Dickensian Intemperance: Charity and Reform

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Wildly popular in its own day, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) is now best known for having inaugurated the Victorian novel. Written in the fallow period following the death of Sir Walter Scott, it entered a literary field divided into minor sub-genres and emerged as the model of what all novels should be. Before *Pickwick*, there were Irish novels, silver-spoon novels, and Newgate novels, among others.[1] After *Pickwick*, and because of its example, novels tended to take a single form: often illustrated, often serialized, invariably realist, and almost always socially engaged. But *Pickwick* was, I want to suggest, inaugural in another sense as well. It was the first novel to think through the relation between realism and social reform.

Our critical discussion of realism and reform tends to presume that the two worked toward the same ends, that the two were parallel discourses for engaging with the social. Generations of critics have argued that realism's expansion of the novelistic sphere of representation was continuous with reform's expansion of the social sphere of concern; in this account, the novel's attention to social problems quite literally helped to solve them. More recently, critics such as Mark Seltzer, D. A. Miller and Amy Kaplan have challenged this benign view by demonstrating that knowledge is a form of power; in this account, the realist novel, no less than the reformist investigation, uses representation as a form of social control. But what if realism and reform were not so neatly aligned? What if they were at odds with one another instead? These questions are prompted by a rather large and very heterogeneous set of novels, which begins with *Pickwick* and extends through Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* (1855), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance* (1852), George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), and Herman Melville's *Confidence Man* (1857), to Henry James's *Bostonians* (1886) and William Dean Howells's *Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) at the century's end. Clearly, these novels are not reformist; nor would it be accurate to categorize them as anti-reformist and nothing more. Rather, each of these novels emerges out of a struggle with reform. That is to say, each of these novels identifies certain representational practices as specific to reformist writing and then either drains these practices of their reformist content in order to appropriate them for the novel's own ends or estranges these practices in order to show their limitations and then to develop better ones in their stead.

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[1] Bulwer Lytton was the first to make this observation, in his *England and the English* (1833). Franco Moretti argues that Dickens's genius as an urban writer comes from connecting, for the first time, the respective domains of the silver spoon and the Newgate novels, the West and the East Ends.

In the past few years, critics have argued that realism is best understood as having been shaped by its rivalry with competing modes. Mack Smith, for instance, puts realism in relation to *ekphrasis*, while Alison Byerly puts it in relation to the arts more generally. I would like to extend this line of argument by suggesting that the most important of these competitors is precisely that discourse with which realism has so long been aligned: the discourse of social reform.

I focus on *Pickwick* here in part because it is the first novel to compete with reformist writings in this way, but more importantly because my argument is most counter-intuitive with respect to Charles Dickens. Of all the nineteenth-century novelists, Dickens is the one we most often think of as a reformer. Indeed, we associate his novels with social abuses so thoroughly that the mere mention of the Chancery Courts conjures up *Bleak House* (1852-53) and of the Poor Laws, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39). And yet, our conception of Dickens as a reformer cannot account for the beginning of his career. For, in his earliest works, he is preoccupied not with reformist concerns but with questions of plotting—with plotting city life in *Sketches by Boz* (1834-36) and with plotting the serial novel in *Pickwick*. In grappling with these questions, Dickens recognized, as subsequent generations of critics would do, the possible parallels between his realist writings and the writings of reform. Despite a love of drinking that is everywhere evident, he turned to the most influential social movement in 1830s Britain, temperance reform, and adopted its characteristic narratives as his own. He took the stories told and retold by temperance reformers, the story of drunken decline and the story of conversion to sobriety, and borrowed them as part of his apprenticeship in plotting. In the process, he discovered what our own critical moment would be quick to note: that temperance reform served to justify industrial capitalism, that it served as a form of social control. But upon discovering this, Dickens did not simply reject the temperance narrative out of hand. Rather, he struggled against it and, in the process, developed the narrative form that would one day enable him to write reformist novels more in keeping with his political commitments.

Charity and Reform: *Sketches by Boz*

Sketches by Boz is divided into four sections, and the first of these, the "Seven Sketches from Our Parish," is a nostalgic tribute to a way of life that the narrator, like Dickens himself, will soon abandon. By the beginning of the second section, the narrator has already left the village for the city, and there Dickens will remain for the rest of his career. *Boz* is organized, then, around the opposition between rural and urban, between past and present, with the parish sketches serving to ground these oppositions. But the parish sketches are themselves internally divided by a less obvious distinction, the distinction between charity and social reform. And while this distinction may seem to be peripheral to *Boz*'s concerns, I will argue that it shapes Dickens's attempts to represent modern city life.

That the differences between charity and social reform are of interest to Dickens is demonstrated on *Boz*'s first page. In the first of the parish sketches, the

narrator imagines a poor man with a large family, whose debts are increasing, whose wife is growing ill, whose children are suffering from hunger. "What can he do?" the narrator asks; "To whom is he to apply for relief? To private charity? To benevolent individuals? Certainly not—there is his parish" (17). For centuries, the parish had administered the poor relief to which all Englishmen and -women had a customary right, but the narrator's questions do not refer to this ancient arrangement. They refer instead to the recent passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which sought to standardize and rationalize an array of ad hoc local practices by specifying the terms on which a parish could give poor relief. Workhouses were built in those parishes that did not yet have them, while existing workhouses were reorganized according to severe disciplines. Only when paupers suffered more than the hardest-pressed of workers, argued the Benthamite proponents of poor law reform, would labor be a more appealing choice than idleness.[2] Dickens's objections to the New Poor Law are well known, and he would protest it most famously in *Oliver Twist*, which details the suffering inflicted by the work-house regime. In *Boz*, however, it is not the poor law itself that concerns Dickens so much as the era of social reform that this law ushered in. The poor law is significant here only as the most obvious instance of a reform that, the narrator's indignant questions imply, will sever the customary ties of obligation and entitlement and thereby dissolve communities that had long been knit together by the generosity of "benevolent individuals" and their acts of "private charity."

The rest of the parish sketches will devote themselves to anatomizing the differences between this superceded charity and this emergent reform. Dickens's intentions here are more speculative than polemical, and it is for this reason that he abandons the inflammatory subject of the New Poor Law and instead creates mildly comic figures to personify both charity and reform. Charity is represented by the so-called Old Lady, whose "name always heads the list of any benevolent subscriptions," who donates twenty pounds toward the purchase of a new church organ and makes annual gifts of coal and soup to the parish poor (27). The alternative to charity is represented by the famous London reformer invited to the parish to speak. And speak he does, of "green isles—other shores—vast Atlantic—bosom of the deep—Christian charity—blood and extermination —mercy in hearts—arms in hands—altars and homes—household gods" (57). That the representative of reform should be an orator, rather than a poor law authority, marks the contemporary shift from an early period of utilitarian reform, under the control of an administrative elite, to the more popular reform that would characterize the rest of the nineteenth century.[3] The opposition between the orator and the Old Lady demonstrates that Dickens distinguishes reform from charity on two grounds. Reform concerns itself with what is far away ("other shores—vast Atlantic"), while charity attends to what is near at hand; and charity involves the direct provision of concrete aid (twenty pounds, coal

[2] See Englander on the history and provisions of the New Poor Law.

[3] See Brantlinger for a fuller discussion of this transformation.

and soup), while reform works more indirectly, through the mediations of speeches and other texts.

These distinctions will hold steady through Dickens's career. In *Pickwick*, reform will be represented by the people of Muggleston, who write one thousand petitions opposing plantation slavery abroad and another thousand supporting the factory system at home. More famously, reform will be represented in *Bleak House* by Mrs. Jellyby, whose "telescopic philanthropy" permits her to see "nothing nearer than Africa," certainly not the distress of her own family and the disorder in her own home (52). As with the Mugglestonites, Mrs. Jellyby's reformist labors are entirely mediated and textual. She dictates scores of letters in a single sitting and once mailed five thousand circulars in a single day, but all the writing she produces is, the narrator suggests, little more than waste paper. Set against these very problematic representatives of reform are two exemplars of charity, Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Jarndyce, each of whom is quick to respond to the suffering he encounters with "a useful something from his waistcoat pocket" (691). What the repeated opposition of charity and reform suggests is that reform, in Dickens's view, is both prone to overlook social problems near at hand and helpless to remedy those problems it does identify.

Or so Dickens's satire of reformers would suggest. But while he invariably ridicules the reformers he depicts, Dickens often acts much like a reformer himself. In his own novels, he, too, circulates representations of suffering among those who cannot see the suffering for themselves; he, too, substitutes mediating texts for direct and local acts of charity. Here is the first passage in which he does so:

> *That wretched woman with the infant in her arms, round whose meagre form the remnant of her own scanty shawl is carefully wrapped, has been attempting to sing some popular ballad, in the hope of wringing a few pence from the compassionate passer-by. A brutal laugh at her weak voice is all she has gained. The tears fall thick and fast down her own pale face; the child is cold and hungry, and its low half-stifled wailing adds to the misery of its wretched mother, as she moans aloud, and sinks despairingly down, on a cold damp doorstep.*
>
> *Singing! How few of those who pass such a miserable creature as this, think of the anguish of heart, the sinking of soul and spirit, which the very effort of singing produces. Bitter mockery! Disease, neglect, and starvation, faintly articulating the words of the joyous ditty, that has enlivened your hours of feasting and merriment, God knows how often!* (*Boz* 77)

This passage comes from "The Streets—Night," one of a pair of sketches that marks *Boz*'s move from the parish to the city. With this move, the culture of charity comes to an end. For charity consists of concrete assistance offered face-to-face, and here no "passer-by" views the "wretched woman" with "compassion" and no one comes to her aid. The narrator recognizes that there is no possibility of reconstituting the parish on the anonymous city streets, and so he attempts to create a new kind of community to replace it. In order to do this, he must address

those who have not seen the woman for themselves, and he can do so only through a mediating text. He offers us a few paragraphs because no one offered the "wretched woman" a "few pence," and he demands of us something more complex than "compassion." He demands, that is to say, something closer to reform.

What is required by this passage, and what is required by reformist representation more generally, is a specific way of thinking about the poor. It is this that Elizabeth Gaskell attempts to produce when she urges her readers to pity the plight of the working class and Harriet Beecher Stowe, when she exhorts her readers to *"feel right"* about the suffering of the slaves. The work that Gaskell and Beecher are trying to do is, I want to emphasize, as much cognitive as affective. It involves, first of all, our recognition that any particular instance is not an isolated instance, but rather part of a general phenomenon; the narrator prompts this realization when he moves from the single "wretched woman" to the category of all "such miserable creatures."[4] And it involves as well our acknowledgment that the existence of such phenomena entails certain responsibilities for those who remain unaffected by them. In this passage as in Gaskell and Stowe, the precise terms of responsibility might seem remarkably inadequate to the suffering described: "thinking" of a woman's "anguish of heart" as she tries and fails to secure food for herself and her child will do little to save either of them from starvation. But the content of this responsibility is less important than its structure. The obligations of charity had been discharged through a familiar, indeed time-honored, network of relations: the Old Lady helps the poor of her parish, whom she sees in church every Sunday bowing their thanks from the side aisle. The responsibilities entailed by reform, however, establish a new network of relations among persons who are not yet identified—and who may never be known to each another. Where charity expects that we will feel compassion for the single "wretched woman" standing before us, reform calls upon us to encompass in our minds all "miserable creatures," whether we ever see them or not. In this way, reform brings each of us, in turn, into an imagined relation with all of the urban poor.[5]

[4] It is here that the differences between an enacted and a represented reform become most visible, and it is here that reformist representations most clearly distinguish themselves from other nineteenth-century forms of detail management (such as Pre-Raphaelitism or debates about inductive and deductive reasoning). We can choose whether to give money to a woman whom we see, and we can choose whether to feel compassion for a woman whom we read about, but we cannot choose whether to understand that this single woman stands in for all the others like her. For if we fail to understand this, then we have failed to read the passage properly. In this way, the passage works on us, whether we consent to it or not, by bringing us into the proper cognitive state—and the goals of reform are thereby achieved. J. Hillis Miller's claims for the performative nature of realism are most useful here, I think, in accounting for the particular case of reformist representation.

[5] The word "imagined" registers my debt to Benedict Anderson. Following Walter Benjamin, Anderson observes that a specific conception of simultaneity is the hallmark of modernity. Our modern sense of "'homogenous, empty time'" is articulated through the word "meanwhile," a word which, as novels teach us, links events that would otherwise be entirely unrelated. This "meanwhile" moves from the fictional to the real, Anderson suggests, through the ritual of reading the newspaper. We read every day of events that are linked only by the accident of

This network of imagined relations is capable of infinite expansion, as Bruce Robbins has shown, and Dickens, having left the parish, finds himself potentially implicated in the sufferings of the entire world. It is in this context that we can best understand his satire of "telescopic philanthropy." His dismissal of anti-slavery activism, like his mockery of any interest in an Africa he renames "Booriboola-Gha," attempts to delimit the scope of concern somewhere between the parish and the world.[6] Such delimiting can further a racist or imperialist agenda, but this is not its primary intention. Indeed, the reformist speaker in *Boz* is critiqued not only for his focus on "other shores," but also for the ease with which he slides from one cant phrase to another ("mercy in hearts—arms in hands") on his way to justifying the "extermination" of the natives. More deliberate and more enduring is another consequence of this delimiting: the consolidation of the nation. As Mary Poovey has demonstrated, social reform and the British nation constituted one another reciprocally. Reformist impulses were limited by national boundaries, but these boundaries were at the same time made real by the reformist activity within them; reformist writings "therefore promised full membership in a whole (and held out the image *of* that whole) to a part identified as needing both discipline and care" (8). The dangers of this are clear. But Dickens's satire of reform reminds us that limiting our sphere of concern to the nation may be what makes it possible for us to care for others at all.

Sketches by Boz and Temperance Reform

In "The Streets—Night," Dickens demonstrates why reform is necessary in a world no longer confined to the parish, but this does not mean that his own writings become reformist. On the contrary, he struggles in subsequent sketches to distinguish his own representational practices from those of the reformers. This effort is most straightforward in "A Visit to Newgate." The narrator begins by announcing that his sketch of Newgate Prison will differ from the "numerous reports" that "numerous committees" have already made (235). These reports rely on quantification and measurement, modes of description that the narrator dismisses out of hand: "We took no notes," he announces, "made no memoranda, measured none of the yards, ascertained the exact number of inches in no particular room; are unable even to report of how many apartments the jail is composed" (235). Against the objectivity of numbers, the narrator sets his own subjective impressions: "We saw the prisoner, and saw the prisoners; and what

simultaneity, and in doing so we imagine the community of all other readers who are daily doing the same (25-26). The *Sketches by Boz*, which first appeared in newspapers, suggest that the imagining of simultaneity may be more palpable, the imagining of community more profound, when what is simultaneous with one's own life is suffering elsewhere in one's nation—when, for instance, we realize that the songs we ourselves sing in our "hours of feasting and merriment " are at the same moment being sung by one enduring "disease, neglect, and starvation."

[6] Here my argument about charity and reform comes closest to Robbins's brilliant argument about philanthropy. Robbins, too, argues that Dickens seeks to delimit a sphere of concern, but where it is the size of this sphere that will be of interest to me, he is more interested in the intensity of the concern.

we did see, and what we thought, we will tell at once in our own way" (235). Dickens is here distinguishing his own work from the vast body of social-scientific reformist writing that would include Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Poor* (1842), Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1850), and Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1891), as well as a host of other, now-forgotten, statistical surveys and parliamentary reports.

But not all reformist writing was of this kind. Much, in fact, was indistinguishable from "A Visit to Newgate," offering first-hand accounts of suffering that relied on specifically literary strategies of description. Many reformers found, as the examples of Stowe and Gaskell remind us, that literary forms were more effective than social-scientific ones in creating sympathy or, in the case of temperance reform, identification. And while it was easy for Dickens to distinguish his own work from the social-scientific "committee report," it was much more difficult for him to distinguish himself from this other body of reformist writing. This difficulty emerges most clearly with respect to temperance reform. For nineteenth-century temperance was, quite simply, the story-telling reform. Earlier generations of temperance reformers had relied on putatively scientific discourses, such as Benjamin Rush's "thermometer" that aligned various moral and physical consequences with the intrinsic "hotness" of a particular drink or Joseph Livesey's chemical demonstrations that there was no nutritious content to alcohol. But temperance became an influential social movement only after it was reconceptualized in terms of narrative, specifically, in terms of a narrative that unfolded the inevitable consequences of drink: from the first occasion of drunkenness, or from the first exposure to spirits, or even from the very first taste of alcohol, follows an unyielding trajectory of moral, physical, and economic decline. The innocuous beginnings of this narrative invited readers to identify themselves with characters tempted to take their first sip, while its hideous conclusions warned them to stay abstinent.[7] This narrative percolated in Victorian fiction over the course of the century, rising from the anonymous tracts circulated by reformers; through the didactic short stories written by such authors as Sarah Stickney Ellis, better known for her conduct books; and into the works of such canonical authors as the Brontës, George Eliot and even the Dickens of *Hard Times* (1854). As early as *Boz*, however, Dickens was already making use of this narrative.

In order to understand why Dickens might need the temperance narrative, we first must understand what he is trying, in *Boz*, to achieve. Nearly all of the sketches that make up *Boz* were first published independently, in a number of different magazines. It was only when Dickens was preparing them for their reissue in volume form that he arranged them in their present order. In doing so, Dickens imposed on the vagaries of biography and the contingencies of history an arc of literary development, an arc that we can trace in the section titles. After the "Seven Sketches from Our Parish," *Boz* moves to the city. The titles of the subsequent sections reduce the sketch form to its component parts, as if to demonstrate that the city requires new techniques of description ("Scenes"),

[7] See Crowley and Alfano.

characterization ("Characters"), and plotting ("Tales"). Critics have long recognized that Dickens's formal innovations emerged out of his efforts to represent the modern city. Raymond Williams argues, for instance, that the hidden connections revealed over the course of Dickens's plots reflect an urban experience of seeming randomness and underlying order (155), while Alexander Welsh attributes the thinness of Dickens's characters to an urban emphasis on surface rather than depth (10). I would like to extend this line of argument by focusing on that aspect of city life that most concerns Dickens in *Boz*, namely, the stark disparities of poverty and wealth.

That these disparities exist is something Dickens everywhere acknowledges; how they might be represented is the subject of "Meditations in Monmouth-street," one of *Boz*'s early city sketches. The narrator visits the second-hand clothing shops that line Monmouth Street in order to indulge in the pleasures of imagining the persons whom the cast-off pieces of clothing metonymically conjure up. Having done this for a while, the narrator then turns to the more difficult task of imagining the possible relations among the people he has invented. Where imagining the individual people required him to infer economic status, imagining the relations among them now requires him to account for economic difference. He experiments with two strategies for doing so, the first temporal, the second spatial. The temporal strategy is prompted by an array of suits, some that had been worn by boys and some, by men; some that were respectable; some, gay; and some, degraded. The narrator connects these suits to one another by imagining them all belonging to the same man at various moments in his life, as he moves from the loving superintendence of his mother's home through a life of increasing degradation and crime to an ignominious sentence of death. What connects all of these stages is the temperance narrative. The crucial turn in the young man's life comes when he falls under the wayward sway of new acquaintances and "swagger[s]" with them into "the public house" (100). From this, the rest surely follows. The narrator sketches in a few strokes the "bare and miserable room, destitute of furniture," the wife and children, "pale, hungry, and emaciated," and the man himself "cursing their lamentations, staggering to the tap-room, from whence he had just returned," and finally striking the wife who has followed him to plead for a little money with which to buy bread (101).

"Monmouth-street" thus points to the power of the temperance plot to transform the present fact of economic inequality into a prior history of individual choices unwisely made. The sight of rich and poor suits hanging next to one another on a rack, like the sight of rich and poor persons passing one another on the street, need not serve as a critique of the existing economic order so long as poverty can be explained as the just consequence of drinking. In the next section, I will discuss more fully the cultural work done by the temperance plot in an industrializing Britain. What I want to emphasize now, however, is the fact that in "Monmouth-street" Dickens neither endorses, nor critiques, the temperance plot. Its significance, for him, is formal rather than ideological. It is a narrative resource for making sense of economic disparities, one that offers itself up quite readily to his use.

That Dickens is primarily concerned neither with furthering, nor with hindering, the work of temperance reform is suggested by his easy relinquishing of the temperance plot in favor of another imaginative strategy, this one spatial. Distracted from the array of suits by a miscellaneous collection of shoes, the narrator brings the shoes into relation with one another by imagining an elaborate dance. Here, the differences between the sturdy boots of the workers, the faded shoes of the shabby genteel, and the elegant pumps of the dandy are largely forgotten, subordinated to a vision of harmony that dance can achieve, if only briefly and through obvious artifice. But the artifice of the dance reminds us that the temperance narrative, too, is similarly conventional. And indeed, the temperance narrative will appear again in the "Tales" section, where it once more serves as one narrative resource among many capable of accounting for otherwise unaccountable economic transitions. A sudden fall in fortune can be plotted by drunkenness, as in "A Drunkard's Death," just as a sudden rise in fortune is plotted in "The Boarding-House" by an impulsive marriage between servant and master or, in "The Tuggs at Ramsgate," by an unexpected inheritance. The juxtaposition of these stories suggests that the temperance narrative is, for Dickens, no more real than any other fairy tale.

But while Dickens ignores the substance of the temperance plot in "Monmouth-street," he confronts its consequences in another sketch, "Gin-shops." This sketch begins with the observation that gin shops are "numerous and splendid, in precise proportion to the dirt and poverty of the surrounding neighborhood" (217), and the narrator devotes the rest of the sketch to elaborating the two terms of this equation. He depicts both the tawdry glamour of the gin shop and what he knows his readers will find even harder to imagine, the filth and wreckage of the poor neighborhoods and the degraded behavior of the people crowded in them. Throughout the sketch, the conditions of poverty and the act of drinking are represented as co-existent. Only in the conclusion does the narrator attempt to establish a causal relation between them, and the relation he establishes is explicitly opposed to the one that would be offered by temperance reform. Addressing the "gentlemen and ladies" who advocate temperance, the narrator insists that "[g]in-drinking is a great vice in England, but poverty is a greater" (220). Until poverty is eradicated, "gin-shops will increase in number and splendor" (220). It is not drinking that leads to poverty, but rather poverty that leads to drinking. In arguing that drinking is an effect rather than a cause, Dickens is challenging the fundamental premise of temperance reform, and this challenge has formal consequences. For "Gin-shops" describes a night's worth of customers without attempting to imagine the life story of any one of them. This, the one sketch explicitly critical of temperance reform, is also the one sketch that does not borrow its narrative structure. And indeed, throughout *Boz*, Dickens keeps his appropriations separate from his critiques. It is only in *Pickwick* that he attempts to bring these two impulses together, to critique the ideology of temperance even as he appropriates its characteristic narratives.

The Pickwick Papers and Temperance Reform

The temperance narrative appears twice in *Pickwick*, first as "The Stroller's Tale," the first of the nine interpolated tales that punctuate *Pickwick*'s main plot and later as an episode within the main plot itself. "The Stroller's Tale" resembles *Boz*'s "Monmouth-street" imaginings in many ways, moving from poverty and sickness to delirium and death. But while the progress through these stations is familiar, the narrative itself is made grotesque by the fact that this particular drunkard is a circus clown. The deformities of his body are magnified by his motley, and his glassy eye stares all the more blankly for the surrounding grease paint. There is horror in this, but there is also dark comedy, and Dickens's choice of a clown is the first sign that the temperance narrative is here being parodied. A more obvious sign is the context in which the tale is told. Mr. Pickwick returns to his rooms one evening to find his friends waiting there with a stranger, who has offered to tell them the story of a man who died of drink. Pickwick listens to the story in silence and, after hearing its harrowing conclusion, puts down his brandy and water and opens his mouth to speak. The logic of temperance reform presumes that Pickwick will then renounce alcohol in words, as he has already set it aside in fact, but this is not, of course, what happens. Instead, some visitors arrive before Pickwick says anything, some confusions ensue from their visit, and the adventures of the Pickwickians resume as a result. The evening concludes, the narrator tells us, "with the conviviality with which it had begun" (115).

That Pickwick is not converted to sobriety by this story is not surprising, for the man who tells the story is not a reformer, but a con man. More precisely, he is, in the words of another con man, a "'Rum fellow—does the heavy business—no actor—strange man—all sorts of miseries—Dismal Jemmy we call him on the circuit'" (104). Dismal Jemmy's con artistry estranges the temperance narrative in two crucial ways. With respect to the narrative's performative dimension, con artistry disables its reformist effects. Taking a glass of brandy and water before starting to speak, Dismal Jemmy presents the "miseries" of his tale as a kind of theater piece and, in so doing, ensures that his audience will be entertained, but not transformed. In this way, Dismal Jemmy resembles no one so much as Dickens himself. Like Dismal Jemmy waiting for Pickwick's return, Dickens relies on the "miseries" of drunkenness to sustain an audience's desire across a period of delay: the preamble to "The Stroller's Tale" concludes *Pickwick*'s first number and the tale itself begins the second. And like Dismal Jemmy expecting to be paid for his story, Dickens hoped to profit from the contemporary interest in reform: "The Stroller's Tale" was written before *Pickwick* was even conceived of, intended to be another sketch by Boz.[8] But if Dismal Jemmy's con artistry throws into relief all that is most cynical in Dickens's appropriation of the temperance narrative, it also enables what will be productive

[8] Fred Kaplan suggests that the inclusion of this already-written tale might have occasioned Dickens some guilt. It was "The Stroller's Tale" that heightened Robert Seymour's discontent with the illustrating he had been hired to do—the dying of a drunken clown being far removed from the sporting scenes he had originally proposed—and ultimately precipitated his suicide.

in this appropriation as well. For with respect to the narrative itself, con artistry does the work of defamiliarization. Dismal Jemmy reveals the temperance narrative *as* narrative, isolating its constitutive elements and thus making them available for Dickens's use. Two of these elements are particularly significant: the disciplined structure of the narrative itself, and the license it provides for realist detail.

Pickwick everywhere bears the marks of Dickens's efforts to transform the text into something more realist and more disciplined. That this was his aspiration is demonstrated by *Pickwick*'s publication history. *Pickwick* began when a publishing firm, Chapman and Hall, commissioned a series of sporting sketches from a celebrated illustrator, Robert Seymour, and then looked for someone to write the accompanying text. They settled on the promising young author of the *Sketches by Boz*. In securing the illustrator before the writer, the publishers were following the contemporary practice of subordinating serial text to serial illustration, but Dickens famously challenged this subordination. His challenges reveal the novelistic ambition that was growing within him, and they also help us to specify what he understood a novel to be. Dickens struggled for two specific prerogatives. From the beginning, he insisted that he, and not the illustrator, be the one to choose the topics *Pickwick* would take up. In practice, this meant that *Pickwick* would focus on something other than hunting and shooting, specifically on the London Dickens knew so well. The second prerogative was harder won. The illustrator, harassed by money worries and harassed by Dickens's demands, finished three of the four illustrations for the second number and then shot himself through the heart. The publishers wanted to cancel the serial, but Dickens persuaded them to continue on very different terms. He insisted that he be allowed to choose the next illustrator, further securing his own predominance, but he also insisted that the number of pages per serial part be increased by a third while the number of illustrations be halved. In practice, this meant that Dickens was now free to develop two rather long episodes per serial part rather than four very brief ones, and this new expansiveness made it possible for him to imagine episodes extending the length of a part or even from one part to the next.[9]

Over the course of *Pickwick*, we can see Dickens exercising these two prerogatives more and more, as he works to transform the comic serial into the realist serial novel. In *Boz*, it was the retrospective reorganization of the sketches that enabled us to read the text as the story of Dickens's apprenticeship in city writing. In *Pickwick*, by contrast, his apprenticeship in novel writing is inadvertently recorded by the unforgiving nature of serial publication itself. Rendering revi-

[9] See Patten for the most thorough and most thoughtful discussion of *Pickwick*'s composition. More recently, critics have given searching accounts of the serial form more generally: Hughes and Lund have described how the constraints imposed by serial publication shaped the reading and writing of novels in ways that were consonant with the cultural predispositions of Victorian England, and Poovey, in *Uneven Developments*, has identified striking parallels between the conditions of artistic and industrial production. My own thinking about the serial form is indebted to their work, but I differ from them in the focus of my attention. Because I am considering the inaugural novel in the serial tradition, I do not attempt to generalize about the effects of serial publication, since serial publication became what Poovey would call an "absolutely standardized form" only after *Pickwick* and only through its example.

sion impossible, the serial preserves within itself the history of its own false starts, failed experiments, and new beginnings. And in this history, too, we see the same aspiration toward narrative discipline and realist detail. *Pickwick*'s main plot had begun with the loosest of frames. Mr. Pickwick has called a meeting of the Pickwick Club and proposes that a Corresponding Society be formed to travel through England and report back on the adventures that befall them. Pickwick and his young friends thus begin their travels free to go almost anywhere and do almost anything, and *Pickwick*'s early chapters are remarkable for the abundance and variety of the adventures they contain. The adventures are connected by a narrative as capacious as Pickwick's proposal: the picaresque.

Indeed, the picaresque is capacious enough to take in its rival, the nine interpolated tales that serve, I want to argue, as the model of what *Pickwick* itself will become. For the tales stand out, brief and self-sufficient, in Pickwick's wandering from part to part and from place to place, standing as models in miniature for the kind of narrative discipline that Dickens was trying to bring to *Pickwick* as a whole. That the main plot is interrupted by them less and less often as it goes along can be explained as an effect of *Pickwick* having become less episodic, but this is only another way of saying that Dickens has managed to establish within the main plot itself structures of progression and culmination like those that structure the tales. The tales also broaden the domain of what *Pickwick* can represent. For the intrusion of these tales underscores the fact that the *Pickwick* picaresque, with all its freedom and joy, depends on the repression of troubling social facts; the tales may be Gothic in mode, but the specific topics they take up (crime, poverty, madness, disease) herald Dickens's growing commitment to realism. Just as the tales become less frequent, so their subject matter becomes less distressing, and for the same reason: the proto-realism of the tales' content, like the disciplined structure of their form, are gradually transferred from the tales to the main plot itself.

The crucial vector of this transfer is the temperance narrative. Temperance reform enters *Pickwick*'s main plot through the rivalry between Sam Weller's father and the Rev. Mr. Stiggins. Another con artist of the Dismal Jemmy variety, Stiggins is identified in the introductory list of characters as "*the red-nosed 'deputy shepherd'*" (66), a description that records both the rhetoric of his self-proclaimed piety and the physical signs of his barely concealed love of drink. Toby Weller has married a widow who owns a public house, and he is dismayed to find her succumbing to the influence of temperance reform. In a neat inversion of the stories that temperance reform tells about rescue from drink, Toby tries, throughout the novel, to save his wife from Stiggins's influence and thus to restore peace to his public-house home. The climax of Toby's efforts comes when he arranges for two friends to ply Stiggins with rum and water and then send him on to the temperance meeting he has been invited to address.

This meeting is what the nineteenth century would have called an "experience meeting." Experience meetings belonged to the third wave of British temperance reform; they followed the free licensing movement of the 1820s, which sought to make alcohol less desirable by making it more readily available, and the anti-spirits movement of the 1820s and 1830s, which sought to end the consumption

of gin. In the 1830s, a third movement, the teetotal movement, emerged and radicalized temperance reform in two ways. Where anti-spirits had limited its attacks to gin and whisky, teetotalism prohibited all forms of alcohol; and where prior temperance reformers had directed their energies to preventing the sober from becoming drunkards and to controlling the damage that drunkards could do, teetotalism sought to reclaim drunkards to a life of sobriety.[10] As a result, teetotalism challenged middle-class dominance of temperance reform in part by proscribing specifically middle-class drinks, but more importantly by transforming the temperance meeting into a forum in which working-class men and women could narrate their own experiences with drink. These "experience meetings" were organized around the recitation of stories that took their structure from the Puritan tradition of personal witness: reformed drunkards would recount the sufferings they had endured because of their drinking, the moment of their conversion to sobriety, and the rewards that had come with abstinence. And their listeners, persuaded by these stories to sign the temperance pledge, would then go on to recount the stories of their own rescue in the hopes of saving other drunkards in turn.[11]

Because these narratives were performed orally, most of them have been lost. But a few of the most prominent speakers did record their oral narratives in written form as well. The most influential of these was the *Autobiography* of John Gough, who made a sensational career, in the United States as well as Britain, out of his redemption from drunkenness. Just as oral narratives were central to temperance meetings, so written narratives were central to the temperance press; a number of journals published them, and *The Commonwealth* even sponsored a competition and awarded prizes to the best.[12] More remarkable, however, are the many narratives published independently that nonetheless relied on the conversion to sobriety to structure the experience of working-class life. In *The Life and Adventures of Colin* (1855), it is the editor of the *Bristol Temperance Herald* who has divided the autobiography into chapters that reflect teetotal values, but in *Incidents in the Life of Robt. Henderson; or, extracts from the Autobiography of "Newcassel Bob"* (1869), it is Henderson himself who has chosen to divide the story of his life into two halves, "The Old Man" and "The New Man," around his simultaneous conversion to Christianity and sobriety.[13] Moreover, John Vine Hall's *The Author of "The Sinner's Friend": An Autobiography* (1865) and William Farish's *The Struggles of a Hand Loom Weaver* (1889) both reiterate a narrative whose arc is best

[10] See Shiman.

[11] Harrison has given the definitive account of temperance narratives and their indebtedness to Puritan tradition. It is worth noting that the narratives Harrison describes persist in our own day. Alcoholics Anonymous differs from the nineteenth-century temperance movement in its insistence that a single pledge is not sufficient, in its emphasis on "one day at a time," but its meetings are nonetheless structured around the recounting of similar narratives of conversion, as Makela et al. demonstrate.

[12] "The Life of a Journeyman Baker, Written by Himself" was one of the prize winners.

[13] While the temperance narratives I cite were published over a broad span of time, they all recount conversions that took place in the late 1830s or early 1840s, in the midst of the teetotal moment that Dickens is describing.

captured in the title of a third text, *A Sketch of the Life of Miles Watkins, of Cheltenham; wherein is related the particular incidents connected with his history ... and the ultimate happiness enjoyed by him, since adopting the Total Abstinence Pledge: Written by Himself* (1841).

The archive of temperance narratives is something that Regenia Gagnier does not discuss in her study of nineteenth-century life writing, and yet her work predicts the very form that the temperance narrative takes. One of Gagnier's central arguments is that the contingencies of working-class life made it difficult for workers to narrate their lives according to the model set by middle-class autobiography; the individual autonomy presumed by the middle-class progress from childhood and schooling, through separation from family and crisis, to the "recovery or discovery of a new self" was simply not part of working-class life. But Gagnier does note a single exception: those workers with access to conversion narratives were able to conceive of their lives in terms that resembled recognizably middle-class narratives and were thus able to lay claim to middle-class subjectivity. Gagnier understands conversion to be religious, but her argument can easily be extended to account for the secular conversion narratives that lie at the heart of temperance reform. The benefits of middle-class subjectivity are clear, and the history of temperance reform makes them material. The taking of the temperance pledge not only articulated a worker's ambition to raise his or her class status, but it also often served as the first step toward achieving that ambition. No one demonstrates this better than Joseph Livesey, the founder of British teetotalism; his own life, as related in his *Autobiography* (1881), dramatizes the rise from handloom weaver to factory owner, and through his reformist labors he advocated that others follow the same path. And indeed, factories were eager to hire and to promote workers known to be sober.[14]

Still, these material benefits came at considerable psychic costs. Gagnier argues that working-class writers often felt oppressed by the distance between the subjectivities they were adopting and the real conditions of their own lives. This distance troubled Dickens as well. In "Monmouth-street," he suggests the ways in which the temperance narrative serves to make sense of an array of social and economic changes. Poverty, disease, crime, imprisonment, and death can all be described as the effects of drinking, while health, happiness, prosperity, and salvation can be described as the effects of sobriety. In this way, the bewildering and often brutal changes brought about by industrialization and urbanization were organized around, and simplified through, the story of an individual drunkard's progress from the sufferings caused by drinking to the rewards achieved by abstinence. In *Pickwick*, Dickens makes this point more powerfully

[14] The autobiographies of Elson and Mitchell show that temperance was also a benefit for chimney sweeps and farm workers. Thompson details the debates among working-class leaders about the political value of temperance reform. Some, the so-called teetotal Chartists most prominent among them, argued that "a sober working class would have the credentials and the capacity to occupy an independent place in the political process" (320); others argued that the individualizing nature of the temperance narrative impeded class cohesion.

by parodying temperance narratives and showing them to be absurd. Here is one that the society's secretary summarizes:

> *Walker, tailor, wife, and two children. When in better circumstances, owns to having been in the constant habit of drinking ale and beer.... Is now out of work and penniless; thinks it must be the porter (cheers) or the loss of the use of his right hand; is not certain which, but thinks it very likely that, if he had drank nothing but water all his life, his fellow work-man would never have stuck a rusty needle in him, and thereby occasioned his accident (tremendous cheering).* (547)

H. Walker is followed by Betsy Martin, who attributes the fact that she was born with one eye to her mother's drinking of bottled stout; she has joined the temperance society in the hope that abstaining from drink will cause a second eye to grow. Then comes one-legged Thomas Burton, who found that his wooden legs wore out quickly when he bought them second hand and drank gin and water; now that he buys new wooden legs, they last twice as long, a difference he attributes to having given up gin. What makes these stories comic, is, of course, their false account of causation, but false causation is, as Dickens emphasizes, more than just a joke. Here, the problem is the substitution of false causes for true ones (porter for a workplace injury), while in "Gin-shops," the problem had been the inversion of cause and effect (poverty and drinking). In both cases, however, the temperance narrative misrepresents the very phenomena it is intended to address.

This misrepresentation is all the more disappointing because what drew Dickens to temperance reform is precisely the representational license it seems to convey. On the one hand, reform justifies an attention to what had hitherto been unseen. "Gin-shops" makes this claim directly. Because the slums "can hardly be imagined" and are only rarely seen (*Boz* 217), reformers are permitted, indeed, compelled, to circulate representations of what would otherwise go unperceived. In *Pickwick*, too, reform serves as a conduit for realist detail. Just as it was "The Stroller's Tale" that first introduced the topic of poverty in *Pickwick*, so it is the temperance meeting that first brings poverty into *Pickwick*'s main plot: a prosperous procession of established landowners, successful professional men, and well-tended servants is interrupted by the poor people described in the temperance secretary's report. On the other hand, the temperance narrative confines perception, and thus representation, within the limits of its own ideology. Reformers see, as Dickens points out in "Gin-shops," the narrow circumstances of drinking but not the broader conditions of poverty. Pushed to the periphery of the temperance narrative are troubling social facts, and Dickens attempts, in *Pickwick* as well as "Gin-Shops," to bring these facts back into view. H. Walker is "out of work and penniless," Thomas Burton, too, is "out of employ now" (547), and Betsy Martin is only slightly better off, a widow struggling to support her child by "charring and washing" (546). Their poverty has outlasted their drunkenness, and Dickens, in drawing attention to the suffering that persists even in sobriety, implicitly condemns the temperance narrative for imposing on experience what can only be a false conclusion.

Dickens thus abandons the temperance narrative and attempts to confront poverty directly, without the mediations of reform. The morning after the Wellers spy on the temperance meeting, Mr. Pickwick is sentenced to debtors' prison because of his refusal to pay what he takes to be an unjust judgment against him. In the Fleet Prison, he encounters for the first time that poverty of which the narrator has always been aware, and the consequences of this encounter are worked out in the two scenes in which Mr. Pickwick deliberately seeks out the worst extremes of poverty in order to see them for himself. Hearing a reference to the so-called "poor side" of the prison, he immediately resolves to visit it. The r arrator explains, as Pickwick walks over there, that the poor side houses the debtors unable to pay for their lodging, and he describes how these debtors would, at one time, have taken turns begging from passersby through a barred opening in the prison wall. That opening has since been closed, but the debtors' misery remains unchanged. Indeed, it has grown even worse, for the sight of debtors begging had prompted individual acts of charity, and their subsequent invisibility had brought this aid to an end. The debtors' disappearance behind the prison walls leaves a perceptual vacuum that the narrator will try to fill: the novelist must represent what is no longer present on the street.

With this, we return to the problem Dickens first posed in "The Streets—Morning," namely the need for reformist representation to compensate for the charitable community that no longer exists. Here, however, the narrator's attempt at such representation is shown to fail. Thinking of the debtors on the poor side, the narrator reflects,

> *We no longer suffer them to appeal at the prison gates to the charity and compassion of passersby; but we still leave unblotted in the leaves of our statute book, for the reverence and admiration of succeeding ages, the just and wholesome law which declares that the sturdy felon shall be fed and clothed, and that the penniless debtor shall be left to die of starvation and nakedness. This is no fiction.* (686)

Where charity had relied on a single "man with hungry looks" to beg on behalf of his friends (686), here the narrator multiplies this man into every prisoner on the poor side and then abstracts him into the class of debtors more generally, before losing sight of him in an attack on the "statute book" that permits such suffering to continue. In the process, the man disappears entirely. As Pickwick crosses the threshold to the poor side, he is, the narrator tells us, busily "turning these things in his mind" and "work[ing] himself to the boiling-over point" (687). So immersed is he in his reformist "reflections" that he forgets everything else, including the purpose of his visit and even the place he has come to see (687). And when he finally arrives, he has difficulty seeing anything at all.

What he does see, when his vision clears at last, is the con man Arthur Jingle and Jingle's servant, Job Trotter. The two have appeared from time to time, first befriending the Pickwickians, then duping them, then eluding Pickwick and Sam

Weller's efforts to exact revenge. Such recurrent encounters are typical of the picaresque, whose protagonists often meet their opponents again and again. And indeed, Jingle accounts for his imprisonment so elliptically—"deserved it all," he says (690)—that he might as well be referring to deceptions imposed as to debts run up; his presence in the Fleet, that is to say, might as well be connected to the conventions of the picaresque as to the realities of poverty. These picaresque conventions are significant because they create a kind of traveling community, a parish-like world in which charity is still possible. And it is for this reason that Jingle and Job are the only debtors whom Pickwick assists, the only ones to receive "something from his waist-coat pocket" (691). The circumstances of poverty are always overwhelming, as Dickens is finding and temperance reformers have long known, but Jingle offers a nostalgic strategy for delimiting poverty's depiction. Where temperance reform attends only to what fits into a particular narrative—drunken suffering, sober reward—the charitable picaresque attends only to what belongs to a particular character. Because everything is done to help Jingle and Job, nothing need be done to help anyone else. In Jingle, then, we can see the origins of a character like Little Dorrit, whose presence in and immunity to the degraded world of the Marshalsea Prison ensure that we can sympathize with some debtors without being overwhelmed by sympathy for all. We can see, too, the origins of the strategy by which Dickens, in his later city novels, will transform the unfathomable city into a knowable community.

Jingle's reappearance in the Fleet restores to *Pickwick* an untamable picaresque freedom, a freedom from the false conclusions characteristic of reform. For in helping Jingle, Pickwick displays a generosity in forgetting the past that is matched by his willingness to remain uncertain about the future. He repays Jingle's debts and arranges for him to be hired by a firm in the West Indies, but the effects of these actions are left unknown. Jingle promises to live a more provident and honorable life, but such a promise is not a condition of Pickwick's assistance, nor is it entirely believed. Pickwick comforts himself with the knowledge that "true benevolence" does not presume to be so "long-sighted" as to know what endings it will achieve (843). Even in *Pickwick*'s epilogue, some uncertainty still lingers. Jingle has become, the narrator tells us, a "worthy member of society," but he insists on remaining in the West Indies, refusing to risk what might happen if he were ever to return to the sites of his "old haunts and temptations" (898).

This ending is satisfying with respect to Jingle and Job, but it is unsatisfying with respect to the other debtors whose existence the novel takes pains to record. Dickens has prepared us for this dissatisfaction. For while the first encounter with extreme poverty prompts Pickwick to a charitable response, the second encounter allows Dickens to demonstrate the necessity, but also the difficulty, of reform. This second encounter comes when Pickwick resolves to embark on a tour of the prison's courtyard. He walks past the screaming children, the lounging men, and the harassed and dirty women who congregate in the courtyard, but he is soon paralyzed by the illusion that these people have all blurred into one:

> *The great body of the prison population appeared to be Mivins, and Smangle, and the parson, and the butcher, and the leg, over and over, and over again. There were the same squalor, the same turmoil and noise, the same general characteristics, in every corner; in the best and worst alike. The whole place seemed restless and troubled; and the people were crowding and flitting to and fro, like the shadows in an uneasy dream.* (737)

What this passage attempts to dramatize is the making of a synecdoche, the process by which Mivins and Smangle, the disreputable men with whom Pickwick first shared a cell, are transformed into the representatives of the "great body of the prison population." Such synecdoches are central to reformist representation, which relies on one "wretched woman" to stand in for all. Here, however, the process somehow gets stuck and the synecdoche is left unfinished, with both the "population" and its representatives visible at the same time. What impedes the process is the absence of narrative. Dickens refuses to emplot his prisoners on, for instance, the downward path of the temperance tale because he refuses to make a story of individual failure out of a general experience of suffering. In this way, he leaves the prisoners quite literally with nowhere to go. They can do nothing but "flit to and fro," "over and over, and over again." And Pickwick himself decides that he has "seen enough" and will henceforth confine himself to his own cell.

In doing so, Pickwick relinquishes any responsibility for the debtors he does not know. Their plight continues to trouble Dickens, however, and he will later claim that his concern for them bore fruit. Dickens returned to *Pickwick* ten years after it was finished, in order to write a new preface for the Cheap Edition of 1847. Taking this occasion to reflect on the changes that had occurred in the past decade, for his country as well as his career, he records that "important social improvements have taken place about us" since *Pickwick*'s first edition (46). Dickens does not explicitly identify *Pickwick* as a reformist text, but the "improvements" he mentions in the second preface all follow directly from the events of *Pickwick*'s plot. Pickwick had been harassed by a pair of almost comically rapacious lawyers, but now, Dickens reports, lawyerly "claws" have been pared by legal reforms; more importantly, the laws concerning debt have been altered, and "the Fleet Prison pulled down!" (46). Neatly pairing the abuses described and the reforms achieved, Dickens projects more such pairings into the future. He concludes with the hope that every future volume of the Cheap Edition might be matched with a new preface celebrating "the extermination of some wrong or abuse" that had been "set forth" within the volume itself (46). All of this is unsurprising, for Dickens the Reformer is a figure we know well, but it is worth noting that he lays claim to this status only by fiat and only retroactively. More importantly, it is worth recalling, as *Sketches by Boz* and *The Pickwick Papers* prompt us to do, that his own reformist writings emerge only through a recognition of reform's limitations and a struggle to develop his own forms.

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