narrative design. First, the historical exchange of diamonds was clandestine and at times appeared to be endlessly circular, both traits which lend themselves to literary forms of "romance," structured around what Carlyle called the gems' "opaque intrigue."<sup>3</sup> In a variety of genres, Victorian writing about diamonds reveals an immanently *narrative* course of recirculation based on their "passing hands" (the period's ubiquitous trope about the gems), a process that Collins recognized as germane to the mystery structures of the sensation novel, itself a type of romance. Second, these exchanges contrast the durability of objects with the ephemerality of human agents and human possession, a trait that the novel expresses formally via its serial narrations, in which the pen, a metonymy for composition itself, is passed from hand to hand as the novel unfolds, like the Moonstone itself. And third, the conspiratorial, subterranean nature of this alternative diamond economy lends itself to elaborate political and criminal plots, which in turn call for extravagant narrative plotting. In total, Collins's diamond furnishes the novel with an opaque circulatory pattern that succeeds because it operates simultaneously at the level of content—the second-order modes of exchange depicted—and the level of form—the elaborate plot structure through which the object moves in alternating periods of visibility and invisibility.

In taking this focus on contextual materials and formal interiors, I'm seeking out a new way of understanding the relationship of imperialism and temporal cyclicity, which

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<sup>3</sup> Carlyle, "The Diamond Necklace," 17.

has been at the heart of criticism on Collins's novel. For most critics, the story of the diamond's restoration exemplifies his progressive politics, since its conclusion tacitly endorses the Hindu repossession of the stone. (Collins's fantasy of just returns remains a fantasy to this day. On his 2013 trip to India, British Prime Minister David Cameron refused the return of the plundered Koh-i-Noor diamond on which the Moonstone is based, saying "I certainly don't believe in 'returnism,' as it were. I don't think that's sensible."<sup>4</sup>) Political and materialist critics, including Ian Duncan, Tamar Heller, John Reed, and John Plotz, have argued the Moonstone's recursive portability expresses a model of history that stands opposed to Western, capitalist linearity.<sup>5</sup> In one of the most influential readings of the novel, Ian Duncan interprets Collins's India as an economic and cultural lodestone:

Collins represents India as a space more vast and perilous than a "margin"—its own fatal center and dark origins. Cyclical recurrence marks an imaginary domain that exceeds mere history or at least the Western linear history that guarantees the narrative of imperial progress. India is a cultural origin strong enough to resist that alienating momentum and reclaim its own.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Britain to India: Diamond in Royal Crow is Ours," *Reuters*, last modified Feb. 20, 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/21/us-britain-india-diamond-idUSBRE91K00J20130221>.

<sup>5</sup> Tamar Heller insists, "The end of the novel promises a repetition of the historical cycle in which repression is followed by resistance." With the aid of thing theory, John Plotz highlights how the Moonstone unsettles the typical paradigm of object movement between metropole and colony. He calls this phenomenon "reverse portability"—the diamond's portentous ability as a religious talisman to carry Indian cultural values into the heart of England. Plotz's analysis of the "two-way traffic" between the countries sharpens the insights that John R. Reed made several decades earlier in a landmark essay on the novel. Reed claims that the Indian prologue and epilogue encouraged Victorian readers to view the real crime of the novel as the stone's theft from India, not Yorkshire, and thus to be critical of English imperialism. Reed notes how geographical repetition underscores the text's political critique; Ablewhite dies at the hands of the Indians in the near vicinity of Lime and Leadenhall streets where the House of the East India Company stood in 1849, the time of the story. Symbolically, the Moonstone's exit reverses the capital flows typical of the Empire by "depart[ing] from the same neighborhood through which the riches of the East flowed into England."

See Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 163; John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), 42, 43; and John R. Reed, "English Imperialism and the Unacknowledged Crime of *The Moonstone*," *Clio* 2:3 (1973): 288.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Duncan. "The Moonstone, the Victorian Novel, and Imperialist Panic," *Modern Language Quarterly* 53 (1994): 301, 303. Duncan's essay stands as an important response to D. A. Miller's claim that the novel is non-subversive and "perfectly obedient to the imperatives of . . . power" (*The Novel and the*

This chapter extends this political insight first by examining how contemporary, non-novelistic coverage of diamonds confirms a widespread discourse about the global instability of ownership, an instability that writers coded in the generic terms of romance. By reframing Duncan's "cyclical recurrence" in generic terms, we then have the opportunity to see how diamond's economic patterns contributed to the convoluted plot mechanics integral to the sensation novel.

Furthermore, the object-driven formal extravagance throws into relief the limits of plot-driven fiction in the nineteenth-century. The sensation novels of the 1860s were notorious for their scandalous content—bigamy and murder, especially—but they were also embroiled in a literary debate about excessively complex plotting at the expense of character development. Sensation novels by Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, and Charles Reade are, quite famously, chock full of astounding plot twists that, because of their compound effect on readers, gave the genre its name. In their conventional expression, these twists involve double identities or the returns of lost or dead characters, not physical objects. "Incident as well as character is subject to the principle of duality," Winifred Hughes writes. "Sensation plots are typically structured around a recurrence of similar or identical situations."<sup>7</sup> *The Moonstone's* fixation on the mysteries of object recirculation was thus not brand new for the genre; it simply had never before been borne out so fully by a material prop. In some ways, Collins effects the inverse transposition of character and material economy that we saw Dickens do in *Bleak*

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*Police* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988], 219). For a reading of imperialism and semiotics in the novel, see Ashish Roy, "The Fabulous Imperialist Semiotic of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*," *New Literary History* 24 (1993): 657–81.

<sup>7</sup> Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 21.

*House*. This, however, signals something of a breaking point in literary history. By investing a single object with such narrative responsibility, Collins stoked the fire of a wider mid-Victorian debate about the overreliance on objects in fiction, as well as the plot machinery so essential to the genre of sensation fiction.

### **Lost, Stolen, or Strayed?**

In drawing on the explicit rhetoric of “romance,” historical writing on diamond circulation was referring to both the gems’ mystical Eastern origins and their convoluted, sometimes circular journeys—often labeled “adventures”—as they passed from hand to hand. This pattern appears in accounts of fictional and non-fictional diamonds, including periodical short stories, mineralogical manuals, and coverage of the Koh-i-Noor, England’s most famous large diamond, which was taken from India, presented to Queen Victoria’s in 1850, and installed on the Imperial State Crown of England (Figure 4.1). We know that Collins was familiar with some of these sources. The topicality of the fictional *Moonstone* is well established, most explicitly by Collins himself who prefaced the first edition of the novel by saying he drew inspiration from the Koh-i-Noor and the Russian Imperial Sceptre’s diamond, both of which possess Hindu religious origins. In these tales, stones circulate within economic networks that stand as alternative or secondary to capitalist ones, and ownership is never stable: while diamonds are remarkable for their durable permanence, an individual’s possession of them is defined by impermanence.



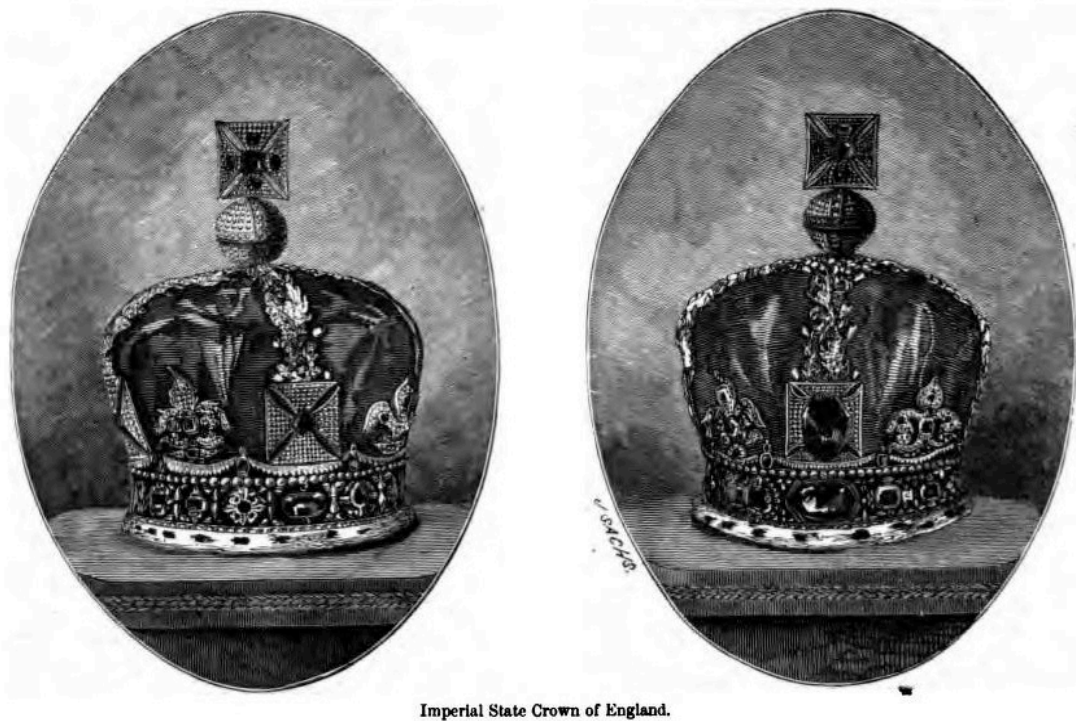


Figure 2. C. W. King, “Imperial State Crown of England,” (1865)

Let’s start by revisiting Carlyle’s “The Diamond Necklace,” a text perched halfway between narrative fiction and historical account. Though written several decades before *The Moonstone*, the historical novel captures diamonds’ peripatetic liveliness as they passed hands, a narrative interest that would continue throughout the century. Carlyle’s description of the gems’ global lifecycles will strike any reader of Collins’s novel as remarkably familiar:

How [the diamonds] lay, for uncounted ages and aeons . . . silently embedded in the rock; did nevertheless, when their hour came, emerge from it, and first behold the glorious Sun smile on them, and with their many-coloured glances smile back on him. How they served next, let us say, as eyes of Heathen Idols, and received worship. How they had then, by fortune of war or theft, been knocked out; and exchanged among camp-sulters for a little spirituous liquor, and bought by Jews, and worn as signets on the fingers of tawny or white Majesties; and again been lost, with the finger too, and perhaps life . . . in old-forgotten glorious victories:

and so,—through innumerable varieties of fortune,—had come at last to the cutting-wheel of [the jeweler] Boehmer; to be united, in strange fellowship, with comrades also blown together from all ends of the Earth, each with a history of its own!<sup>8</sup>

Carlyle divides the passages of time according to transfers of possession, and what a great variety of transfers there are: mining, theft, barter, purchase, and pillage.

(Inheritance and misplacement are common in other versions.) Note the anaphora of “how,” each functioning to register a shift of ownership. I will return later to the personification of the stones, but for now witness also the shift within the passage in grammatical voice, from active (“emerge,” “behold”) to passive (“been exchanged,” “be united”). Humans increasingly dictate the portable stones’ fate, even if they never hold onto them for long.

The political intrigue, the adventure sequence, the array of exchanges—these are the characteristics that led Carlyle to label his work “a small Romance.”<sup>9</sup> The coveted stones may be physically substantive items of the verifiable world, but their opaque circulation lends them the air of a supernatural force typical of the romance literary tradition. Even when unseen, diamonds influence adjacent events. Just after the necklace disappears, Carlyle writes:

For no Act of a man, no Thing (how much less the man himself!) is extinguished when *it* disappears: through considerable times it still visibly works, though done and vanished; I have known a done thing work visibly Three Thousand Years and more: invisibly, unrecognised, all done things work through endless times and years. Such a Hypermagical is this our poor old Real world; which some take upon themselves to pronounce effete, prosaic!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Carlyle, “The Diamond Necklace,” 22–23.

<sup>9</sup> Carlyle, “The Diamond Necklace,” 16. The text’s opening line proclaims “The Age of Romance has not ceased; it never ceases” (3).

<sup>10</sup> Carlyle, “The Diamond Necklace,” 131.

The narrativity of diamonds is a specific kind. It relies on serial periods of visibility and invisibility, though the invisible periods still register diamonds' existence indirectly via a mediated spectrum of effects. Thus, diamonds—mere carbon!—can be emblems of the “Hypermagical” without actually having any magical powers. This merger of the physical and the sublime is typical of Carlyle's thought and analogous to the way that *Sartor Resartus* links the squalid materiality of rags to the abstract interconnections of Victorian social totality.

You'll find this cluster of terms regarding diamond circulation—“romance,” “adventure,” “history”—repeated in short stories and anecdotes about diamonds, especially in the wake of the Koh-i-Noor's arrival in England in 1850. For example, Richard Horne's fantastic 1851 *Household Words* short story, “A Penitent Confession,” is both an example and parody of the sentiment that, in the words of the story's gem merchant, “the history and adventures of all the great diamonds were a sort of romance.”<sup>11</sup> The narrator Simon Sparks steals the Koh-i-Noor from The Great Exhibition via a subterranean tunnel; hides it alternately in port bottles and German sausages; barely avoids arrest when attempting to sell it in France; and in the end, psychically shattered, learns that it was a decoy Koh-i-Noor all along, and worth, at best, five pounds. He accepts the money, falls into the workhouse, and in the narrative's final turn, is knocked in the elbow by a street cart, awakening the author into the realization the whole story was a nightmare. Horne's tale captures the volatility of diamond circulation, minus the royal intrigue. By midcentury the form was already established enough to be the subject of a part burlesque, part morality tale about pilfering.

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<sup>11</sup> Richard H. Horne, “A Penitent Confession,” *Household Words*, Vol. 3, No. 71 (2 Aug. 1851): 445.

Shorter anecdotes about lost and found or stolen and recovered diamonds tended to appear in those popular periodicals that were also running reports on rag recycling and paper production, such as *Chambers's Journal*, *Household Words*, and *All the Year Round*. Both topics shared an explicit interest in the circular movement of materials. The tales are typically based on a simple but rousing mystery in which a diamond or other jewel disappears, followed by the comforting closure provided by property restoration. On the spectrum of sensation, these tend to be more droll than scandalous: for example, a diamond that is presumed stolen by a friend but has actually been stuck to the top of a jewelry box for several years.<sup>12</sup> A diamond that is lost while fishing and found thirteen years later in the sand by children at play on the beach. A diamond ring that is found in a bag of Egyptian beans. "The mystery, however, is, how did it find its way there? The beans, we believe, came direct from Egypt; and of course, as someone must have lost the ring in that country, means were taken, and we believe with success, to discover the rightful owner. The far-travelled ring has returned to the East."<sup>13</sup> Other stories show similarities with the Rosanna Spearman subplot of *The Moonstone*, such as an 1859 story about a plucky housemaid who discovers the theft of a lady's jewelry by a covetous female guest. The story's title, "Lost, Stolen, or Strayed," condenses the mystery that many of these stories turn on: by what manner have I lost possession of my jewel?<sup>14</sup>

Non-fiction articles on diamonds are motivated by similar fascination with the stone's movement, but these tend to recognize their multi-cycle, even world-historical, transit, much like Carlyle's global romance. "The history of individual diamonds is often

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<sup>12</sup> See "The Lost Diamonds," *Chambers's Journal* 204 (28 Nov. 1857): 350–52.

<sup>13</sup> "Lost and Found," *Chambers's Journal* 758 (6 Jul. 1878): 430.

<sup>14</sup> See Augusta Johnstone, "Lost, Stolen, or Strayed," *Sharpe's London Magazine of Entertainment and Instruction for General Reading* 29 (Jan. 1859): 289–92.

strange and romantic,” an *All the Year Round* article declared only a few months after *The Moonstone* concluded serial publication within its covers. “They have influenced fortunes of families, dynasties, and nations. They bring with them luck, good or ill.”<sup>15</sup> That sentiment was not born in the afterglow of Collins’s novel, though. As early as 1850, *Household Words* could write that “The history and adventures of the ‘great diamonds’ of Eastern, Northern, Southern, and Western potentates, have been often chronicled.”<sup>16</sup> In the same year, a long essay on diamonds from the *New Monthly Magazine* covered the convoluted history of the Koh-i-Noor in all of its “curious” details. That term, “curious,” appears often in these diamond anecdotes and carries several valences germane to the romance genre: interesting, surprising, inexplicable, and, in the more antiquated meaning that we’ve now lost, elaborate.<sup>17</sup>

Even in the most technical accounts of diamonds, authors allow that the science of rare gems intersects with the curious narrative dimensions of romance. Take, for instance, Harry Emmanuel’s *Diamonds and Precious Stones: Their History, Value, and Distinguishing Characteristics* (1865), which tells the chemical makeup of various gem categories as well as the backstories of the world’s most famous diamonds. In a book review *Chambers’s Journal* writes that “[Emmanuel] takes, of course, the practical view of the subject, but borrows his illustrations of it from all sources, so that the work combines the advantages of a trade hand-book and of a volume of romance.”<sup>18</sup> The same year, another history of gems appeared, and this one we know Collins to have read in

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<sup>15</sup> “Precious Stones,” *All the Year Round* (16 Jan. 1869): 154.

<sup>16</sup> Richard H. Horne, “The Black Diamonds of England,” *Household Words*, vol. 1, no. 11 (8 Jun 1850): 246.

<sup>17</sup> “A Chapter on Diamonds,” *New Monthly Magazine and Humorist* 89 (Aug. 1850): 427. For this final sense of the term, see “curious,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, def. 10b and 8.

<sup>18</sup> “In the Jewel-Garden,” *Chambers’s Journal* 232 (6 June 1868): 360.

preparation for writing *The Moonstone*, for he took extensive notes from the volume.<sup>19</sup>

This was C. W. King's *The Natural History of Precious Stones and of the Precious Metals* (1865). In it King cites one Professor Maskeleyne who describes the Koh-i-Noor as follows: "The history of this Diamond is one long romance from then till now; but it is well authenticated at every step, as history seems never to have lost sight of this stone."<sup>20</sup>

The remark contains an apparent contradiction at the heart of diamond circulation. The gem is romantic on account of its mysterious and sensational history; however, its "romance" has been partly dispelled by history's retrospective ability to reconstruct and "authenticate" the diamond's former movements.

A more precise way of describing this relationship between romantic transit and historical authentication would be to say that historians are most interested in isolating those nodal moments in which gems traded hands. These are the events of concern for King, Emmanuel, and other historians, since intervening periods of stable possession carry less dramatic interest.<sup>21</sup> This focus accounts for the prevalence in these texts of the

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<sup>19</sup> For a transcription of Collins's notes for the novel, which include excerpts from King, see William Baker, "Wilkie Collins's Notes for *The Moonstone*," *Victorians Institute Journal* 31 (2003): 187–205.

<sup>20</sup> C. W. King, *The Natural History of Precious Stones and of the Precious Metals*, 2nd ed. (London: Bell and Daldy, 1867), 70. This was King's second book on gems. Also see King, *Antique Gems, their Origin, Uses and Values* (London: John Murray, 1860). In addition, the 1860 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* included an account of the Koh-i-Noor. For more on Collins's source material, see Mark M. Hennelly, Jr., "Detecting Collins' Diamond: From Serpentine to Moonstone," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 39.1 (1984): 25–47. Hennelly convincingly traces thematic connections between gemological texts and *The Moonstone*.

<sup>21</sup> About this possessive instability, the contemporary historian Oppi Untracht writes, "The drive to possess diamonds has resulted in more intrigue, scandal, treachery, violence, and prolonged or sudden death . . . than any imaginative fiction writer could invent." See Untracht, *Traditional Jewelry of India* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 312.

Arthur Conan Doyle makes a similar observation in "The Blue Carbuncle": "Of course it is a nucleus and focus of crime. Every good stone is. They are the devil's pet baits. In the larger and older jewels every facet may stand for a bloody deed. This stone is not yet twenty years old. . . . In spite of its youth, it has already a sinister history. There have been two murders, a vitriol-throwing, a suicide, and several robberies brought about for the sake of this forty-grain weight of crystallized charcoal. Who would think that so pretty a toy would a purveyor to the gallows and the prison?" See Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and the Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 145.

synecdoche of the hand—as in the diamond’s passing from one hand to another. This characteristic trope is especially thick in Emmanuel’s description of the Koh-i-Noor:

Nadir Shah, the conqueror of India, obtained by means of an artful trick, possession of the stone, and *from the hands* of his descendants *it passed* into the possession of Achmed Shah. His son, Shah Sujah, was in turn forced to *deliver it into the hands* of Runjeet Singh. After the capture of Lahore, at the time of the Sikh mutiny, it *fell into the hands* of the British troops, who presented it to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1850.<sup>22</sup>

The synecdoche of the hand emphasizes the impermanence of possession by reducing the human actors to their hands, the body part that for one party gives—or gives up—the stone, and for the other party receives it. In isolating the hand, the trope spotlights the portable diamond held within and the power it holds over all those who seek to own it.

### **Passing Hands; or, Romancing the Stone**

Via the synecdoche of passing hands, we’re able to discern how *The Moonstone* appropriates contemporary diamond discourse to chart the movement of its fictional gem. Moreover, because the exchange contrasts the durability of objects with the ephemerality of human agents and possession, it lends itself to the circumscribed serial narrations in Collins’s novel, in which the pen, like the diamond, is passed from hand to hand, a perspectival conceit responsible for the book’s series of narrative postponements and aporia.

The hand synecdoche runs throughout Collins’s novel, beginning with the Epilogue’s description that “the Moonstone passed (carrying its curse with it) from one lawless Mohammedan hand to another” (13). While this sentence could easily have appeared verbatim in a gemological handbook, the trope turns up everywhere in the

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<sup>22</sup> Harry Emmanuel, *Diamonds and Precious Stones: Their History, Value, and Distinguishing Characteristics* (London: Hotton, 1865), 79–80. Emphasis added.

English domestic story too, relocating the geopolitical dynamic of volatile circulation into the localized context of the Verinder's country house. Herncastle's will states, for example, that "I hereby desire my executor to give my Diamond, either by his own hands or by the hands of some trustworthy representative whom he shall appoint, into the personal possession of my said niece Rachel, on her next birthday after my death" (53).

For the most concentrated usage of the synecdoche, we can turn to Rachel Verinder's explanation to Franklin Blake of his own unconscious crime:

"You opened, and shut, one drawer after another, until you came to the drawer in which I had put my Diamond. You looked at the open drawer for a moment. And then you put your *hand* in, and took the Diamond."

"How do you know I took the Diamond out?"

"I saw your *hand* go into the drawer. And I saw the gleam of the stone between your finger and thumb, when you took your *hand* out."

"Did my *hand* approach the drawer again—to close it, for instance?"

"No. You had the Diamond in your right *hand*; and you took the candle from the top of the cabinet with your left *hand*." (351, emphasis added)

Rachel's explanation comes late in the novel, at the point when the novel begins to demystify the crime, but in the novel's lengthy middle section Collins uses the synecdoche of the hand in the interrogative mode just as often as the declarative. That is, various characters use it to pose the questions of who stole the diamond from Rachel, and who then took the diamond from Blake and transported it to London. The hand appears in the question of the perpetrator's identity, as when Sergeant Cuff tells Superintendent Seegrave, "If the person [with the smeared nightgown] can't satisfy you, you haven't far to look for the hand that has got the Diamond" (114). It also appears in the question of timing, as when Murthwaite asks Bruff, "When do we suppose, at a rough guess, that the diamond found its way into the money-lender's hands?" (295).



The shift from declarative to interrogative mode maps the phases of the diamond's visibility and invisibility. It enters the narrative as plunder, well documented from Somnauth to Herncastle's bank vault to Rachel's drawer. It then exits the narrative when stolen unconsciously by Blake and then consciously by Ablewhite, prompting the rhetorical shift in the hand trope. That shift to the interrogative also signals a broader generic shift: this is the point when *The Moonstone* becomes a mystery novel. After this point, the initial question is where did the Moonstone go? Is it lost, stolen, or strayed? (Cuff, for one, believes at first that Rachel simply misplaced the stone.) Later, these questions about its location logically develop into the whodunit question of a detective novel. This transition again registers as a linguistic shift in the hand synecdoche. The trope migrates to a different idiom. Hands now become the implements for catching and arresting the thief. Returning from Europe two-thirds of the way into the novel, Franklin Blake proclaims the new master goal: "If time, pains, and money can do it, I will lay my hand on the thief who took the Moonstone!" (299). The other male sleuths quickly mimic this language. Bruff remarks to Blake that guarding the London bank at the time of the diamond's redemption "may help us to lay our hands on the mysterious Somebody who pawned the Diamond" (358). At the novel's end Cuff, ever the tenacious detective, contributes these lines in his statement to Blake: "there is a chance of laying hands on the Indians, and of recovering the Moonstone yet" (459). Hands express both the diamond's promiscuous mobility and the attempt to arrest the thief carrying it.

The former idiom of the hand ultimately wins out over the latter, since Brahmin hands successfully convey the stone back to India, and the thief Godfrey Ablewhite is killed before any English detectives can lay their hands on him. The passing hands trope

makes explicit how the gem's circular flow and the novel's story are intertwine, to the point of even including prospective counterplots that end up not materializing. This relationship, however, is even more intimate and complex, for what has gone unexamined so far are the formal qualities of *The Moonstone* that definitively mark it as a sensation novel.

In other words, why always the Moonstone? Why focus so much on the diamond itself when it is clear to any reader of *The Moonstone* that Collins is at least as fascinated by character drama, opium, and the nature of memory? In fact, once the Moonstone disappears from Rachel Verinder's bedroom, the reader does not glimpse it again until it shines from atop the Hindu idol in Somnauth, India, so why concentrate so much on a stone that is invisible for the majority of the novel? What might be gained, in other words, by mapping out the path of the diamond beyond, well, a map?

Another way of asking this question is how might the historical research pursued in the last section illuminate the formal complexities particular to *The Moonstone* and to the sensation novel generally? I emphasize the intertextual relationship between Victorian diamond discourse and Collins's novel because they both contain a narrative kinetics—the instability of diamond possession—that is simultaneously political and formal. This intersection allows us to build on but diverge from other historicist approaches available for analyzing diamonds. Material historians and contextual historicists may look to diamond coverage to recreate a more robust cultural “background.” Thing theory critics may work to reveal how novelistic diamonds offer fleeting glimpses of occluded political histories outside the text, ones that Victorian readers knew much better than us. My argument here, however, recognizes how a particular political narrative of unstable,

recursive, or *ad infinitum* circulation permeates mid-Victorian culture's understanding of precious gems. In *The Moonstone* that narrative inheres within the structural organization of the mystery story. In appropriating the kinetic paradigm of diamonds, Collins takes the thematic concepts of dispossession and clandestine circulation, and formalizes them into narratological devices for suspense based on withheld knowledge, including the various perspectives of his serial narrators, each of whom has a sharply circumscribed point of view.

Stefanie Markovits has recently argued that diamonds are a category of Victorian objects that uniquely invite such a marriage of thing theory and neoformalism. She explores how diamonds are not only exceptional *things*, but, because of their shape, cut, and reflective qualities, Victorian writers also understood them in terms of *form*. Novelists in particular used diamonds to deliberately test formal boundaries: "diamonds frequently appear in literature of this period—one unusually rich in generic experimentation and debate—at moments and as signs of extreme generic self-consciousness. When neoformalism and thing theory collide, they push diamonds to the surface."<sup>23</sup> For Markovits, the *Moonstone* allows Collins to challenge the stereotypical view of the sensation novel, which held that the genre neglects character development in exchange for fast-paced plotting: "Within a novelistic medium, diamonds focus and trouble sub-generic distinctions between plot- and character-based fiction."<sup>24</sup> Because of the gem's multifaceted allure to its many viewers, she argues it elicits characters' interior states in the form of voiced desires and priorities.

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<sup>23</sup> Stefanie Markovits, "Form Things: Looking at Genre through Victorian Diamonds," *Victorian Studies* 52 (2010): 595.

<sup>24</sup> Markovits, "Form Things," 608.

My own focus here is less on characterological issues and more on the structural paradox by which *The Moonstone* relates the story of a diamond's circulation by withholding the details of that circulation. The irregular relationship between the gem's mobility and the shifting narrative point of view is crucial here. The diamond is an object of intense focus and scrutiny, and yet it is unseen for most of the novel. For the narrators, talking about the Moonstone means speculating about its status and location. The most sensational diamonds are not simply promiscuous but clandestine. This uncertainty is what generates the readerly affects typical of the genre: curiosity, nervousness, and doubt—all phenomena arising from an epistemological deficit in the narrative. Faced with this lack of knowledge, Collins's reader may indeed be tempted to repeat some version of Carlyle's exclamation, "Could these aged stones . . . but have spoken . . . !" <sup>25</sup> And yet, the whole sensation structure would collapse were this desire fulfilled.

The most concrete way of understanding this material-formal dynamic is actually to begin with what may at first seem like a nutty proposal: let's imagine *The Moonstone* as simply an it-narrative with an inverted point of view. This, after all, would be the genre in which a diamond could actually have spoken. I take my cue not from Carlyle, but from Collins himself, who employs in the novel the unmistakable language of the it-narrative—that of the "adventure," the most common term used in titles of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century object narratives. <sup>26</sup> When Collins writes about "the adventures of the Yellow Diamond" in the Prologue and speculates about the "next adventures of the

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<sup>25</sup> Carlyle, "The Diamond Necklace," 23.

<sup>26</sup> Here are a few examples out of several dozens: *Chrystal; or the Adventures of a Guinea* (1760–65); *The Adventures of a Pin* (1798), *The Life and Adventures of Toby, the Sapient Pig* (1817); and *The Adventures of a Bible* (1821). For a substantial collection of these texts, see *British It-Narratives, 1750–1830*, ed. Mark Blackwell, 4 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012). For criticism on the genre, see *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2007); and Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2013).

Moonstone” in the Epilogue, he bookends his story with rhetoric that reminds readers that however perceptually different *The Moonstone* is from an it-narrative, it ultimately tells a recognizable story about object circulation. In fact, the restoration to former owners and promise of recirculation that ends *The Moonstone* can also be found in it-narratives, which were also called “narratives of circulation.”<sup>27</sup> For instance, in Douglas Jerrold’s popular “The Story of a Feather” (1844), an ostrich feather from Africa reencounters multiple characters who owned him earlier in the story. The feather “again Meet[s] with Patty Butler” in the final chapter, and at another point is “once more passed into the hands of Shadrach Jacobs, my old master.”<sup>28</sup> Compare Collins’s conclusion: “Yes! After the lapse of eight centuries, the Moonstone looks forth once more, over the walls of the sacred city in which the story first began” (472).

Despite these similarities in plot arcs, the difference in point of view so radically alters the experience of reading *The Moonstone* that the link has never been critically pursued. The it-narrative operates according to a fully transparent model of objecthood. Because these are first-person stories, there are never transfers of possession that the talking thing withholds from the audience. By design, there is no opportunity for suspense. Feathers, coins, and books bare their souls to the world, telling the reader in great detail about their origins, travels, and observations about the humans who possess them. Their unique vantage gives them something approaching even omniscience, Elaine Freedgood argues, due to the way they often overhear their owners voicing their private

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<sup>27</sup> See Mark Blackwell, “Introduction: The It-Narrative and Eighteenth-Century Thing Theory,” in *The Secret Life of Things*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas Jerrold, *The Story of a Feather* (1844; London: Bradbury and Evans, 1867), 248, 256.

thoughts.<sup>29</sup> The reader's interest lies in the episodic rambling of the object, which introduces readers to a socially diverse array of characters, while also accumulating experiences like some flimsy hero of a *bildungsroman*.

One could nevertheless have written an it-narrative based on exactly the same circuit that Collins's *Moonstone* takes from India to England to India, including all the same characters who handle or see it. It bears repeating that the principal difference between the actual novel and this imagined one would be point of view, and I think pursuing this thought experiment is crucial for recognizing how Collins uses object circulation for formal innovations in narrative perspective. He does not transparently incorporate the diamond circuit into his novel, as an it-narrative might. Instead, the novel digests it into fragmentary phases that are then embedded into the narrative structure in differing degrees of clarity and mystery. It-narratives, on one hand, display object movement in transparent, sequential detail, in just the manner Jerrold's feather proposes in the text's first paragraph: "I will narrate my adventures in the order they befell me."<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, *The Moonstone* merely implies object movement. Rarely is it displayed directly. Readers encounter dozens of mediated reports, doubtful confessions, and multiple hypotheses about its path from Yorkshire to London to India. Sometimes the novel will not even offer the reader such hints; it will only reveal the stone's movements in retrospective explanations at its conclusion, such as the story of how an unconscious Franklin Blake passed the stone to a sleepless Godfrey Ablewhite in the country house hallway. Structural devices of withholding are layered on top of the gem's circulation

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<sup>29</sup> Elaine Freedgood, "What Objects Know: Circulation, Omniscience, and the Comedy of Dispossession in Victorian It-Narratives," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15.1 (2010): 83–100. On doll narratives and omniscience, see Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), 111–166.

<sup>30</sup> Jerrold, *The Story of a Feather*, xi.

story, covering it from view for various stretches of time. If an it-narrative develops plot via the object narrator's description of its own transfers, *The Moonstone* develops plot via its human narrators' scrambling efforts to discover such exchanges. Invisible things create visible effects.

Thus, the answer to my question about why always the Moonstone is that the diamond motivates story in its very absence and for that reason must be treated as the prime mover of all plot, including those plot lines only tangentially related. We might take a moment here to formulate the most thorough explanation of the novel's subtitle: *The Moonstone. A Romance*. The Indian diamond, (1) exotic and cursed, passes through England in a circular path (2) rendered obscure by narrative perspective, an object adventure which Collins captures within (3) a generic form defined by "the violent yoking of romance and realism, traditionally the two contradictory modes of literary perception."<sup>31</sup> Romance in triplicate.

A more technical answer to why always the Moonstone exists, though—the narratological one that neoformalism invites. In first reducing the novel to the diamond's movement, we are able to glimpse how the stone serves as the fundamental nexus for story and discourse, narratological distinctions never more prominent than in the sensation and detective genres. We can think of Collins's novel as possessing a complex architecture that integrates multiple stories—the *fabulae* of the theft, the investigation, and the romantic subplots of Blake, Rachel, Rosanna—with techniques of narrative discourse that circumscribe point of view via the sequence of serial narrators. Collins organizes the story components this way in order to produce the diamond's opaque

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<sup>31</sup> Hughes, *Maniac in the Cellar*, 15–16. Charles Reade subtitled most of his sensation novels, "A Mater-of-Fact Romance."

intrigue. He had previously experimented with multiple narrators in *The Woman in White* (1859–60), having each share their subjective angle, thereby creating a structural conceit that mimicked law courts. In *The Woman in White*, this perspectival method deferred knowledge about character identities and motivations: the uncanny resemblance of Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, the illegitimacy of Percival Glyde, and the malicious intentions of Count Fosco. In *The Moonstone*, the serial narration's chief function is postponing knowledge about the diamond's circulation.

Now, then, we can return to the passing hands trope, which not only expresses the diamond's transfer but this concealment effect produced by point of view: the passing or handing of the *pen* from one narrator to the next, the pen acting as a metonymy for composition. This transfer recurs at the conclusion of multiple narrators' statements. As Gabriel Betteredge wraps up his first contribution (the longest of the novel), he writes "when I have next described certain strange things that happened in the course of the new week, I shall have done my part of the Story, and shall hand over the pen to the person who is appointed to follow my lead" (187). Thus begins the pen-passing that will characterize the remaining two thirds of *The Moonstone*. In a more ceremonial tone, Matthew Bruff will also draw attention to this process: "And that done, I hand the pen, which I have no further claim to use, to the writer who follows me next" (295). The pen circulation trope reminds the reader how narrative explication lags behind the circulation of the diamond. The temporal lag serves to defer reliable knowledge about the crime and the diamond. Moreover, the pen passing recapitulates the diamond's circularity at the level of narrational sequence; the pen returns to its initial author at the end just as the diamond comes back to its initial home in India. Excluding the Epilogue, *The Moonstone*



closes with Gabriel Betteredge again assuming the pen: “I am the person (as you remember, no doubt) who led the way in these pages, and opened up the story. I am also the person who is left behind, as it were, to close the story up” (462). A similar balance in construction exists with the Prologue and Epilogue, both set in India. Viewed from a distance, the novel has a tidy circularity in terms of both the structural arrangement and the imperial politics of repossession.

The significance of the pen passing is not merely a superficial parallelism. It highlights *The Moonstone*’s organizational principle in which each narrator has a sharply circumscribed point of view and limited set of experiences to share: “the idea is that we should all write the story of the Moonstone in turn,” Betteredge explains, “as far as our own personal experience extends, and no further” (22). When one narrator reaches the boundaries of his or her experience, the pen must be passed to another. Franklin Blake, the editor of the manuscripts, then retrospectively arranges them so that for most of the text the Moonstone drifts just beyond the narrators’ perspectival limits.<sup>32</sup> This strategic organization also means that certain characters are off-limits as narrators: Rachel Verinder, Septimus Luker, and Godfrey Ablewhite especially. In this way, *The Moonstone* creates the weird impression the diamond moves on its own, as if it had a type of agency. For a mild xenophobe like Betteredge, the stone’s curse and this apparent kinetic agency are one and the same. Late in his first narrative, he tells the reader that the diamond has moved beyond his purview and other narrators must take control of the pen

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<sup>32</sup> Alexander Welsh writes, “the main purpose of the arrangement seems to be managing evidence after all, and especially managing the pace of concealment and revelation—that is, the suspense.” See Welsh, *Strong Representations: Narrative and Circumstantial Evidence in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992), 218. About sensation novels in general, Patrick Brantlinger writes, “The narrator must seem either to connive with criminals, thereby sacrificing moral legitimacy, or to suffer a kind of structural amnesia, only recovering something close to omniscience as a version of memory or recapitulation at the end of the story.” See Brantlinger, “What is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel’?” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37.1 (1982): 18.

to advance the story: “The devil’s dance of the Indian Diamond has threaded its way to London; and to London you must go after it” (197). As usual, the reader follows several steps behind.

This perspectival lag in tracking the missing gem is exactly what Anthony Trollope would purge in his novel *The Eustace Diamonds*, and this difference unequivocally separates Collins’s sensation storytelling from Trollope’s even-tempered style. Trollope doesn’t quite grant his stolen diamond necklace a voice and homing beacon as an it-narrative would, but his omniscient narrator can see through safes, pillows, and pockets. He can thus reliably report on the diamonds’ location in real time. When thieves first attempt to steal the necklace, the narrator dispels all mystery within a few paragraphs of the larceny. The reader learns that the gems were not in the stolen strongbox; they were merely in a parcel under Lizzie Eustace’s pillow, “perfect, and quite safe.”<sup>33</sup> Later, when thieves actually do succeed in stealing the diamonds, Trollope again closes out his chapter with an update about the necklace, this time repudiating the perspectival maneuvering of the sensation novel:

In the meantime, the Eustace diamonds were locked up in a small safe fixed into the wall at the back of a small cellar beneath the establishment of Messrs Harter and Benjamin, in Minto Lane, in the City. . . .

The chronicler states this at once, as he scorns to keep from his reader any secret that is known to himself.<sup>34</sup>

Whereas *The Moonstone* might use “in the meantime” to shift from one narrator’s screened perspective to another’s, *The Eustace Diamonds* uses the phrase to pivot fluidly from the protagonist Lizzie Eustace to the titular necklace. It’s indeed true that Trollope borrows diamond theft as a plot event from Collins, and I’ll return to that point later in

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<sup>33</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, eds. John Sutherland and Stephen Gill (New York: Penguin, 2004), 443.

<sup>34</sup> Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, 514.

the chapter. It's also true that his comfy omniscience precludes any object-borne suspense, and certainly anything like "detective fever." In *The Moonstone* these restricted points of view are exactly the reason that readers experience the gem's clandestine *economic* circulation as a clandestine *narrative* experience.

### **The Sands and the Market**

Just as *The Moonstone*'s multiple points of view defer knowledge about the stone's location, so does the plot itself possess epistemological gaps that amplify its renowned suspense. As a mystery story, the novel unfolds as most would expect: around the gradual disclosure of a series of secrets. The process is especially self-reflexive, though. Collins achieves his narrative pacing through two devices of material postponement that then comment upon the inner mechanics of plotting: the Shivering Sands and the European gem market. Tamar Heller convincingly interprets the Sands in terms of the novel's hybrid generic qualities: at the site the Gothic female energies of the sensation novel (represented by the Sands) encounter the rational male drive of the detective novel (represented by Cuff and Blake).<sup>35</sup> Building on this, I demonstrate how the Shivering Sands allegorize the narrative mechanics of the detective novel, particularly the procedures of recovering a hidden past via recirculating objects that become temporarily caught in limbo. The site provides Collins with a quasi-supernatural device for temporally coordinating the two story planes constitutive of the detective novel: the crime and the investigation. The discovery of Blake's gown within the quicksand will lead the reader closer to the circulating diamond, but even then the gem remains

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<sup>35</sup> See Heller, *Dead Secrets*, 149–51. For a Freudian reading of sexuality and the sands, see Albert D. Hutter, "Dreams, Transformations, and Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction," *Victorian Studies* 19 (1975): 181–209, esp. 204–205.

imperiled by those who wish to divide it and sell it into the European markets. The diamond teeters on the edge of commodification at several points, a counterplot that the narrators explicitly recognize via the literary language of plotting. The diamond's potential fate in the market demonstrates how *The Moonstone* generates narrative contingency by juxtaposing contending economic systems, each bearing its own logic of circulation.

The Shivering Sands helps resolve the textual aporia created by Blake's opiate blackout, which suppresses from view his theft of the gem from Rachel. In order to understand the narrative work of the Sands, I want to pursue the synecdoche of the hand one step further, for it relates to Blake's unconscious state caused by the opium Dr. Candy administers to him unaware. Blake's theft of the Moonstone creates a crisis of identity and agency that the novel looks to resolve by describing the crime in terms of his hands only, thereby leaving the rest of his self free of culpability. When Rachel proclaims to her mother and Miss Clack, "I know the hand that took the Moonstone!" (218), we're witnessing more than a commonplace figure of speech. Rachel's internal conflict involves negotiating the incompatible ideas of loving Franklin Blake, yet being witness to his larceny in the very heart of her bedchamber. The solution—at least the linguistic one—to this contradiction is to attribute the crime to Blake's hands alone. Blake himself will also invoke the idea of automatous hands at the climactic moment when he recognizes his own crime. Just before reading his own name on the collar of the nightgown, he repeats in his mind Cuff's advice that once he finds the gown, "you haven't far to look for the hand that took the Diamond" (314). His epiphany follows immediately afterward:

I took [the nightgown] up form the sand, and looked for the mark.  
 I found the mark, and read—  
 MY OWN NAME.  
 . . . And, on the unanswerable evidence of the paint-stain, I had discovered Myself  
 as the Thief. (314)

The “unanswerable” physical evidence proves what is impossible according to Blake’s memory, presumably reliable up to this point. With the gown as witness, he realizes he is, somehow, both agent and investigator of the diamond’s disappearance. In the same way that Victorian diamond coverage highlights the possessor’s limits of ownership and agency, the material prop of the gown channels a recurrent interest of the sensation novel as a genre: the fact that plot proceeds often without—or at the expense of—individual character’s wills. The effect is to alienate his intentions from his actions, represented by the physical agency of his hands. The shocking scene is a limit-case version of what will later become a classic detective trope: the last person suspected is often the criminal, perhaps even the detective him or herself.

Arguably the novel’s most spectacular moment, Blake’s discovery of his own crime by way of literally buried evidence demonstrates that even within one character’s experience, his or her memory may be subject to unknown or unconscious stretches, a character-based blind spot that the reader experiences as long withheld plot data. Blake’s epiphany at the Sands showcases what Patrick Brantlinger calls one of the genre’s essential plot devices: the “structure of abrupt revelation.”<sup>36</sup> This revelation is especially astounding because at that moment neither Blake nor the reader can comprehend its viability, yet neither can we dismiss the incriminating evidence, especially since Cuff has long prepared us to view the gown as undeniable proof of its owner’s guilt. Blake exclaims, “‘I am as innocent of all knowledge of having taken the Diamond as you are . . .

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<sup>36</sup> Brantlinger, “What is ‘Sensational’ about the ‘Sensation Novel’?” 14.

But there is the witness against me!” (316). The scene dramatizes the epistemological contradiction at the heart of *The Moonstone*: individual memory (always bounded and sometimes unreliable) versus physical evidence. Critics have read Blake’s inability to remember his own plundering as replicating the broader lack of awareness surrounding British imperial appropriation. Thus, Susan Zeiger writes, opium “indexes a British failure of memory and self-recognition, both at the level of the plot and in the larger context of imperial politics.”<sup>37</sup> Ezra Jennings and Blake’s subsequent opium experiment then attempts to reproduce unconscious behaviors that will elucidate the questions of agency that remain, but it will ultimately fail.<sup>38</sup>

The elucidation of a mystery via an incriminating domestic possession that reappears to its owner has many literary precursors, but one of the closest in execution is in Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1860–61), which Margaret Oliphant and others grouped with the sensation novels, on account of how “it occupies itself with incidents all but impossible, and in themselves strange, dangerous, and exciting.”<sup>39</sup> The object is Joe Gargery’s stolen blacksmith file, and the scene is the Kentish pub where the file returns to astonish Pip many years after he has pilfered it to give to the convict Abel Magwitch. Its reappearance in Kent creates an uncanny effect more closely resembling Blake’s discovery of the gown, though. In this stunning scene, recirculation reveals what Dickens has withheld for several years of story time: Magwitch has given the file to a criminal acquaintance at some point after his encounter with Pip. (Dickens even leaves open the

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<sup>37</sup> Susan Zeiger, “Opium, Alcohol, and Tobacco: The Substances of Memory in *The Moonstone*,” in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, ed. Pamela K. Gilbert (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 210.

<sup>38</sup> This tension between memory and evidence is also responsible for narrative aporia when Dr. Candy, incapacitated by illness, cannot coherently explain his use of opium on Blake. Candy, however, never narrates, and in this case, a character, Jennings, elucidates the blind spot, not a tell-tale object.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Oliphant, “Sensation Novels,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 91 (May 1862): 576.

possibility that the file itself has traveled to Australia and back, although he hints at this implausibility.) The unnamed associate then delivers it directly to Pip as a wordless prop which clarifies the origin of the “two fat sweltering one-pound notes”<sup>40</sup> that he gives to Pip that evening:

...then [the unnamed associate] made his shot, and a most extraordinary shot it was.

It was not a verbal remark, but a proceeding in a dumb-show, and was pointedly addressed to me. He stirred his rum-and-water pointedly at me, and he tasted his rum-and-water pointedly at me. And he stirred and he tasted it: not with a spoon that was brought to him, but *with a file*.

He did this so that nobody but I saw the file; and when he had done it he wiped the file and put it in a breast-pocket. I knew it to be Joe's file, and I knew that he knew my convict, the moment I saw the instrument. I sat gazing at him, spell-bound.<sup>41</sup>

In such moments, *Great Expectations* reprises what so many other Dickens novels do: manufacturing shock by way of economic circularity. Pip later admits to long being “haunted by the file,” bothered so much by its unaccountable return that “A dread possessed me that when I least expected it, the file would reappear.”<sup>42</sup> It is the tool's implausible circularity that is responsible for bestowing such a high degree of terror upon what already qualifies—file or no file—as a shocking scene of character revelation.

Like in *Great Expectations*, *The Moonstone* stages an encounter with a seemingly impossible thing that nevertheless acts as an unimpeachable witness. But in Collins's text criminal evidence-in-waiting resides in a physical repository that is both empirical and phantasmagoric. He creates an entire setting where evidence is *literally* buried, thereby concealing materials from readers for long stretches of time, particularly long for the novel's serial consumers. He creates the Shivering Sands, the quicksand where Rosanna

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Charlotte Mitchell (New York: Penguin, 2003), 78.

<sup>41</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 77-78.

<sup>42</sup> Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 79.

Spearman hides Blake's gown and commits suicide. Like the formal function of circumscribed narrators, the Shivering Sands creates a limit of visibility and knowledge—this one a physical boundary, a quivering and mysterious surface. Little surprise, then, that Betteredge first introduces the concept of “detective fever” when he and Cuff first go to the quicksand to look for Rosanna. The reader shares the characters' own nervous curiosity because we experience it as a symptom of formal delay within the narrative construction. *The Moonstone* revels in postponement, and it takes its decree for doing so from the prolonged circulation pattern typical of diamond narratives. In Collins's previous novel, *Armada* (1864–66), Collins had similarly married thematic and formal concepts of delay, but based on the neurological lags of perception not the stoppages of object circulation. As Michael Tondre argues,

*Armada*'s inquiry into the nature of the nervous body (delay's status as an empirical, embodied experience) is translated increasingly into an ideology of the aesthetic (its status as a principle of narrative form). What delay means for figures in the plot, in other words, resolves into the further issue of what it does to readers' nerves, so that the novel's solution to the nature and effects of sensory delay is instantiated in its own prolonged patterns of postponement.<sup>43</sup>

Here is “detective fever” before Betteredge gave it its name. *The Moonstone* couples the corporeality of *Armada* with a fixation on objecthood.

Although the Moonstone itself never enters the Sands, the site operates similarly to the banks and jeweler's shops in which the diamond lingers. Both locations hold items in suspension as they await future transfers back to characters who possessed them earlier. Only by first recovering his own gown from the Sands can Blake attempt to recover the diamond from Luker's bank before Ablewhite absconds to Europe with it. The Sands is thus a temporal-structural nexus in the same family as those other

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Tondre, “‘The Interval of Expectation’: Delay, Delusion, and the Psychology of Suspense in *Armada*,” *ELH* 78 (2011): 587.



chronotopes of potential preservation we have seen at work in nineteenth-century fiction: thieves' dens, rag-and-bottle stores, pawnshops, and dust piles.

In his later detective novel, *The Law and the Lady* (1874–75), Collins uses a similar plot device—the dust heap, borrowed from Dickens—that has the paradoxical narrative function of preserving objects despite its association with loss and disintegration. *The Law and the Lady*'s key piece of evidence, a torn-up suicide letter, lies buried in a Scottish estate's dust pile for three years before its removal exonerates the hero from the charge of murder. The rubbish is a time capsule, a reliable sedimentation of history, and, like the Shivering Sands, the country house's unconscious. Collins was never as interested as Dickens in physical decay, and he has no problem representing dust as an archival fantasy. Because it's a private estate's waste, no scavengers disturb the heap, as would occur with those in urban settings. Furthermore, and rather unrealistically, nothing in the pile undergoes putrefaction.<sup>44</sup> Even fragile paper needs no container to preserve it. Employing a pseudo-science akin to the tidal explanation of the Shivering Sands, Collins rationalizes the suicide note's preservation via the outlandish analogy of Pompeii's preservation under the volcanic ash of Vesuvius. “*Open the dust-heap at Gleninch,*” commands a dramatic telegraph late in the novel, as if the entire pile were like Rosanna's tin case in the Sands or the sealed jars that *Our Mutual Friend* uses to preserve the Harmon wills within its dust.<sup>45</sup>

By installing objects as the primary agents of plot, *The Moonstone* carries the troubling message that things always outlive persons. The gown and suicide letter endure

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<sup>44</sup> Nataka Freeland argues that *The Law and the Lady* “embodies the packrat's—or criminologist's—ideal in which nothing is ever disposed of.” See Freeland, “Trash Fiction: The Victorian Novel and the Rise of Disposable Culture” (PhD diss., Yale Univ., 1998), 93.

<sup>45</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 364. Emphasis original.

within the Shivering Sands until retrieved, but Rosanna disappears forever. Ablewhite is left a stiff corpse, while the Moonstone continues its global circuit unscathed. (Recall what Murthwaite tells Blake: “If a thousand lives stood between [the Brahmins] and the getting back of their Diamond . . . they would take them all” (84-85)). The Shivering Sands showcases the novel’s twofold ability to either preserve or annihilate matter, but when it comes to evidentiary objects, their fate is always the former. In fact, twice Betteredge will wish aloud that he could destroy the Moonstone by throwing it into the quicksand; twice it will not happen. When the fisherman Yolland tells Sergeant Cuff that “What the Sands get, the Sands keep for ever,” he is right only insofar as he speaks of items not physically secured and thus suspended in time (165). With the right kind of implements—dog chains and a waterproof box—Rosanna can indefinitely hide the gown and letter. This tension of preservation versus destruction forms part of Sergeant Cuff’s line of questioning: “The pinch of the question is—why, after having provided the substitute dress, does she hide the smeared nightgown, instead of destroying it?” (157). Rosanna’s reasons are for love; she wants Blake to know of her devotion to him. Collins’s reasons are for plotting.

The Shivering Sands allegorizes how the detective novel unfolds its sequence of clues via suspension and release. The actual chain that Blake pulls in order to dredge up buried secrets from the past alludes to the metaphorical “chain” typical of detective discourse. The chain connects the past to the present. Blake and Bruff will riff on this vocabulary at other points in the story, as when the first speaks of “the chain of evidence,” and the second of “the chain of events” (348, 272).<sup>46</sup> Sergeant Cuff will also

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<sup>46</sup> Regarding chains and the Sands, Jenny Bourne Taylor writes that “the Shivering Sands is expressive because it *absorbs* its secrets. . . . It conceals its own past and the pasts of others, which have to be dragged

play with the double meaning of “case,” as both a physical enclosure and a criminal case: “The hiding-place at the Shivering Sands must be searched—and the true state of the case will be discovered there” (157). Furthermore, the status of a case physically *suspended* in the sands etymologically relates to the narrative effect that it produces: *suspense*. Collins consciously works to flaunt rather than cloak *The Moonstone*’s construction.

The chain imagery specifically highlights the double story organization that all detective fiction contains: the crime and the investigation. Evidence chains and repositories link these two story planes via the reconstruction of the past in the present. “Detective fiction is a genre committed to an act of recovery,” Dennis Porter writes, “moving forward in order to move back.”<sup>47</sup> In his pioneering essay “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” Tzvetan Todorov writes that in detective fiction’s “purest form,” these two stories “have no point in common”—that is, no *temporal* points in common.<sup>48</sup> The crime concludes, and only then does the investigation begin. *The Moonstone*, however, is not a temporally bifurcated whodunit and is far from any “pure” detective form that becomes codified with Conan Doyle and Dorothy Sayers many decades later. The crime story does not terminate with Blake/Ablewhite’s theft. As befits the itinerancy of diamonds, the Moonstone continues to motivate crime because it continues to pass hands: the disreputable Luker knowingly fences the gem, and the Indians then commit murder in order to reclaim it. When Betteredge speaks of the “devil’s dance of the Indian diamond,” he’s referring to how every movement of the cursed stone carries the potential

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back, painfully, on a chain of submerged associations” (*In the Secret Theatre of the Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* [London: Routledge, 1988], 198).

<sup>47</sup> Dennis Porter, “Backward Construction and the Art of Suspense,” in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983), 329. Franco Moretti argues, “Detective fiction’s object is to *return to the beginning*.” (*Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* [London: Verso, 1988], 137, emphasis original.)

<sup>48</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” in *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 43.

for intensified violence or damage, even after the investigation of the initial larceny is underway (197). The investigation story thus temporally overlaps with the crime story, an imbrication Collins achieves by using chronotopes of suspension like the Sands and the bank vault.

It's important to note this overlap because we can then see how the novel's entire progression is based on incrementally bringing these two story levels into closer and closer temporal alignment, thereby reducing the degree of delay between the diamond's movement and the reader's position. At the novel's conclusion they nearly converge—separated by only a few hours—but ultimately the diamond recirculation paradigm overrides all other latent plotlines. I speak of the scene when Blake and Cuff discover Ablewhite's body in the hotel room. Pay attention to how Collins superimposes Ablewhite's unmasked face with Cuff's written hypothesis about the thief's identity. The stunt signals this convergence of crime and investigation stories. Blake is our narrator:

“Come back to the bed, sir!” [Cuff] began. He looked at me closer, and checked himself. “No!” he resumed. “Open the sealed letter first—the letter I gave you this morning.”

I opened the letter.

“Read the name, Mr Blake, that I have written inside.”

I read the name that he had written. It was—*Godfrey Ablewhite*.

“Now,” said the Sergeant, “come with me, and take a look at the man on the bed.”

I went with him, and looked at the man on the bed.

GODFREY ABLEWHITE! (448)

Here the Moonstone's criminal circulation and the detectives' forensic investigation come into *near*-perfect temporal alignment. Ablewhite's body and the paraphernalia in the room do finally confirm the speculation that has been floating around for half the novel about the stone's deposit in the vault of Mr. Luker's bank. But, of course, the alignment is imperfect: though there is the unassailable evidence of Ablewhite's corpse,

there is no diamond, only a box of jeweler's cotton. Thrillingly, the interval of separation has been whittled down to mere hours, but the scene is the closest we come to the resolution of criminal conflict. Because of the unstoppable recirculatory drive of the Moonstone, what remains of the book's narrative deferment dissolves into the post-plot uncertainty of the diamond's next adventures. "Who can tell!" (472).

The Indians' eleventh-hour obstruction of Ablewhite's plan to cut up and sell the Moonstone is the novel's final rejection of a counterplot that has haunted it from the start: the diamond's entry into the European gem market. This counterplot, Collins's second materialist strategy of suspense, runs throughout the entire text and is responsible for the reader's uncertainty about the stone's fate. The Moonstone long teeters on the edge of commodification up to this point. "If [Ablewhite] had got safe with it to Amsterdam," Cuff explains retrospectively, "there would have been just time between July 'forty-nine, and February 'fifty . . . to cut the Diamond, and to make a marketable commodity (polished or unpolished) of the separate stones" (459). The novel contains one master plot, realized in the narrative, of the diamond's restoration to Hindu fetish; and one counter-plot, nearly achieved but ultimately frustrated, of the diamond's division and monetization.

In fact, the Brahmins' fear of this commodification creates the occasion for the bulk of the narrated story. Early on, they suppress their own violent action against Colonel Herncastle, thus allowing for the bequeathing of the diamond to Rachel and the theft in Yorkshire. The Brahmin's noted patience has a legal basis: they cannot murder Herncastle, for that would trigger the diamond's commodification. "Kill me," Blake says, paraphrasing the Colonel, "and the Diamond will be the Diamond no longer; its identity

will be destroyed” (51). That is, the Diamond will become diamonds—vulgar and stripped of religious importance by virtue of their entry into retail markets. In this event, the stone would have been sent to Amsterdam to be cut up into four to six smaller diamonds that are “to be sold for what they would fetch,” the proceeds funding a university chemistry professorship (50). Herncastle’s legal safeguard leaves the hands of the Indians tied—emphasis, I would say, on *hands*.

The Indian “plot”—a term used dozens of times in reference to the Brahmins’ motivations—refers to both conspiracy and this anti-capitalist plotline of the diamond’s restoration. When Blake explains their motivations to Betteredge, he emphasizes the two competing trajectories in these terms:

“If robbery for the purpose of gain was at the bottom of the conspiracy, the Colonel’s instructions absolutely made the Diamond better worth stealing. More money could have been got for it, and the disposal of it in the diamond-market would have been infinitely easier, if it had passed through the hands of the workman of Amsterdam.”

“Lord bless us, sir!” [Betteredge] burst out. “What was the plot, then?”

“A plot organized among the Indians who originally owned the jewel,” says Mr Franklin—“a plot with some old Hindoo superstition at the bottom of it.” (51)

Blake’s description captures the radically different endpoints of the two prospects. The capitalist plot of the stone’s division is a type of “disposal,” that is, the obliteration of the relic and thus the termination of any narrative future involving the original stone. The Brahmin plot is one of original ownership restored, and thus, as the Epilogue confirms, the potential for renewed narrativity.

Put differently, anxiety about property circulation defines *The Moonstone*’s politics of possession, which in turn defines its structure. Regardless of the Brahmins, for most of the story the gem’s high value and associated scandal forestall Ablewhite’s wish

to commodify it, leading the gem instead into the shadowy economic channels that generate a parallel but different type of uncertainty that's inherent to underground markets. Mr. Luker's skeptical question to Ablewhite might be taken as the novel's thesis, a significance that Cuff recognizes when recounting Luker's words: "'How did you come by this?' Only six words! But what volumes of meaning in them!" (455). The reader's long route to discovering how Ablewhite came by the diamond has passed through the opium-induced memory hole of Blake, the suspended evidence of the Shivering Sands, and the counterplot anxiety regarding the stone's commodification. Cuff's and Blake's forensic reconstruction produces, in the end, the "volumes of meaning," that make the mystery soluble, even if the diamond goes unrecovered by the detectives. The other answer to what this produces—one more resonant to a contemporary reader than modern—is three *physical* "volumes of meaning": the triple-decker format of the sensation novel.

### **Recurrence and the Plot Machinery of Sensation**

We've seen how the circulation of the Moonstone, invested with the kinetics and politics of romance, supplies a materialist stratum of convergences and divergences, upon which the character system intermittently shifts its weight, and from which suspense is generated. In achieving this complexity, *The Moonstone* also became a lighting rod for critics exasperated by the sensation novel's plot machinery, which they believed had become increasingly dependent on artificial intricacy to manufacture the genre's affective extravagance. The remainder of this chapter explores how the plot device of the Indian diamond illuminates the larger debate in mid-Victorian fiction about plot- versus

character-centered fiction. That debate played out in the critics' responses to the genre of the sensation novel in the 1860s and 70s as well as Trollope's to Collins in *The Eustace Diamonds*, which thematically resembles *The Moonstone* but departs radically in its plotting of diamond recirculation. *The Moonstone* may be unsurpassed in its degree of constructedness, but that achievement marks both a zenith and a tipping point in the history of Victorian plotting. It would take until the turn of the century before detective fiction codified material forensics to the point of legitimizing puzzle-like plot construction as a feature of respected, and respectable, literature. In the meantime, the school of circular, inwrought plotting began to lose its hold on the domestic novel by the end of the 1860s. The new generation of psychological realists—including George Eliot, Henry James, and Thomas Hardy—approached the material world primarily as a philosophical subject of inquiry in its own right, not a matrix for manufacturing plot devices.

To see how *The Moonstone* controversially stretched the limits of plot via an object, we first need to examine how previous sensation novels had already established *character* recurrence as a primary (though notorious) plot strategy. The diamond's continued unity as it passes hands toward its final repossession by the Indians accords with the genre's much wider reliance on recursive character systems. In the sensation novels that predated *The Moonstone*—bestsellers such as Collins's own *The Woman in White* and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–62)—these patterns appeared around characters' returns to narrative visibility, especially via the devices of doubled selves, hidden identities, or returns of the living dead (characters presumed dead but who are not). The reader's journey toward character revelation—a plot that requires the



reconstruction of past crimes—is *the* master plot formula of the sensation novel. The entirety of *Lady Audley's Secret*, for example, is based on Robert Audley's obsessive quest to discover the fate of his missing friend, George Talboys, who, despite being given a burial and headstone, reappears in the end to reveal he left England for a few years after being pushed down a well by his bigamist wife Helen Talboys, now remarried as Lady Audley. Winifred Hughes shows that these character mysteries run throughout the entire genre: "Just as the most childish of heroines is likely to have a discarded husband or two in the background, so the most carefully certified of corpses is apt to revive at an interesting juncture." These concealments rely on elaborate stage contrivances that "furnish the dramatic scenes of confrontation and recognition that take place between parted lovers, former husbands and wives, victims and would-be murderers."<sup>49</sup> Character recurrence existed also around more peripheral characters who return at the novel's climax having been nearly forgotten, and in this way seem to owe something to Dickens's character economies in *Dombey and Son* and beyond. Consider Professor Pesca's reentry into *The Woman in White* in order to intimidate Count Fosco and exonerate Laura Fairlie. Walter Hartwright admits that Pesca "has been so long absent from these pages, that he has run some risk of being forgotten altogether."<sup>50</sup> It's not a particularly stylish reentry, but it's nonetheless marked as one. Over and over again, the sensation novel capitalized on what Dickens had been so successful at doing: creating patterns of surprise and suspense through the ambivalent fates of absent characters held in abeyance.

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<sup>49</sup> Hughes, *Maniac in the Cellar*, 20–21.

<sup>50</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. John Sutherland (New York: Oxford, 2008), 579.

This school of character mystery was by no means uncontested, though. The literary debate is percolating even before the birth of the sensation novel. In Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857), his narrator pauses late in the first volume to lampoon the school of suspense that leaves character fates' up in the air until the novel's climax. Trollope almost surely had Dickens in mind as a chief offender: "He [the narrator] ventures to reprobate that system which goes so far to violate all proper confidence between the author and his readers by maintaining nearly to the end of the third volume a mystery as to the fate of their favourite personage."<sup>51</sup> Trollope's exasperation only increased in the decade that followed, given that the sensation fiction that soon flooded the market derived the majority of its power from exactly such a "system" of character uncertainty.

Collins, already a virtuoso of this character system by the late 1860s, used the primacy of the *Moonstone* to transpose the sensation of character recurrence onto object recirculation. In this ways, *The Moonstone* might be said to accomplish the opposite of what *Bleak House* did when it transposed the suspense of rubbish onto character limbo. Collins's own transposition did not completely jettison these established character patterns: the novel still indulges in surprise returns, of course, such as with Sergeant Cuff's unexpected reappearance after a long sabbatical in Ireland to aid the final stages of Blake's investigation of the missing diamond. But the core plot has changed from the earlier novels. Robert Audley traced a lost friend, not lost property. Walter Hartwright sought evidence to restore Laura Fairlie's lost identity, not her usurped possessions.

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<sup>51</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers*, 3 vols., eds. Michael Sadleir and Frederick Page (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 1:143.

We're accustomed to thinking of *The Moonstone* as a generic touchstone: it is one of the greatest sensation novels as well as (by many accounts) the first detective novel in English. The text is a "watershed moment in the history of the genre," writes Ronald Thomas, condensing a line of criticism that extends back to T. S. Eliot and Dorothy Sayers.<sup>52</sup> It is less often recognized, however, as a watershed moment in the literary debate about plot-driven fiction and, more specifically, object-based plot devices. As we've seen, *The Moonstone* bases its suspense on the delayed revelation about the diamond's circulatory path and the fate of those connected, and the plot's climax in the third volume exemplifies the tension-and-release plotting typical of sensation novels. However, in opposition to this, Victorian readers had access to a more serene style of domestic realism that didn't rely on novel-length enigmas, even if it was attentive to materiality and domestic objects. As Chapter 3 argued, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* appears to straddle this line by emphasizing domestic recuperation as a temporal tenet of her novel's accumulative structure, but stopping short of using it in any spectacular way, as she first did in *Mary Barton*. But with the arrival of the sensation novel, these lines became more sharply drawn between sensationalist and anti-sensationalist camps. I want to return now to Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds*, since here we'll see how Trollope used object recirculation to inveigh against the plot intricacy and premeditated construction of the sensation novel.

Let's first observe the common ground; Trollope could only parody Collins's object plotting by having thematic parallels, after all. *The Eustace Diamonds* shares with *The Moonstone* a deep interest in the instability of diamond possession. Trollope draws

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<sup>52</sup> Ronald R. Thomas, "The Moonstone, Detective Fiction, and Forensic Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 66. See also Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999.

explicitly upon the Victorian cultural interest in gem circulation, even if he doesn't frame his narrative in terms of any opaque intrigue. The language of "restoration," "recovery," and "restitution," runs throughout *The Eustace Diamonds*, evident particularly in the lawyer Mr. Camperdown's quest to return the necklace to the Eustace estate.<sup>53</sup> The conflict centers on the ambiguity of the necklace's legal status: is it an heirloom (and thus an inalienable part of the Eustace estate), or is it paraphernalia (a less restricted category of property, which can be gifted to a wife or sold)? Because Lizzie falsely claims the diamonds as stolen, possession becomes so circular that it creates paradoxes of self-theft. In *The Moonstone* Franklin Blake is both the perpetrator and investigator of the gem's disappearance. Similarly, Lizzie Eustace is both complicit in, and the victim of her own diamond heist. The hotel manager where the theft occurs is the first of many to put his finger on this contradiction: he "almost seemed to think that Lizzie had stolen her own box of diamonds."<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, much like with the Moonstone, there exists a fear that the necklace will be broken up into component diamonds and sold off, thus destroying the unique value of the aristocratic heirloom. Camperdown knows that if Lizzie were to succeed in this attempt—if "the diamonds should have been broken up and scattered to the winds of heaven"—the Eustace Diamonds would be no more.<sup>55</sup> The fate never comes to the gems, though; Lizzie knows that there is too much scandal and attention focused on them. Even the underground market trembles at the idea of buying the diamonds from her, since most believe she has falsely claimed them as a gift from her husband and then lied to the police about their theft from her strongbox.

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<sup>53</sup> Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, 75, 316, 78.

<sup>54</sup> Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, 442.

<sup>55</sup> Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, 289.

Trollope invokes these questions of property and circulation for the purposes of a character study not a mystery plot. It's a novel about the cunning of Lizzie Eustace. As the novel draws to a close and the necklace fades indistinctly into the European black market, this priority is evident in Lizzie's response when she's told that they will likely not recover it:

I do not care about the property, sir;—although it was all my own. Nobody has lost anything but myself; and I really don't see why the thing should not die out, as I don't care about it. Whoever it is, they may have it now.<sup>56</sup>

Trollope's diamonds are an icon of an aristocracy threatened from below. The pith of the diamond plot has always been about sexual agency, deceit, and the subversive characters who challenge the social order.<sup>57</sup> One obvious way that's noticeable is the fact that we hardly even get a physical description of the necklace.<sup>58</sup> It is, first and foremost, a characterological device not a plot device. We can see this also in how the story dissolves into dry irony at the close, becoming merely a bit of chatter among aristocratic circles:

“‘Dear, dear, dear!’ said the duke. ‘And the diamonds never turned up after all.’”<sup>59</sup>

More than the diamond's not turning up, the fact that the narrative doesn't even much care to track their circulation is what really highlights the differences between the two authors' plotting. Where exactly does the necklace end up in *The Eustace Diamonds*?

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<sup>56</sup> Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, 658.

<sup>57</sup> On the relationship between the diamonds and sexual deviance, see William Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1996). Cohen writes “The gems, which form the centerpiece in a series of overlapping scandals, at once metaphorize sexuality and literalize the economics of sexual difference” (161). John Kucich argues several of Trollope's novels make deceit into an integral psychic dimension of bourgeois characters who appear morally traditionalist: “In relationship to the commonly shared ethical ideal of truth-telling, even a relatively conservative Victorian writer such as Trollope projects illicit energies outside the middle class, stigmatizes them as the moral defects of the enemies of bourgeois culture, and then reappropriates these same antibourgeois energies for his more privileged protagonists.” See Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), 44.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Miller remarks that like all of Trollope's novels, “the representation of material culture [in *The Eustace Diamonds*] is extraordinarily thin” (*Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995], 160).

<sup>59</sup> Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, 768.

We hear second-hand that they have gone through Hamburg and are reportedly now owned by Russian royalty, but these details primarily supply an occasion for Mr. Camperdown to lament his failure in upholding the aristocratic legacy of the Eustace family. *The Eustace Diamonds* takes a local, domestic focus, never explicitly concerned with the international dimensions of diamond circulation. Even less dramatic than the description of their fate is the narrator's limp report of catching the English thieves. The narrator includes a brief note on their capture, permissible mainly because it reflects back on Lizzie: "That Mr Benjamin and Mr Smiler would be prosecuted, the latter for robbery and the former for conspiracy to rob, and for receiving stolen goods, was a matter of course. But what was to be done with Lady Eustace?"<sup>60</sup> The bland report on legal procedures parodies *The Moonstone*'s sensational climax of tracking Luker and unmasking Ablewhite. In the flat tone of obligation, the narrator bypasses the thieves' actual capture by the police through analepsis. Trollope subordinates a plot climax to a narrational afterthought.

Trollope's minimalist treatment of the diamond plot also throws into relief the degree of planning Collins had to take in mapping out the *Moonstone*'s circuit *before* writing the novel, and more generally the degree of planning that all successful sensation novels required. In his posthumously published *An Autobiography* (1883), Trollope points out how the difference in object plotting is one of premeditation versus improvisation, a distinction that Bulwer made fifty years before in contrasting himself to Walter Scott:

The plot of the diamond necklace is, I think, well arranged, though it produced itself without any forethought. I had no idea of setting thieves after the bauble till I had got my heroine to bed in the inn at Carlisle; nor of the disappointment of the

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<sup>60</sup> Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, 657.

thieves, till Lizzie had been wakened in the morning with the news that her door had been broken open. All these things, and many more, Wilkie Collins would have arranged before with infinite labour, preparing things present so that they should fit in with things to come. I have gone on the very much easier plan of making everything as it comes fit in with what has gone before.<sup>61</sup>

The word choice of “bauble” is telling, of course: it reduces the necklace to something functional in the characterological sense, but little more. Its novelistic circulation proceeds according to Trollope’s own organic, sequential principles of composition. He determines plot events based on those immediately preceding. The necklace’s fade to insignificance raises no problems within this school of storytelling. The Eustace diamonds will pass hands, yes, but any grand circular design smacks of “infinite labour.” By this, Trollope means the artifice of constructing plot points based on their function within a premeditated global design. When Trollope has his two dimwitted policemen proclaim that “Stones like them must turn up more or less,” he’s having a joke at the expense of Collins and his blueprint of inevitable recirculation.<sup>62</sup>

Trollope’s problem with Collins’s novels isn’t so much the intricacy of their plots but the conspicuousness of their plotting. He admits to finding all of Collins’s novels too schematic, however exciting they may be:

When I sit down to write a novel I do not at all know, and I do not very much care, how it is to end. Wilkie Collins seems so to construct his that he not only, before writing, plans everything on, down to the minutest detail, from the beginning to the end; but then plots it all back again, to see that there is no piece of necessary dove-tailing which does not dove-tail with absolute accuracy. The construction is most minute and most wonderful. But I can never lose the taste of the construction. The author seems always to be warning me to remember that something happened at exactly half-past two o’clock on Tuesday morning; or that a woman disappeared from a road just fifteen yards beyond the fourth milestone.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 344.

<sup>62</sup> Trollope, *The Eustace Diamonds*, 482.

<sup>63</sup> Trollope, *An Autobiography*, 256–57.

Collins's plots are cloying. For Trollope, their chains of events and clues are so obviously marked as significant that everything is invested with potential meaning within the swirling, closed economy of the narrative. However exciting they are, he still feels like he's reading a blueprint.

In complaining of this, Trollope was joining a much larger chorus of protest against the sensation novel's lack of subtlety in storytelling. These critics charged that the genre did not sufficiently ensconce its plot points within ambient depictions of character, setting, and domestic materiality. They complained that no physical detail could ever serve the rhetorical purpose of description only. Every encountered object appears to be a plot device, even if a red herring. Sensation fiction is the furthest from the reality effect than any other Victorian genre. As one reviewer remarks, "if a tea-cup is broken, it has a meaning, it is a link in a chain; you are certain to hear of it afterwards."<sup>64</sup> Perhaps the *Times* described sensation plotting best: "The whole school has this habit of laying eggs and hiding them."<sup>65</sup> The problem isn't that the novels hide eggs to uncover later; most fiction does this. The problem is that the act of hiding is done so conspicuously. Collins was not as heavy-handed as many critics alleged, but even his attempts at subtlety sometimes backfired by too loudly proclaiming a clue's insignificance. *The Law and the Lady* first introduces the rubbish pile that will later yield the suicide note as "nothing more remarkable than the dust-heap."<sup>66</sup> Nothing to see here—move along, readers.

In their conversations on design, Dickens often advised Collins not to make his egg-laying so noticeable. After Collins proposed other ways that his friend might have

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<sup>64</sup> "Novels and Novelists of the Day," *The North British Review* 38 (Feb 1863): 184.

<sup>65</sup> Unsigned Rev., *The Times*, in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Page (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 176.

<sup>66</sup> Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, 288.



developed the plot of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), Dickens replied that “it would have been overdone in that manner—too elaborately trapped, baited, and prepared—in the main anticipated, and its interest wasted.” In the same letter, Dickens promoted a more subtle approach in laying the ground for plot development: “only to *suggest* until the fulfillment comes.”<sup>67</sup> He appears to have convinced his mentee, considering that in 1860 Collins would praise *A Tale of Two Cities* by highlighting its plot design: “the most perfect work of constructive art that has ever proceeded from his pen.”<sup>68</sup> In his feedback on *The Woman in White*, Dickens again recommended more subtlety in the development of narrative clues, this time telling Collins not to underestimate readers’ intellectual ability: “you know that I always contest your disposition to give an audience credit for nothing—which necessarily involves the forcing of points on their attention—and which I have always observed them to resent when they find it out—as they always will and do.”<sup>69</sup>

That resentment about the undisguised machinery of plot appeared repeatedly in the critical reception of Collins’s blockbuster novels of the 1860s. Confederates of the developing school of psychological realism argued that this overreliance on incidents and clues stripped away characterization to the point of leaving the novel a profane and translucent contrivance of moving parts: “[A] sort of disinterested delight,” as R. H. Hutton described it, “in the technical machinery of novels quite apart from the human

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The Pilgrim Edition, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 9:127. The letter is dated 8 October 1859, and is in response to Collins’s suggestion that Dickens should have indicated the connection between Dr. Manette and Charles Darnay earlier in the novel. Dickens emphasizes “suggest” with a double underline.

<sup>68</sup> Collins remarks are from the 1860 Preface to *The Woman in White*, included in the appendix of the Oxford edition (644).

<sup>69</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, 9:194. The letter is dated 7 January 1860.

interest that machinery used to serve.”<sup>70</sup> (Charles Reade’s rejoinder to this common criticism is even more delightful: he accused psychological novelists of dissecting characters to the point of “microscoping their poodles into lions.”)<sup>71</sup> More damning were the many reviews that cited Collins’s hyper-complex plots to accuse him of being a great carpenter and mathematician, but not an artist. A sour-tempered write-up in the *Saturday Review* remarked,

“He is . . . a very ingenious constructor; but ingenious construction is not high art, just as cabinet-making and joining is not high art. Mechanical talent is what every great artist ought to possess. Mechanical talent, however, is not enough to entitle a man to rank as a great artist.”<sup>72</sup>

In his famous 1863 omnibus review of the genre, H. L. Mansel wrote that sensation plots are so inorganic that they appear as “the combinations of an algebraic equation.”<sup>73</sup> Perhaps nothing deflates a novelist’s sense of success quite like being accused of writing algebra. In this critical atmosphere, Henry James’s semi-appreciative remark in 1865 that Collins’s plots are “not so much works of art as works of science” seems little more encouraging.<sup>74</sup>

Given the intricacy of the diamond’s circulation, it is little surprise that *The Moonstone* continued to attract criticism of its puzzle-like nature, despite appearing after the peak of anti-sensation backlash in the early 1860s. Considering Collins had been attacked for being overly mechanical for much of his career, his translation of those mechanics into a story so focused on an object struck many as a doubling down on artifice, however much Collins associated the diamond with mystic forces. Reviewers

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<sup>70</sup> R. H. Hutton, *The Spectator* (22 Feb. 1862): 104.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Reade, *Bible Characters*, quoted in Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, 25.

<sup>72</sup> Unsigned Rev., *Saturday Review*, vol. 10, no. 252 (25 Aug. 1860): 249.

<sup>73</sup> H. L. Mansel, “Sensation Novels,” *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863): 486–87.

<sup>74</sup> Henry James, *Nation* 1 (9 Nov. 1865): 864.

almost universally recognized that its recirculation plot was something new. “Into and among these characters rolls and revolves the Moonstone, with its mythical burden of misfortune,” the *Times* said of the plot.<sup>75</sup> The question, however, was whether this was innovation or gimmick. Some reviewers, like Geraldine Jewsbury in the *Athenaeum*, praised Collins’s “carefully elaborate workmanship,” but many others were on the side of Trollope: the diamond made his workmanship *too* obvious and tedious. One critic compared the plot to “double acrostics” and “anagrams.”<sup>76</sup> Even Dickens, who had praised early installments of *The Moonstone* for its “wild, yet domestic” qualities, thought the novel had collapsed under its own ponderous weight by the end. In a letter to W. H. Willis, he wrote that “The construction is wearisome beyond endurance, and there is a vein of obstinate conceit in it that makes enemies of readers.”<sup>77</sup> *The Moonstone*’s extreme degree of constructedness forced Dickens into a rare position: he agreed with Trollope.

The discrepancy between Collins and Dickens becomes clearer if we contrast *The Moonstone* with the Newgate novel, its generic antecedent. Both plot action around stolen goods, but Collins’s insistent focalization on the diamond’s circulation creates a structure of readerly affect that is the inverse of the typical Newgate pattern. For three volumes, Collins’s narrators speak about little else other than where the Moonstone is. The novel is hyper-aware of the stone’s presence and movements, even if these rely only on inference. Thus, the book’s central strategy—like the sensation novel genre as a whole—is protracted *suspense* regarding the vagaries of movement. Conversely, the Newgate novels utilized stolen goods for *surprise*. Stolen or second-hand objects go missing, but the

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<sup>75</sup> Unsigned Rev., *The Times*, in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, 175.

<sup>76</sup> Unsigned Rev., *Spectator*, in in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, 171.

<sup>77</sup> Dickens, *Letters*, 12:159. The letter is date 26 July, 1868.

narrative doesn't encourage the reader to miss them, a reasonable approach given that these items tend to be of low or personal value, instead of tens of thousands of pounds. The reader forgets about the love letters in *Paul Clifford* or the old suit of clothes in *Oliver Twist*. Stolen goods usually aren't marked as potential plot devices initially, or if they are, it's a brief flagging. The narration notices them only to then overlook them and hold them in a state of abeyance in which they remain unnoticed, not scrutinized like the Shivering Sands or the London bank vault. By design, the Newgate novel's initial indifference allows for the goods' sudden, unexpected reappearances, which channel the convergent energy of melodramatic coincidence. Moreover, after Newgate novels stage this reappearance, they don't much care to provide a full reconstruction of how the object passed from hand to hand, like Cuff and Blake do so diligently. At most, they offer a sketch of that movement, thereby preserving the uncanny nature of the black market trade in objects of low or moderate value. Stolen property is a plot device buried deep. In *The Moonstone*, though, it runs much closer to the surface, from start to finish—after all, it's the world's largest diamond. This persistence, this “obstinate conceit,” explains why Trollope, Dickens, and others found the novel so wearisome.

Once detective fiction became an established genre, a remarkable historical revision occurred. Twentieth-century critics took to praising the intricate qualities of construction that Victorian critics so often denigrated. The critical shift demonstrates just how inchoate, eccentric, and even non-literary detective novels seemed in the 1860s. Modern critics tend to evaluate detective fiction primarily by the formal ingenuity of its mystery plot, particularly the management of material clues. Generic parameters exist. The protocols of modern detective fiction now blatantly elicit the reader's scientific drive

toward hypothesis and validation in the face of a puzzle laid out in the form of recovered clues. The modern author exercises—without apology—what Frank Kermode calls “the maximum degree of specialised ‘hermeneutic’ organisation” distinctive to the genre.<sup>78</sup> In the 1860s, these reading priorities were far from codified, though. Moreover, detection as a readerly task remained tainted by the sensation novel’s low cultural associations.

Literature, at least as a category of art, had not yet made room for novels that so candidly exhorted the reader to engage with its object-borne mysteries. In a characteristic dismissal, the *London Review* remarked, “Most of those who read ‘The Moonstone’ are likely to regard it less as a work of literature, than as an elaborate puzzle.”<sup>79</sup>

Many decades later, however, the early twentieth-century critics responsible for canonizing the novel cited its plot, including its overtly constructed style, as evidence of its preeminence. In 1913 G. K. Chesterton remarked that “[Collins] is one of the few novelists in whose case it is proper and literal to speak of his ‘plots.’ He was a plotter; . . . *The Moonstone* is probably the best detective tale in the world.”<sup>80</sup> T. S. Eliot’s evaluation of *The Moonstone* as “the first and greatest of the English detective novels” is surely the most commonly cited evaluation of the text, but rarely do we hear why Eliot thought so: “The one of Collins’s books which is the most perfect piece of construction, and the best balanced between plot and character, is *The Moonstone*.”<sup>81</sup> Eliot not only grants Collins more credit in terms of characterization than Victorian critics usually did; he is unashamedly intrigued by its object-based construction, not wearied.

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<sup>78</sup> Frank Kermode, “Secrets and Narrative Sequence,” *The Act of Telling: Essays on Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), 137.

<sup>79</sup> “The Moonstone,” *The London Review of Politics, Society, Literature, Art, and Science*, vol. 17, no. 421 (25 July 1868): 115.

<sup>80</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), 132.

<sup>81</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Wilkie Collins and Dickens,” *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 464.

The 1870s did not see this unrestrained embrace of sensation plotting as a scientific exercise. It saw, instead, the death of Dickens, the flagging of Collins's formal experimentation, and the ascendancy of the psychological realists like Eliot, James, and Hardy, whom we tend to consider as related but superior to Trollope. Domestic fiction certainly didn't forgo the recirculation plot completely—Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* opens by coordinating its double plot via a pawned necklace of sapphires, for instance—but these writers did deemphasize plot intricacy in favor of character interiority. To give only one example of dozens available, witness Thomas Hardy's disavowal of his early work's use of sensation devices. In his first novel, *Desperate Remedies* (1871), he explicitly acknowledges the “long and intricately inwrought chain of circumstances” that makes his plot possible.<sup>82</sup> However, in a new preface to the novel, written in 1889 after Hardy had pioneered an innovative naturalist style, he admits that “The principles observed in its composition are, no doubt, too exclusively those in which mystery, entanglement, surprise, and moral obliquity are depended on for exciting interest.”<sup>83</sup> Hardy's self-critique neatly demonstrates how sensation fiction was the high water mark of Victorian plot intricacy—a style that, in its very extravagance, could never sustain its vitality for too long. But, Hardy's words also warn us not to conceive of this reaction in black and white terms, since it's most accurate to affirm that late-Victorian novelists simply did not rely on them so “exclusively.”

The anecdote is a small sketch of a more complex transition in narrative form, a transition that this dissertation has tracked via the evolution of circular plotting in novels

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<sup>82</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Desperate Remedies* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), 1. On this disavowal, see Lyn Pykett, “Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel,” in *Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), 211–213.

<sup>83</sup> Hardy, “Prefatory Note” (1889), *Desperate Remedies*, vii.

whose designs are built on the backs of objects. *The Moonstone* presents a privileged viewpoint since there we see how the diamond's patterns of disappearance and reappearance occasioned a new, and in many ways concluding, phase of critical discussions about the relationship of plotting, objects, and preconceived design, one which had first emerged in the 1830s. And just as back then, Collins looked to economic discourse on diamond's romantic global lineages to find the parameters of his novel's own internal form. In this way, Collins married the politics of property possession with the kinetics of recurrent plotting. In this way, Collins also forged innovations in narrative postponement centered on the suspense inherent in the material world's portability. To this day, the contours of detective fiction remain indebted to the opaque intrigue of Collins's diamond, which is itself one of many vibrant materializations of the Victorian recirculation plot.

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