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# READING DICKENS: PLEASURE AND THE PLAY OF BERNARD HARRISON'S “SOCIAL PRACTICES”

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### 1. Introduction

Literary critics, new and old, tend to begin with the texts crafted by fiction writers, without much bothering about the epistemological status of language. They often deploy implicit notions deriving from “the pervasive Cartesian notion of knowledge, mind, subject and nature” (Wagenaar and Cook, 2011, pp. 193–212), as they range through an artistic production mining for nuggets of meaning, be they referential discoveries about society or intrinsic to narrative habits of a given discourse. Critical theory has made us attend to the implications of our work, though it has not situated art within one side or the other of the Cartesian divide, but, rather, tended to seek alternative ways of understanding what writers are up to in their writing, which apparently plays both sides of the street.

At stake here is the status not only of the art-work but the experience generated by art: is it a pointer to a wider understanding of social experience, or a deeper analysis of the self-referentiality of artistic discourse and literary language. To take a specific example, are the novels of Charles Dickens dressed up sociological inquiries, or fantastic imaginings of, say, coincidence relating only to their own linguistic play? And if either, or both, why bother with them, when other less ambiguous inquiries are available? The practice of English social history has yielded micro-histories of parish life as well as general studies of the family; and the pleasures of English fantasy literature range from utopian writing to Dr. Who. While Dickens's torrent of language captivates, can we enjoy the narrative pleasures Dickens provides just as linguistic play, without knowing to what extent we can trust his knowledge of English society or the deep psychic processes critics have located in his work?

The representation of Jews in Dickens's fiction is a test case. Teasing out the meanings involved in his depiction of two Jewish characters that he imagined in relation to each other—to Fagin, in *Oliver Twist* (Dickens, [1838] 1982) and Riah, in *Our Mutual Friend* (Dickens [1864–1865] 1952)—brings us directly to the issue of the experiences provided by art and the epistemological status of the language that generates them. I submit that we will discover we need not just a critique of Cartesian views of language but an alter-

native perspective. Here Bernard Harrison's concept of "social practices" enables us to respect the integrity of Dickens's text. Working with "social practices," we can grasp the range of meanings generated by Dickens's narrative habits, his sociological acuity, and the linguistic choices that produce the characters that people his fiction. As we situate his art in the context provided by Harrison's reconceptualization of language, we gain a fuller understanding of Dickens's achievement.

## 2. The Poor, the Downtrodden, the Irish—But Not the Jews

Dickens's signature is his engagement of the feelings of his readers to empathize with and to enter into the living experience of the poor and the downtrodden. His sympathies surpass even great modern novelists such as Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky, the later Leo Tolstoy, engaged modernist Isaac Babel, or the Yiddish writers such as Sholem Aleichem, Israel Rabon, and Yosef Haim Brenner. In England closer to our day, think of Edmund Gosse, or in America, Michael Gold. He engages us in the social nexus of the economic and class status of his impoverished and humiliated fictional characters. With them, his readers discover the merciless power and strangling strategies of the social system that defines the lives of his characters. Think of Jo in William Powell Frith's painting, *The Crossing Sweeper* (1858), arrayed against the reverend Chadband of Dickens's *Little Dorrit* ([1855–1857] 1953) and the red-tape Barnacles of Betty Higden and the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend*, to name some notable examples that come readily to mind and can stand for many others.

It is notably the place of the poor in the caste system of Victorian England that Dickens's readers come to know. But more than the sociological exploration, his narratives reveal how these characters, without access to the means of production in the society that launched the hope of modernity, struggle to live within and even perhaps escape from the procrustean horizon of expectations to which they have been ascribed—and the narrow circumstances in which they have been inscribed. Unlike the upwardly bound middle classes, the poor have no hope of gaining a new, achieved status. Yet even more than the range of Dickens's sympathy, his ability to engage his readers, and to give them entry into the subjectivities of the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden, the orphan child especially marks his writing. But Jews are an anomaly in Dickens's wide-ranging sympathies.

Not just self-referential, not just journalistic polemic, Dickens writes with knowledge of what Harrison has articulated as the social practices of communities and the individuals they engender. Dickens's understanding of the network of these practices owes much to his friend Thomas Carlyle's insights, but goes beyond them. He deploys the social practices of his day, elicited by, in part, society's formulas—and that would lead in modern sociology

to Robert Merton's fundamental analysis of the manifest and latent functions of social experience.

In Dickens's writing, these Carlylean formulas and Mertonian manifest and latent functions function as literary matrices—they give birth to character and situation, they are—to deploy a different range of reference—algorithms that generate the literary conditions out of which the reader experiences the social location as well as the interiority—the subjectivity—of his characters. For Dickens, that also includes the emotional tone of places and things. What Dickens makes us know is that what is at stake is the struggle of the silenced to make their lives meaningful.

Pam Morris (1991) and Sally Ledger (2010) have alerted us to the ways in which Dickens evokes the cultural worlds of these folk outside the middle-class print culture of Victorian England. What Henry Mayhew catalogues in his lists of the social practices of the economically marginal and impoverished, Dickens brings to life: the scavengers of *Our Mutual Friend*, for example, are not statistical presences but living fictional characters. We witness their interactions as we hear their spoken exchanges and observe them in their work of fishing the resources for their lives out of the Thames, including the corpses whose portable property they commandeer. As Gaffer Hexam says to his daughter, Lizzie, who shudders at the corpse they have just found in sweeping through the Thames:

As if it wasn't your living! As if it wasn't meat and drink to you! . . .  
How can you be so thankless to your best friend, Lizzie? The very fire that warmed you when you were a babby, was picked out of the river alongside the coal barges. The very basket that you slept in, the tide washed ashore. The very rockers that I put it upon to make a cradle of it, I cut out of a piece of wood that drifted from some ship or another. ([1864] 1899, vol. 1, p. 4).

The mention of the basket in which she slept, joined with the tide that washed it ashore, evokes the folk motif of the Moses story and its mythic aura, thereby reinforcing the cultural world in which these characters live—and its distance from middle-class lives.

Not just the poor and downtrodden, not just Major Bagstock's dark-skinned "native" servant in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* ([1847–1848] 1950), not just Quilp and Sally Brass in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* ([1840] 1943), not just the Irish—Dickens's sympathy is capacious, his ability to engage their interiority for his readers is astonishing. Yet alas, it does not extend to the Jews. We know that he did not want to offend his Jewish readers, nor did he want to scapegoat them for the oppressions of a grinding social system. Nevertheless, the limits of his sympathies are suggested by the nearly non-existent representations of Jews in his fictions, limited to Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, and Riah in *Our Mutual Friend*. What is it about Dickens's range as a

writer, of his narrative habits, of his social experience that allows him access to the poor, the downtrodden, the Irish, the colonized, and yet keeps him from fully imagining the lives of the Jews of Victorian England?

We need to acknowledge the difficulties of this literary and cultural situation. It is not just a biographical issue but a problem of narration, for Jewish lives were unfolding simultaneously with hegemonic English ones; next to each other, they were also at times in alternative universes. One way to elicit the situation is to imagine them as layers of a palimpsest, a view of history and society Carlyle spoke for and Dickens often elaborated, a metaphor I've elaborated in a previous essay (2011, pp. 219–232). Dickens understood what it meant to think of English culture and society as a palimpsest—and while he plumbed its layers, he did not have access, given his personal and cultural location at this point, to the situation of its Jewish inhabitants. As we read Dickens today, we have to ask whether Victorian Jews for all the improvements of that modernizing society yet remained in the world of what Wolfgang Iser has called “the unsayable” (1987, p. xi)—and what D. A. Miller has characterized as “the unnarratable” (1989).

Sander Gilman has taught us to read the way in which foreground and background reflect the larger context, so evident here: the psychic geography of Dickens's fictional world excludes Jew and thus casts them out as available prey. Where Fagin is the manifest racist caricature, Riah is its latent obverse, the feminized, unmanned Jew. Despite their apparent differences, what is abundantly clear is that in this Dickensian universe, Jews have no address, no location from which to speak in their own voice and person. How is it then possible for Dickens to narrate Jewish lives?

### 3. Language, Narration, and Social Practices

To see how Harrison can help us understand the parameters of the narrative difficulties, how to tell or at least evoke, then and now, the lives of English Jews, we need to understand what he means by “social practices.”

Harrison focuses the narrative problem by asking how language connects us to reality, which is a hidden subtext of much of the continuing sociological turn in Dickens criticism. He cuts through the competing either-or conventional views of language. He holds that the connection forged between language and reality is not a direct link between linguistic expression and an aspect of reality. He tells us that language is neither in a one-to-one relation with reality nor is it merely self-referential, but directs us to the ways in which “meaning arises as a result of the roles assigned to linguistic expression in the conduct of practices” (Harrison, 2011a).

Evading the binaries of conventional (and Cartesian) conceptualizations of the relation of language and reality, and thus of narrative's relation to the external world, Harrison asks us to attend to the “multifarious ways in which

practices engage with the complex realities revealed to us by experience” (2011b, p. 412). Later Harrison continues:

Practices, after all, make us, as human beings of one sort or another, what we are: parliamentary democrats or Bolsheviks; Jazz-lovers or fans of Early Music; Jews, Muslims, or Christians; scientists or laymen. And if, on the one hand, our nature as human beings, and on the other the meanings of the words in which we express and articulate that nature, are both, equally, born out of a common relationship to the multifarious practices which give shape to our lives, it follows that the kaleidoscope of language must stand in permanent and inextricable relationship with the shifting reality of the multiple worlds of human being and commitment. (Ibid., p. 413)

Meaning, then, is generated by the interplay of the social practices into which we are inscribed by parents and society, and the choices we make of how and what to express and imagine.

When Fagin leaps off the page, we are engaged by Dickens's representation of criminals. Dickens knew those social practices more thoroughly perhaps than any writer of his era. The criminal underworld was part of his attraction of repulsion, the joining of the Gothic and the realistic in his writing. Irving Howe tells us that Dickens, in a letter to a Jewish woman who had protested his stereotypical treatment of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, wrote that Fagin “is a Jew because it unfortunately was true, of the time to which the story refers, that the class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew.” Howe says that the term “invariably” could be questioned, but “that some fences were Jewish is certainly true” ([1838] 1982, p. xix). Nonetheless, despite Dickens's use the Yiddish word for thief, *gonoph*, in an essay about the Metropolitan police (1851), his representation did not go beyond the deployment of a stereotype of his day.

In this melodramatic universe, Fagin is the stage Jew; ushered out of *Oliver Twist*, the novel, he emerges as a cultural icon of profound criminality in the larger arena of English society. He is a figure of the devil and, as such, of rebellion, anger, hate, resistance—of the refusal to acquiesce in an oppressive social order in which he is the despised other. Yet unlike William Blake's positive judgment of John Milton's Devil in his illustrations for *Paradise Lost* ([1667] 1996; for a discussion of Blake's illustrations, see Dunbar, 1980), Dickens reinforces the antisemitic stereotype of the Jew of hegemonic English Victorian society.

There are moments in *Oliver Twist* when the reader enjoys the games Fagin plays with his boys, perhaps the only time in the novel when these young gang members can actually *play* and be boys. But there are no moments when the reader enters Fagin's consciousness. He remains an externalized metonymy—a stand-in and front man for the criminal conspiracy he and

Monks have hatched. He is defined *against* the middle-class world he preys on. Why Fagin can continue to play this role for contemporary readers in our own supposedly enlightened day deserves exploration. Here another of Harrison's insights can shed light on the situation involved.

#### 4. Literary Experience and Social Practices

Much contemporary discussion of imaginative writing, Harrison notes:

allows for two possible ways in which words can acquire meaning: either (1) through the relationships in which they stand, by conventional association, with real things or features; or (2) through the relationships in which they stand to other words. [Critics] assume that this pair of options exhausts the possibilities. . . . Its exhaustiveness is presumed, not only by most contemporary writings on literature, culture, and ideology, including virtually all of those generally comprehended under the label "Critical Theory." [The binary view generates the] admittedly very popular and very culturally embedded, way of dividing up the options . . . makes it very difficult indeed to understand our relationship to imaginative literature, not least by making it impossible to attach any non-pejorative meaning to the term "imagination." . . . the idea of a language whose most basic signs function merely as associative markers for pre-existing features of reality is conceptually incoherent. (Ibid., p. 84)

Harrison's complex argument, elaborated notably in *Inconvenient Fictions: Literature and the Limits of Theory* (1991), seeks to reinstate the meaning-making function of the literary imagination by noting, "it is only through explaining the mode of engagement of a word in a practice, a practice which in turn engages in determinate ways with the world offered to us in sensation and bodily interaction" (2006, p. 84). There is a difference between "factual and fictional discourse," he notes, and he suggests "new ways alternative to . . . the long philosophical tradition" on which the conventional view depends (ibid., p. 85). Meaning, which is central to the work of the literary imagination:

is equally the creature of human practices, which in turn engage with the realities, of extra-human origin, offered to us in sensation and in bodily interaction with the physical world. . . . Thus there are "two standpoints" from which to regard the practices which found meaning. From one of these standpoints they constitute a bridge, *the* bridge, between the human mind and the inhuman, extra-human world of physical reality. From the other standpoint, our continual invention of new practices amounts to the continual invention of a new world, the human world, or rather, the invention of numerous, interpenetrating and interacting, human worlds. (Ibid.)

Choosing to imagine meaning through the articulation of social practices, writers and their writings have an ethical function. In this work of the imagination, the human world is continually invented—devised through the social practices of a given language use and narrative intentionality. As well:

the difference between factual, scientific language, and the language of poets, dramatists, and novelists, is not that the one engages with the only reality there is, physical reality, while the other engages with nothing but ideological smoke and mirrors. Rather, they look in different directions. (Ibid.)

Harrison continues in this essay to elaborate the directionality of factual scientific discourse. But what especially interests me here is his characterization of literary discourse:

The discourse of poets and novelists [literary discourse] turns . . . language back upon itself. It uses the language born of the practices through which we make, not only language, but ourselves, not to illuminate the inhuman, physical world, but to illuminate its own founding practices, and thus the human worlds which those practices originate and constitute. (Ibid., pp. 84–85)

Harrison thus asks us to attend to Dickens's language and to the ways in which it is a speaking because it emanates from social practices. In his analysis of Dickens's language, Garrett Stewart (1974) presumes this social practice, as does John Jordan in his deft studies of his voicing of character and situation, notably in his recent book, *Supposing Bleak House* (2011).

### **5. Literary Networks as Matrices of Meaning-Making**

One way of working with this powerful formulation is to look at the human worlds constituted by these language practices, by particular narratives. Following this line of thought the character Fagin leads to the suggestion that Dickens has articulated a world in which this Jew, modeled as is often thought after a notable English criminal of the early nineteenth century, Ikey Solomons (cf. Sackville O'Donnell, 2002), stands for networks of the medieval Christian accusation of the blood libel. On the connection between blood libel myths and *Oliver Twist*, see Joseph Litvak's "Bad Scene: Oliver Twist and the Pathology of Entertainment" (1998) and Frank Felsenstein's *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes* (1995).

After Dickens's Jewish friend Eliza Davis objected to his emphasis of Fagin's Jewishness in *Oliver Twist* (Lebrecht, 2005), he removed all stereotypical caricature of Fagin from later editions, changing the epithet "the Jew" with its connotation of the devil and replacing it with the name, Fagin (see

Nunberg, 2001, p. 126). In doing so, he was, in effect, seeking to revise the “human world” that his prior characterization had constituted. He also invented Riah, a Jewish character central to *Our Mutual Friend*, who changes his apparent allegiances to reveal a kinder world. Evil Fagin, called a “Jew bogey-man” in the first edition, who evokes the specter of the “old clothesman” in *Our Mutual Friend*, that medieval Christianity willed into being, stands in contrast to the helpful, benevolent Riah.

Against the network of social practices that Dickens evokes in *Oliver Twist*, Riah in *Our Mutual Friend* articulates a different set of networks and practices. *Our Mutual Friend* stages a theatrical and dramatic set of revelations that in part make up for—that *remediate* to a large extent—Fagin’s evil. The ironies of the acknowledgment direct us to the limits of Dickens’s representations of Jews. How can we acknowledge the ironies of Dickens’s effort to make amends for Fagin with his philosemitic portrayal of Riah in *Our Mutual Friend*? For, as Fred Kaplan notes, Dickens uses the “powerful Jewish-Christian motif of redemption in *Our Mutual Friend*” (1998, p. 410) but reverses the stereotypes by depicting:

Christianity as responsible for the fiction of the materialistic perversion of the Jew in Christian culture. Under economic pressure, oppressed by racial and cultural stereotypes, Riah, the good Jew, is forced to become the front man for the Christian moneylender and slum landlord Fascination Fledgby. Without a sense of otherness, Dickens conceives of the Jew in stereotypical Christian terms and the Christian in stereotypical Jewish terms. As fiction, it is brilliant. . . . As racial apologetics, it is limited. (Ibid., p. 472)

When he received the gift of a Hebrew-English Bible after the publication of *Our Mutual Friend* from Eliza Davis, Dickens stressed that he would not “willfully” have done an injustice to the Jewish people “for any worldly consideration . . . he could not get beyond the cultural evasion inherent in the word ‘willfully’ nor escape subtly associating material terms with those to whom he was supposedly apologizing” (ibid., p. 473). In effect, then, Riah and the question of his human world, of the limited social practices, which he exemplifies and in which he is embedded, becomes a key index by which we might assess the history of English literary antisemitism.

## 6. Reading and the Plots of Social Practices

Dickens begins *Our Mutual Friend* with a sequence of negations. Rather than the expected birth scene of the Romantic founding story with which *Oliver Twist* begins, Dickens starts *Our Mutual Friend* with a series of observations



that call into question which convention, which kind of story, this Victorian novel offers. The opening chapter, "On the Look Out," toggles between the point of view of the characters, who, we learn four pages along in the chapter, are looking out for bodies in the water, and the reader, whom the narrator engages in looking out and about to assess the as yet undefined situation in which the characters are engaged. "In these times of ours" Dickens begins, "though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise" ([1864] 1899, vol. 1, p. 1), thus plunging us into the present tense of our and their looking.

The narrator continues his description by locating "a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it" that "floated on the Thames, between Southwark Bridge, which is of iron, and London Bridge, which is of stone, as autumn evening was closing in" (ibid.) The narrator takes us from the equivalent of an establishing shot of a film to focus on:

the figures in this boat were those of a strong man with ragged grizzled hair and a sun-browned face, and a dark girl of nineteen or twenty, sufficiently like him to be recognizable as his daughter. The girl rowed, pulling a pair of sculls very easily; the man, with the rudder-lines slack in his hands, and his hands loose in his waistband, kept an eager look out. (Ibid.)

Family likeness set, the narrator's account notes that they are working together in what must be the family business but does not here name or specify it. At just the point where the reader expects to learn the what and why of these characters' activity, the narrator launches into a series of negatives:

He had no net, hook, or line, and he could not be a fisherman; his boat had no cushion for a sitter, no paint, no inscription, no appliance beyond a rusty boathook and a coil of rope, and he could not be a waterman; his boat was too crazy and too small to take in cargo for delivery, and he could not be a lighter-man or river-carrier; there was no clue to what he looked for, but he looked for something, with a most intent and searching gaze. (Ibid.)

Still deferring the definition of the action we are observing, the narrator tells us:

Allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state, this boat and the two figures in it obviously were doing something that they often did, and were seeking what they often sought. (Ibid, p. 2)

The narrative deferral continues, displacing the meaning of the observed action into the description of the two figures:

Half savage as the man showed, with no covering on his matted head, with his brown arms bare to between the elbow and the shoulder, with the loose knot of a looser kerchief lying low on his bare breast in a wilderness of beard and whisker, with such dress as he wore seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed his boat, still there was a business-like usage in his steady gaze. So with every lithe action of the girl, with every turn of her wrist, perhaps most of all with her look of dread or horror; they were things of usage. (*Ibid.*, p. 2)

We learn of the skill involved in responding to the ebb and flow of tides. We become aware that these figures “on the lookout” are not only on the bottom of the English social classes, but perhaps even outside that social system, allied instead to the mud in which they work, and from which they emerge like strange amphibians who fish out, the reader discovers, abandoned corpses. The girl shivers but cannot evade the proximity of the corpse lying in the bottom of the boat, and her father reminds her that though she may “hate the sight of the very river,” it is the source of their living: “As if it wasn’t meat and drink to you!”

Dickens continues showing how their lives depend on—emerge from—the mud of the Thames:

How can you be so thankless to your best friend, Lizzie? The very fire that warmed you when you were a babby, was picked out of the river alongside the coal barges. The very basket that you slept in, the tide washed ashore. The very rockers that I put it upon to make a cradle of it, I cut out of a piece of wood that drifted from some ship or another. (*Ibid.*, p. 4)

There is a fleeting suggestive reference to the biblical Moses floating on the Nile in his bulrush basket about to be rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter, but that is quickly elided by the imagery of the material help offered by the debris the tide washes ashore. Mythology gives way to an exchange about money and value between Gaffer Hexam and his former scavenging partner, Rogue Riderhood, to whom Lizzie listens, and Gaffer’s daughter, with whom the chapter ends.

The second chapter, a satiric account, immediately takes us to a banquet hosted by the newly minted Veneerings, who strive to participate in the upper reaches of middle-class society, and its aristocratically connected guest, Twemlow, “first cousin to Lord Snigsworth.” The table talk turns to the “man from nowhere,” who has now become the “man from somewhere,” heir to a fortune made from Dust collection, which brings with it a requirement of marriage. With the note that announces the heir apparent is in fact the corpse retrieved by Gaffer and Lizzie and now at the bottom of their boat, the detective story is launched that will connect top and bottom of this society.

This is not to be a tale of a Romantic foundling who will, after many escapes and adventures, come into his inheritance—the staple of so many operas generated from this class of fiction. Rather, it is a Victorian tale that asks how the Victorian society of extremes, of rich and poor, holds together. In addition, that brilliant first chapter, that chapter of surprises with which *Our Mutual Friend* begins, will take us from the scavenging class, perhaps the poorest of the poor, into the drawing room and dining elegance of the Veneerings, which includes the aristocratically connected Twemlow.

We move from the social practices of the impoverished and the marginal, even criminal class, to the heights of wealth and power. The social practices of the rich and the well-connected are juxtaposed to their opposites, and both come together through a plot that will inform us how social situations work. This is not the limited writing of a novelist, whom Lionel Trilling claimed “had a simple mind” (1978, p. 32), but a sophisticated interrogation of the human worlds constituted by his society. It is an inquiry that will turn on the question central to English culture: Who and what is a gentleman?

Riah, the benevolent Jew, breaks out of those practices and networks that deny the possibility of a Jew becoming a gentleman. But how can he be a gentleman? In the discourse of *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens locates the question more generally. It hovers throughout the Lizzie/Eugene plot—a theme and motif Dickens, in *David Copperfield* ([1850] 1943), with its Emily/Steerforth strand had begun to explore. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Twemlow, is designated from the beginning as a gentleman, while Boffin, the putative miser, has the qualities ascribed to Jews scripted by the plot for him to play until he, like Riah, reveals himself as the benevolent man. Is this the pantomime world so finely analyzed by Edwin Eigner (1989)—the world of the commedia—the theatre world of hoped-for wish fulfillment—that gives the reader a glimpse of possible redemption? Boffin emerges from the novel at its conclusion as the gentleman who has played the miser’s role to teach a lesson about the qualities that define the gentleman.

The question remains: Can a Jew who has been stereotyped as the old clothesman or a Jew bogey-man, as a blood-sucking usurer, as a practitioner of the blood-libel, as, in a word, a Fagin, possibly become a gentleman in the Victorian world? Why does Dickens, for example, not make use of, refer to, or even narrate some of Moses Montefiore’s life as a model for Riah’s, parallel to his use of Solomons’s for Fagin? Is it because he does not understand Montefiore’s commitment to Klal Yisrael, to the community of practice of his people, which he served and his commitment to seeking justice for his people? Is it that the Jew for Dickens is a member of an alien species, beamed in from the middle ages which so many Victorians, Carlyle included, thought of as the immediate predecessor to their own era? Is he a time-traveler plunked down in Victorian England and acting in it but not part of it? The stereotype that Fagin performs persists in the English literary imagination, calling into

question the very possibility that a Jew, even through good deeds, can be a gentleman. For it is the voice of society alone that can grant him that status.

### 7. The Social Practices of Gentlemen and Jews

Late in his life, Dickens had pretensions to aristocratic status. He managed to get a coat of arms to go with his cultural prominence as the most important man of letters of his day. His later novels dwell on the idea of the gentleman, as he proceeds to subvert the conventional view. In *Great Expectations* ([1860–1861] 1942), Magwitch thinks Pip has reached aristocratic heights with learning to read and write, but as thoughtful readers know, *Great Expectations* does not extend that status to him but to Joe, the benevolent Blacksmith, and even his benefactor, Magwitch. So doing Dickens makes us aware of the conditions defining aristocratic status, a narrative move he could have learned from Shakespeare's Henriad (second historical tetralogy, comprising *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Part 1*; *Henry IV, Part 2*; and *Henry V*), among other exemplars. What is at stake here is what in the Renaissance was known as "condescension"—the contractual obligation of the aristocrat to care for those his status charged him to care for.

In Harrison's terms, the language of *Great Expectations* "turns . . . back upon itself. It uses the language born of the practices through which we make, not only language, but ourselves, not to illuminate the inhuman, physical world, but to illuminate its own founding practices, and thus the human worlds which those practices originate and constitute" (2006, pp. 84–85). Pip's own words reveal his inability to care for others, for he is so blinded by his own sense of self as to make him unable to reach out and understand their concerns. His narcissism keeps him from taking actions that are benevolent.

*Our Mutual Friend* has a parallel concern with the gentleman and concludes with a chapter, "The Voice of Society" in Volume Two. In this last dinner at the Veneerings, the narrator stages the table talk as a mock Parliamentary proceeding. The dinner guests—the usual cast of suspects we have come to know from the second chapter of the novel forward—play at constituting themselves as if they were a Committee of the Whole gathered to decide if Lizzie and Eugene can be included in society. Mortimer speaks for Eugene and Lizzie. But his firm and quiet voice is mocked by Lady Tippins and the other guests, until Twemlow is questioned.

For the first time in the novel, Twemlow speaks out, naming Eugene a gentleman and Lizzie a Lady, and then stands his ground:

I say . . . if such feelings on the part of this gentleman, induced this gentleman to marry this lady, I think he is the greater gentleman for the action, and makes her the greater lady. I beg to say, that when I use the word, gentleman, I use it in the sense in which the degree may be attained by any man. The feelings of a gentleman I hold sacred, and I con-

fess I am not comfortable when they are made the subject of sport or general discussion. ([1865] 1908, vol. 2, p. 854)

The strong views of Twemlow carry the reader, if not the assembled company, and the novel ends with Mortimer seeing Twemlow home: He “shakes hands with him cordially at parting, and fares to the Temple, gaily” (ibid., p. 855).

The reader joins in Twemlow's and Mortimer's assessment—that crucial category, gentlemen and lady, are democratized, as Twemlow judges them a matter of feeling rather than inherited or financial status. Rather than social status, Twemlow—and the novel—lead us into assessing the question of sincerity through the experience of authentic feeling in opposition to the inauthenticity of the characters like Lady Tippins who have aggrandized themselves with the self-appointed role of the voice of society.

Once attained through the discussion of sincerity, the gentleman's role is implicitly extended to Riah.

The reader acknowledges the impact of Riah's benevolence, in helping Lizzie and Jenny. That course of action by Riah leads to his joining the ranks of the true aristocrats of *Our Mutual Friend*. What a turn-about, to have a Jew be one of the gentlemen of this world.

That revolutionary outcome is central to George Eliot's novel, *Daniel Deronda* ([1876] 1984), which begins with Daniel acting the benevolent aristocrat when he returns Gwendolyn Harleth's necklace. Her novel draws on the image Disraeli would have liked to project but was not able to because of the taint associated with his Jewish origins that, society, felt drew him down on the social scale and branded him an upstart and parvenu. It is noteworthy that *Deronda*, whose Jewishness does not come out for most of the novel, is echoed by Israel Zangwill in his popular play, *The Melting Pot* (1914), which also features a hero of Sephardic origin. It is worth noting that where Dickens ends in *Our Mutual Friend*, these other writers in one sense at least begin.

Dickens did not, however, have much to do with Jews—and in his day no Jews had yet been raised to the Peerage. Is it possible that his father was sent to debtors' prison because of the actions of a Jewish moneylender—and even arrested by a Jew and turned over to the bailiff at the Marshalsea, an action that Dickens would have known and resented? We do know that as Dickens negotiated the sale of Tavistock House in 1860 to James Eliza Davis, he did make some casual antisemitic remarks about Jewish money-lenders to his friend Forster, that were in keeping with what was expected of the creator of Fagin. Until the extended correspondence with Eliza Davis that began in 1863, Dickens had little personal experience of the social practices of Jews. It is noteworthy that references to Moses Montefiore are absent in his work, even though Riah, in his generosity and reaching out to the poor, friendless, and disabled echoes some of Montefiore's signal virtues (see Kaplan, 1998).

A key result of the correspondence with Eliza Davis and the subsequent effort Dickens made to understand Jewish experience was the figure of Riah.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Riah goes from devilish money-lender to benevolent friend of Jenny Wren and Lizzie Hexam. With them, the reader discovers that he was the reluctant front-man for Fascination Fledgby, and acted under duress. His disguise thrown over, Riah helps Lizzie hide among Jewish friends who own a paper-mill some distance from London, and joins Jenny and Lizzie in a key scene in the novel on the roof—"Come up and be dead," Jenny calls to him, acknowledging his unlocatable situation in contemporary England (*ibid.*).

Lizzie provides a glimpse of Jewish benevolence in a brief comment she makes about Riah's friends, the paper-mill owners, when she notes their kindness: As Harry Stone notes, "Dickens uses Riah to underline Jewish loyalty, kindness, humility, patience, and charity—the supposedly Jewish virtues," which Riah exhibits time and again. "He hides Lizzie Hexam among his co-religionists and keeps her secret in the face of humiliation and contempt. Lizzie herself vouches for Jewish kindness (1959, p. 247). "'The gentleman certainly is a Jew,' said Lizzie, 'and the lady, his wife, is a Jewess, and I was first brought to their notice by a Jew. But I think there cannot be kinder people in the world'" ([1864] 1899), p. 114). Lizzie attests to the goodness of these Jews. It is a judgment Lizzie dwells on and the reader hears—or, rather, with her, utters. For the novel invites the reader to participate in the voicing of its conclusions: this feature of the novel is foregrounded in the soliloquies that evoke the thinking speech of John Harmon, perhaps most notably in Volume 1, Chapter 13, "A Solo and a Duett" which defines a theatrical space within the narrative matrix of the novel.

Confronted by the implications of the different identities he has established for himself, John Harmon must decide which one to play through. In this scene John Harmon thinks "it out to the end" (*ibid.*, p. 465). This soliloquy as Carol Hanbery Mackay has observed transforms the novel and makes possible the pious fraud on which the plot turns (*Soliloquy in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 1987, cited in Eigner, 1989). Coming at the hinge of the serial parts of the novel, this episode does not as some critics have argued destroy the suspense the novel has built, but, instead, displaces it into the question of performance: will John Harmon be able to carry through his choice of new identity as John Rokesmith?

The soliloquy gives voice to the performative issue: after a page and a half of narration, there are six pages of soliloquy. Soliloquy is then succeeded by two and a half pages of dialogue when Rokesmith meets Bella, and the chapter concludes with a clinching question: "And John Rokesmith, what did he?, what did he?" ([1864] 1899), p. 471). The subjectivity of John Harmon so brilliantly represented here and insinuated into the readers' consciousness as if they were speaking and thinking it, is unavailable to Riah. Dickens has no access to Jewish interiority. Was it closed off to him resentment he harbored after his father was sent to debtors' prison? Whatever the personal or social motivations, in the Dickens theatre it is not possible to have a character

step to the front of the stage and express his Jewish identity by talking about his situation as a Jew.

By contrast, we have Harrison's nuanced essay, "Talking like a Jew: Reflections on Identity and the Holocaust" (1996, pp. 3–28). Like John Harmon, Harrison here thinks through the problem of multiple identities, now in the modern post-Holocaust context. Harrison also must sort out some of the consequences of his having enjoyed the hospitality of a childhood friend's Jewish home and family. This complex essay turns on what it means to "talk like." As Harrison tells his story, he takes on through his talking what it is to be Jewish. It is not that he acts the part, but that he becomes, through talking—through the voicing, the breathing of speech—that of which he is speaking. What is at stake is the difference between playing at acting a part and the pleasure in the play of talking—of becoming that which is being performed.

Harrison's articulation of "social practices" makes such a distinction possible. Performing the role, the speaker takes on not only the costume but the subjectivity of the figure in question. The social practices which constitute identity also constitute the self's insideness—and it is just that interior state, which comes forward so clearly and is so thoughtfully nuanced in Harrison's essay, that is missing in Dickens's representation of Riah.