HOUSEHOLD STYLE: DICKENS EDITS A NATION

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Abstract

This article explores how Dickens’s journal, *Household Words*, works both formally and thematically to reimagine the modern nation. Focusing on the creation of the journal and the first two months of its run, it argues that the journal’s representation of ‘home’ provides a formal structure for the dynamism characteristic of the new mobile culture Dickens hopes his journal is writing into existence. Dickens envisions his journal as a companion to the ‘mighty inventions’ of the age, but his formal innovations within the journal and his emphasis on technology, institutions, mobility, and the idea of ‘home’ require us to see the periodical itself as a technology of public space.

Floating on the Thames with the river police in 1853, Charles Dickens tells his *Household Words* readers that the world is blowing in the wind:

the east wind blowing bleak, and bringing with it stinging particles from marsh, and moor, and fen – from the Great Desert and Old Egypt, may be. Some of the component parts of the sharp-edged vapour that came flying up the Thames at London might be mummy-dust, dry atoms from the Temple at Jerusalem, camels’ foot-prints, crocodiles’ hatching-places, loosened grains of expression from the visages of blunt-nosed sphynxes, waifs and strays from caravans of turbaned merchants, vegetation from jungles, frozen snow from the Himalayas!1

This fanciful description of flying desert detritus makes a serious point, one frequently made in Dickens’s journal: the world is on the move, in part due to technologies that have replaced the wind as a means of making the world smaller. Almost a hundred and fifty years later, Benedict Anderson provides

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1 ‘Down With the Tide’, *Household Words* (5 February 1853), p. 481.

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a Dickensian description of how the communications revolution shapes our relationships with one another:

The Thai bartender in a Tokyo suburb shows his Thai comrades karaoke videotapes just made in Bangkok. The Filipina maid in Hong Kong phones her sister in Manila and sends money electronically to her other in Cebu. The successful Indian student in Vancouver can keep in daily touch with her former Delhi classmates by electronic mail. To say nothing of an evergrowing blizzard of faxes.  

Dickens’s and Anderson’s images of international winds and blizzards suggest a potentially blurry, borderless world. Anderson tempers the perhaps joyous sense of the liberating possibilities of his description by saying that while access to everything is available in theory, we can only see ‘what the masters of the screen choose’ us to see. We tend to see Dickens as a kind of Andersonian ‘master of the screen’, as he asserts control over this mobile world both in his novels and, as more scholars have turned to the periodicals (enabled by the continuing communication revolution of online databases), in his work as an editor of *Household Words* (1850–59) and *All the Year Round* (1859–70). We take for granted Dickens’s fondness for omniscient narrators and his desire to stamp his personality, not to mention his name, on his otherwise anonymous weekly journals. But the question as to how much control Dickens desired to have over the imagined community of his readers has, in recent years, given way to a more complex conversation about both what kind of world he was hoping to bring into being and what formal innovations he devised for doing so. In this essay, I argue that Dickens uses the household or home as an organizing figure for his journal. The journal’s representation of ‘home’ provides a formal structure for the dynamism characteristic of the new mobile culture he hopes his journal is writing into existence.

This requires us to take a look not only at Dickens the editor, but also at the journal that provided the fast-paced and fragmented first home for several of his novels. What follows are three sections. The first section argues that in imagining and editing his journal, Dickens is attempting to provide a form for the reimagination of the nation. In so doing, he both insists on the importance of form and that the periodical is a technology that needs to be considered with other technologies remaking the world.

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3 See Audre Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative and the Subject of Omniscience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and Shu-Fang Lai, ‘Fact or Fancy: What Can We Learn about Dickens from His Periodicals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 34.1 (Spring 2001) 41–53.
For Dickens, *Household Words* is the soul of the machine that can house both change and familiarity. This makes Dickens's journals a crucial part of the current conversation about cosmopolitanism and Victorian culture. They need to be read not just as interesting context for understanding the novels, or for Dickens himself, but as part of what Lauren Goodlad calls a ‘geopolitical aesthetic’ in which form is seen as ‘a medium through which transnational processes are encountered, figured, and, to some degree, shaped’.

The second section talks about the house style of journals and uses the *Cornhill Magazine* as a comparison to see what was unique in Dickens’s editorial choices. The final section looks closely at the first months of the journal itself to see how Dickens’s emphasis on form, technology, mobility, and home conveys his message to the nation.

I

Dickens’s journal was born at a moment when the new world created by the industrial revolution was on everyone’s mind: the year of the planning for the Great Exhibition. The synergy between *Household Words* and the Great Exhibition has been noted – as has Dickens’s professed disinterest in it. What needs more attention in this conversation, however, is the importance of form, and how Dickens uses the multiple forms contained by the periodical to manage the chaos of modern life. Structure is obviously important to both a periodical and to an exhibit as both juggle individual instalments while seeking to tell a coherent story about the changing nation. The third number of *Household Words* featured a short piece by William Weir and Dickens’s sub-editor, W. H. Wills, titled ‘Short Cuts across the Globe’. This article argues for the necessity of building a Panama canal now that ‘a wondrous revolution in the [. . .] prospects of these regions’ has opened up previously unimaginable markets from California to China.


6 Jonathan Farina sees the Exhibition catalogue as a metaphor for *Household Words* itself. See his “‘A Certain Shadow’: Personified Abstraction and the Form of *Household Words’*, Research Society for Victorian Periodicals, 42.4 (Winter 2009), 392–415 (p. 404).

The article’s celebration of the ‘cosmopolitan effects of such an undertaking’ is punctuated by a lengthy quote from Prince Albert, who spoke at a dinner for the ‘forthcoming great Exhibition of Arts and Industry’:

Nobody who has paid any attention to the particular features of our present era, will doubt for a moment that we are living at a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish that great end – to which indeed all history points – the realization of the unity of mankind. Not a unity which breaks down the limits and levels the peculiar characteristics of the different nations of the earth, but rather a unity the result and product of those very national varieties and antagonistic qualities. The distances which separated the different nations and parts of the globe are gradually vanishing before the achievements of modern invention, and we can traverse them with incredible speed; the language of all nations are known, and their acquirements placed within the reach of everybody; thought is communicated with the rapidity, and even by the power of lightning. 

Prince Albert’s vision of the communication revolution that would become the Great Exhibition a year later is one of global unity but significantly not at the cost of ‘national varieties and antagonistic qualities’. Thanks to ‘modern invention’, different parts of the globe are linked but not blurred. The Great Exhibition gave mid-century England an unprecedented opportunity to reflect on itself and its position in relation to the world. Crowds flocked to the Crystal Palace.

Dickens, however, fled. He writes to Geraldine Jewsbury on 25 June 1851, ‘the invaders from all nations have terrified me out of London by their letters of introduction – the most tremendous engines that have ever been leveled against my peace. We have taken refuge on the Kentish Coast, where there is a Crystal Palace not made with hands’. Dickens comes up with a range of criticisms of the Exhibition from chaotic to boring. In a piece that ran in Household Words on 5 July 1851, titled ‘The Great Exhibition and the Little One’, Dickens and frequent contributor Richard Horne explain: ‘Of these special signs and tokens of the peaceful progress of the world, how numerous, how diversified are they! – and – let us honestly add – how impossible to be thoroughly singled out and examined amidst the crowding masses of men and things, raw materials and manufactured articles, machines and engines that surround you on every side!’ Other than a handful of articles, Dickens discouraged coverage of the Great Exhibition in the magazine. To Wills he writes ‘I have always had an instinctive feeling

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8 Weir and Wills, ‘Short Cuts across the Globe’, p. 68.
against the Exhibition, of a faint, inexplicable sort [. . .]. My apprehension – and prediction – is, that [the public] will come out of it at last, with that feeling of boredom and lassitude (to say nothing of having spent their money) that the reaction will not be as wholesome and vigorous and quick, as folks expect’.10 The language of Dickens’s lament reveals a concern about form. His critique of the Exhibition underscores its formlessness (‘inexplicable’ and he fears a murky response on the part of the public (‘lassitude’, ‘not [. . .] vigorous’). This critique becomes clearer in the *Household Words* piece: ‘Where to begin, and how to advance with any prospect of concluding in a reasonable number of daily visits – is the difficulty. It is not much diminished by the great official Catalogue [. . .] to which no index is attached’.11 With no coherent message, calling forth inchoate responses, and no organizing text, the Exhibition manages paradoxically to be both chaotic and boring; hence, Dickens explains to Wills, his ‘Expositional absence’.12

Dickens’s protests require greater scrutiny. Prince Albert’s plan for the Exhibition eerily echoes Dickens’s initial explanation of the purpose behind *Household Words*, explained in the opening lines of the first article to appear in the journal:

> We aspire to live in the Household affections, and to be numbered among the Household thoughts, of our readers. We hope to be the comrade and friend of many thousands of people, of both sexes, and of all ages and conditions, on whose faces we may never look. We seek to bring into innumerable homes, from the stirring world around us, the knowledge of many social wonders, good and evil, that are not calculated to render any of us less ardent-ly persevering in ourselves, less tolerant of one another, less faithful in the progress of mankind, less thankful for the privilege of living in this summer-dawn of time.13

Dickens, like Prince Albert, was unusually aware of this as a unique cultural moment which put into play not only national borders but also conceptions of time and space themselves.14 *Household Words* shares the formal and thematic aspirations as the Great Exhibition as it hopes to offer the world to
the English reader. But Dickens attempts to do in his journal what he believed the Great Exhibition attempted but failed to do: provide a structure for English readers that allowed them to be coherently transported through time and space, a kind of index for modern life that would enable them to be both part of a crowd and able to single things out. The periodical’s representation of both movement and the structures that prevent that movement from becoming chaos does two things: first, it offers up a complex model of national identity that is both mobile and ‘familiar in their mouths as household words’; second, it puts periodicals, with their necessary emphasis on formal, temporal, and spatial questions, at the centre of the communication revolution.

We should think of the Victorian periodical as one of the many technologies of public space, much in the same way we understand the Great Exhibition or the Victorian railway system. Similar to the way that the railroad both cut up and connected the modern world, or the Great Exhibition brought nations together in order to compartmentalize them, a journal like *Household Words* could imagine a unified identity for a changing nation while also continuing to change it. Dickens himself sees his journal as a companion to ‘the mightier inventions of this age’ such as the railway and steamboat. As he explains in ‘A Preliminary Word’:

> The mightier inventions of this age are not, to our thinking, all material, but have a kind of souls in their stupendous bodies which may find expression in Household Words. The traveller whom we accompany on his railroad or his steamboat journey, may gain, we hope, some compensation for incidents which these later generations have outlived, in new associations with the Power that bears him onward; with the habitations and the ways of life of crowds of his fellow creatures among whom he passes like the wind; even with the towering chimneys he may see, spitting out fire and smoke upon the prospect.

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15 Kate Flint’s characterization of the Great Exhibition as a ‘heterotopia’, a place that juxtaposes incompatible things, would be an apt characterization for the miscellany found in a Victorian periodical. See James Buzard, Eileen Gilooly and Joseph Childers, *Victorian Prism: Refractions of the Crystal Palace* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007).


Dickens describes *Household Words* as being the soul of the machine age. He desires the periodical to be part of the ‘Power’ that enables the world to be seen anew. But since the traveller’s view may be clouded by the ‘fire and smoke’ produced by the mighty inventions, he admits that it might not always be a clear picture. Or even heading in a particular direction. Sometimes, as in ‘Down with the Tide’, the wind blows the world into London; here, the traveller is himself carried ‘like the wind’ among ‘crowds of his fellow creatures’.

As central as movement is to Dickens’s vision of the journal and the ‘stirring world’ that it represents, as we see in ‘A Preliminary Word’, the idea of ‘home’ is just as important. This will surprise no one familiar with Dickens’s novels and the cozy, toast-eating Aged P of *Great Expectations* (1860–61) or *Oliver Twist*’s Rose Maylie, whose smiles ‘were made for Home’. The concept of the home was equally important to his work as an editor and journalist. As Dickens was thinking of names for what would become *Household Words*, other ideas included *The Household Voice, Household Guest*, and *Household Face*. *Household Words* brings the world into ‘innumerable homes’ and ‘aspires to live in the Household affections’ and ‘Household thoughts’. The seemingly fixed place of the home or household becomes, like the form of the journal issue, or, like the idea of the nation, a structure through which to imagine and organize movement.

But again not in any particular or rigid way. As the ‘towering chimneys’ can obscure a traveller’s view, what constitutes a household is sometimes hard to make out – in *Oliver Twist* (1837–38), for example, and *Bleak House*, written (though not published in) the first years of *Household Words*. The loving, supportive, and solvent Brownlow home is, of course, such a Dickensian ideal that it practically glows in a Thomas Kincaidesque way off the page. Nevertheless, the novel offers a puzzling variety of homes. Compared with the Brownlow’s home, Fagin’s den is a nightmare. But Fagin frying his sausages is a model of maternal care next to the deprivation and abuse of the Sowerberry household. The reader feels powerfully the harbour provided by Fagin’s den after the perils of the open road. And to return to the perfect Brownlows, even that household has to be fractured, repaired, and relocated to serve as a safe harbour by the story’s end. *Bleak House* has a growlery and its borders are not impermeable enough to prevent disease; it also has to be curiously disrupted and duplicated by the end of the novel to convey its intended meaning.

Part of the fluidity of what home can mean is that it refers to both a material thing and an abstraction. In the passage from ‘A Preliminary Word’

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quoted above, Dickens works towards a coherent idea of home (the name of his journal, the imagined location of the journal’s readers) while also working to keep that idea moving fast enough to encompass a range of different geographical, temporal, and ideological meanings. For example, the peculiar and repeated use of the double negative in the opening sentences, where knowledge is ‘not calculated to render any of us […] less ardently persevering in ourselves, less tolerant of one another, less faithful in the progress of mankind’, keeps the aims of the journal from being fixed, working against the structure implied in household and home. The form of the weekly periodical, featuring multiple but anonymous contributors (organized by Dickens in collaboration with his sub-editors, staff-writers and contributors), enables Dickens to articulate a complex vision of the nation, something that would be impossible within the more stable, synchronous borders of a single piece. Yet, the form of the periodical keeps there from being the rootless wandering characteristic of the modern traveller or Exhibition visitor. As Sabine Clemm has argued, Household Words ‘forms an arena in which the complex and often contradictory strands of the question of national identity can be untangled or, indeed, knotted anew’. The idea of home and the idea that his journal is a home provide a home—albeit a mobile one—for a potentially destabilizing knowledge of the ‘stirring world around us’.21

My argument that Dickens’s editorial vision instantiates a national identity that is both mobile and ‘homely’ (to borrow his phrase from Bleak House) participates in several conversations at once, some very large—for example, theories of national identity in the Victorian period, and the relationship between politics and aesthetic form—and some rather smaller— theories about the relationship between works within periodicals and Dickens’s polyvocal role as editor, journalist, social critic, and novelist. To sum up years of scholarly debate, we used to think of the Victorian nation as ‘a fixed, monolithic, and self-enclosed geographic and cultural whole’.22 However, work by scholars such as Benedict Anderson, Linda Colley, Katie Trumpener, Julian Wolfreys, Lauren Goodlad, Stephanie Barczewski, Ian Baucom, and collections such as the recent issue of Victorian Literature and Culture on Victorian Cosmopolitanisms edited by Tanya Agathocleous and Jason R. Rudy show how English society, in changing from an agrarian kingdom to a sprawling empire over the course of the modern era, attempts to form a coherent identity around multiple and often conflicting identity categories.

20 Clemm, Dickens, Journalism and Nationhood, p. 1.
21 For an additional analysis of the relationship between serial publication and the form of the novel, see my ‘The Novel’s Mobile Home’, Novel, 43.1 (Spring 2010), 72–77.
22 Amy Kaplan, ‘Manifest Domesticity’, American Literature, 70.3 (September 1993), 581–606 (p. 583).
(religion, race, nationality, and class). Colley’s well-known formulation explains that Englishness is a common identity ‘superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other, and above all in response to conflict with the Other’. While the scholarship covers a wide range of ideas about identity formation, most agree that it is at heart a problem of the relationship between part and whole or, in other words, how to enable or envision a general or common identity without effacing important local specificities.

Work on national identity in the Victorian period has the additional challenge of understanding the complex interrelationship between England’s identity as an island nation and as a growing empire. As William Maginn explained in the opening number of Fraser’s Magazine in 1830, ‘the policy of England should be insular, as she is an island, and colonial, as she is the queen of colonies, the nursing mother of empires’. This is indeed the theoretical bind Prince Albert attempts to address when talking about a unity that does not ‘break down limits and levels’. The current critical conversation about Victorian cosmopolitanism helps to move us past hard-and-fast distinctions between core and periphery. James Buzard writes that it is no longer meaningful to ask of the Victorian novel: ‘is [it] nationalistic or cosmopolitan’. Agathocleous and Rudy suggest that ‘the adjective cosmopolitan is flexible, pertaining not only to relations among nations but to individual activities and stances as well’. Amanda Anderson’s work on cosmopolitanism talks particularly about Dickens, seeing him as having a ‘divided set of attitudes displayed toward British nationalism’.


24 Colley, Britons, p. 6.

25 James Buzard, ‘“The Country of the Plague”: Anticulture and Autoethnography in Dickens’s 1850s’, Victorian Literature and Culture, 38.2 (September 2010), 413–19 (pp. 418–19).


Buzard’s work on Dickens shows a shift in thinking about Dickens’s relationship to questions of national identity — and also why the kind of insight afforded by the periodicals is long overdue. In his influential reading of Dickens’s *Bleak House* as ‘metropolitan autoethnography’, Buzard argues that Dickens imagines a ‘national culture’ that is ‘above all, locatable’ as opposed to a ‘world not credited with the same degree of “place-ness”’. More recently, however, Buzard sees Dickens in the later *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), feeling ‘his way toward an understanding of what we might call the ecology of local, national, and cosmopolitan identities — a sense of the interdependence of each category upon the others, if each is to have any vital or meaningful embodiment’. Dickens, however, always had an understanding of this ecology, evident in the creation of *Household Words*. Readings like Buzard’s earlier one of *Bleak House* are possible because we tend to see novels as a finished whole outside the context of their more fragmented, original publications. At the time when Dickens is at his most insular, according to Buzard, is when he is developing a vision of *Household Words* that precisely illustrates the interdependence of local, national, and international in the many voices that make up each instalment of the periodical.

We can see, then, the importance of considering form (and the formal homes of novels) when looking at how knowledge about national identity is produced. Questions about identity categories, such as local, national, or cosmopolitan, are as much questions about the form as about identity, as Caroline Levine has convincingly argued in her work on ‘strategic formalism’. Following the logic of strategic formalism allows us to see how the ‘precarious consensus’ of Victorian national identity expresses itself in the aesthetic forms of the period. Levine posits that we understand ‘the cultural-political field as shaped by a web of competing attempts to impose order […] Taken alone, each political agenda might be calculating and directed, but taken together, they constantly meet, collide and get in each other’s way’. Strategic formalism seems like the ideal lens through which...
to view the relationship between competing identity categories involved in nation formation (individual, local, national, and international) and the various forms not always harmoniously contained within the Victorian periodical. As Catherine Waters has explained, ‘nineteenth-century journalism remains notoriously difficult to bring into critical focus. Its fractured, heterogeneous and multi-vocal form resists the protocols of traditional literary analysis’. Taken alone, each piece in an instalment conveys a particular perspective. But taken together these perspectives can support, challenge, and complicate each other. The fragmentation that is the nature of serial publication allows for contesting voices that make up cultural discourses. If genre is a ‘key component of the construction of knowledges’ in the reading experience, the yoking together of many genres that happens in the pages of the periodical present a real challenge to stable meaning. Margaret Beetham explains that the ‘role of the periodical in relation to its readers is complex’ in part because ‘of the particular balance of closure against openness which is the form’s characteristic mode’.

It is a balance between fragmentation and form, however, as the serial can also be a nationally unifying technology. Mary Poovey argues that a ‘social body’ emerges in the 1860s. ‘The image of a single culture’, she writes, ‘had begun to seem plausible in 1860 – even though different subgroups continued to exist – because technologies capable of materializing an aggregate known as the ‘population’ [such as affordable transportation and reading material] had been institutionalized for several decades’. While rightly emphasizing the illusory nature of any single image of a culture, Laurel Brake argues that ‘the illusion of a characteristic ‘identity’ [. . .] is one of the constitutive conditions of newspapers and periodicals’. Dickens’s journals are an excellent example of what Lauren Goodlad has recently called a ‘Victorian geopolitical aesthetic’ which emphasizes both form and fluidity. She argues, like Franco Moretti does, that British literature is a ‘world literature’: Goodlad rejects, however, ‘the rigid tectonics of core and periphery which shape [Moretti’s] assumptions about metropolitan form’. Dickens makes clear that Household Words is to be world literature. In the ‘Preliminary Word’, he writes that ‘Our Household Words’ will consider ‘every nation upon earth’. In his journal, then, he is forced to be

33 Waters, Commodity Culture, p. 6.
37 Goodlad, Victorian Literature, p. 405.
flexible in ways that produce a radical new vision of home and make the periodical an essential context for understanding the novels, which found their first home there.

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The periodical text, according to Jon Klancher, ‘can be a space for imagining social formations still inchoate, and a means to give them shape’. But balancing between the formlessness of inchoate social formations and the formal demands of the periodical was a challenge for editors, who attempted to create a house style while also welcoming diversity in contributors and contributions. The convention of anonymity in Victorian journalism made it easy for the journal to seem to speak in one voice, and yet the staggering variety of contributions is always working against this. According to Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston, ‘Each journal’s individual house style puts in place what it tries to construct as a set of standards which it tries to represent as normal and which most nearly represent how that journal wishes to present itself to the public. At a very literal level then, a periodical’s house style is indeed its formally constructed voice, its dominant discourse, and that same style inflects every topic the periodical addresses’.

A brief detour to the *Cornhill Magazine*, started in 1860 when *Household Words* had already become *All the Year Round*, will show how these challenges are juggled differently in different journals and how Dickens has a unique understanding of what style can do.

The editors and publishers of the *Cornhill Magazine* gave the idea of house style a great deal of thought. For one of the things that defines this – as opposed to other contemporaneous magazines such as *Blackwood’s* or *Macmillan’s* – is that it hoped to walk just this line between having a characteristic identity and not having one, not being, for example, a Tory journal or a Whig journal, a man’s magazine or a woman’s magazine. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Cornhill’s* first editor, defended the rather pedestrian title of the magazine (named after the Cornhill location of publisher Smith, 38 Jon Klancher, *The Making of the English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 24.


40 While *Cornhill’s* aim was to remain open to a wide readership, critics have noted how Thackeray’s interest in gentlemanliness influenced his vision for the journal. See Elizabeth Teare, ‘“Cornhill” Culture’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 33.2 (Summer 2000), 117–37 and Judith L. Fisher, ‘Thackeray as Editor and Author: ‘The Adventures of Philip’ and the Inauguration of the “Cornhill Magazine”’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 33.1 (Spring 2000), 2–21.
Elder’s main offices) by suggesting that ‘sensible’ readers would not have been hailed by a more sensational title, such as, he quipped, ‘The Thames on Fire’. Cornhill is a specific, knowable place and the magazine aimed to have a familiar English feeling. When Anthony Trollope was solicited for a serial novel to inaugurate the magazine, he hoped to provide an already completed Irish novel, Castle Richmond. But Trollope was pressed instead for ‘an English tale, on English life’, which became Framley Parsonage. But what constitutes the boundaries of an ‘English tale’? While Thackeray defended the simple title of his magazine, he took great pains to insure that the illustrations for the cover page reflected rather a worldly air of refinement. One of Thackeray’s conceptions of his role as magazine editor provides a unifying image: the ‘Conductor of a Concert’. At the Cornhill social table, he wrote, ‘we shall suppose the ladies and children always present; we shall not set up rival politicians by the ears; we shall listen to every guest who has an apt word to say; and, I hope, induce clergymen of various denominations to say grace in their turn’. The ‘conductor’ could preside over all these players and could lend a ‘unifying stability and consistency of tone to the number’.

Dickens saw himself as a conductor, as well, but the image was more akin to a train conductor, underscoring the journal’s concern with movement and technology rather than Thackeray’s vision of a genteel social table or concert stage. ‘Conducted by Charles Dickens’ appears just below the title of the journal in bold and capital letters. It is also at the top of every page in tiny print (‘Conducted by’ and ‘Charles Dickens’ face each other at the top of the double truck). Dickens similarly faced the editorial balancing act. He wanted each number to hold together even as it contained a ‘diversity of material’. Dickens chastised his sub-editor, W. H. Wills, in April 1856: ‘the last published no. is frightfully bad […] no idea in it, no purpose […] a mere hash-up of the most indifferent magazine papers at a chance medley’. A rejection letter Dickens wrote to a contributor gave the following explanation: ‘notice how patiently and expressly the thing has to be planned for presentation in fragments, and yet afterwards fusing together as an uninterrupted whole’. Dickens’s desire for control over his journals is

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41 See Robert A. Colby’s ‘“Into the Blue Water”: The First Year of “Cornhill Magazine” Under Thackeray’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 32.3 (Fall 1999), 204–222. Colby explains that Thackeray’s editorial intentions did not include setting the Thames on fire. He also discusses Thackeray’s editorial self-fashioning as that of a sea-captain.

42 Spencer Eddy, *The Founding of ‘The Cornhill Magazine’* (Muncie: Ball State University, 1970), p. 45. See also Colby, ‘“Into the Blue Water”’, p. 216, for further musical imagery used by Thackeray in discussion of his editorial choices.


44 Quoted in Ellen Casey, ‘“That Specially Trying Mode of Publication”: Dickens as Editor of the Weekly Serial’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 14.3 (Fall 1981), 93–101 (p. 94).
well-known, conjuring up images of a miffed Mrs Gaskell, complaining that he made all the contributions too ‘Dickens’, or of Douglas Jerrold’s quip that Household Words was not anonymous but rather ‘mononymous’. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wondered in a letter why someone would want to write for or with Dickens: it ‘must be highly unsatisfactory, as Dickens’s name would swallow up every sort of minor reputation in the shadow of his path. I shouldn’t like, for my part (and if I were a fish) to herd with crocodiles’. Dickens considered ‘Charles Dickens’s Own’ as a title for the new journal and Harry Stone writes that Household Words ‘achieved its cohesiveness [...] through assimilation to a Dickensian vision of life. While employing a diversity of writers [...] Household Words would seem to speak with a single voice’. In these opinions, Dickens is not just the conductor but the whole train.

This critical perspective overstates the problem. As Dickens casts about for an organizing idea for his ‘long-deferred-but-never-sufficiently-to-be-considered-and-never-to-be-approached-though-not-yet-planned-or-named Periodical’ (28 July 1849), in a letter to Forster on 7 October 1849, he stumbles upon a figure that implies both presence and absence, abstraction, and materiality: a shadow. The journal is to contain the usual essays and reviews and to be ‘as amusing as possible’, but, Dickens explains,

all distinctly and boldly going to what in one’s own view ought to be the spirit of the people and the time [...] Now to bind all this together, and to get a character established as it were which any of the writers may maintain without difficulty, I want to suppose a certain SHADOW, which may go into any place, by sunlight, moonlight, starlight, firelight, candlelight, and be in all homes, and all nooks and corners, and be supposed to be cognizant of everything and go everywhere, without the least difficulty [...] a kind of semi-omniscient, omnipresent, intangible creature [...] I think the importance of the idea is, that [...] it presents an odd, unsubstantial, whimsical, new thing: a sort of previously unthought-of Power going about [...] but in which people will be perfectly willing to believe, and which is just mysterious and quaint enough to have a sort of charm for their imagination, while it will represent common-sense and humanity.

48 Here I join Clemm, who argues that ‘that Dickens did not always succeed in keeping such tight control over the journal – occasionally, Household Words undermines the purpose of its conductor’, Dickens, Journalism, and Nationhood, p. 8.
Dickens is struggling here to imagine a figure of extraordinary power (‘cognizant of everything and go everywhere’) that is also ‘unthought-of’, ‘intangible’, ‘unsubstantial’, and ‘new’. Jonathan Farina makes a strong argument that this is the point. In his excellent recent article on *Household Words*, he argues that Dickens was attempting to portray the journal’s voice as a ‘deep character’ just like round or complicated characters in fiction.51

Farina’s emphasis, however, is on the utility for Dickens of the journal’s desired formlessness embodied in the shadow figure. I think we need to see that it is a dialectical relationship between formlessness and form.52 For Dickens, the journal is a form through which to reimagine other less tangible forms, such as time, space, and national character (‘the spirit of the people’). Beetham has argued about the periodical as a genre that ‘the relationship to time is the central characteristic of the periodical but this means that the form has a deep regular structure’.53 An ‘alternation between progression and pause’ is characteristic of the publication of serials and serialized fiction, according to Linda Hughes and Michael Lund. I think we need to understand what we have easily accepted as a formal characteristic of serials as more radically fundamental to Dickens’s reimagining of English national identity. Like the idea of home or the shadow, both material and abstract, Englishness for Dickens becomes less about concrete characteristics and more a state of mobility. *Household Words* represents not just a portrait of national identity, but a project in it.54

3

On 1 February 1850, Dickens shared with Forster some other possible journal titles, including: ‘*The Comrade. The Microscope. The Highway of Life. The Lever. The Rolling Years. The Holly Tree. Everything*’.55 We see Dickens

52 Lorna Huett’s excellent essay, ‘Among the Unknown Public: *Household Words, All the Year Round* and the Mass-Market Weekly Periodical in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, *Victorian Periodicals Review* 38.1 (Spring 2005), 61–82, gives a detailed analysis of the ‘hybridity which characterized [Dickens’s] journals’ both in terms of content and structure (p. 79).
54 Here I clearly join those scholars who see Victorian periodicals as constructing rather than simply reflecting Victorian opinion and identity. Lyn Pykett, writing about Michael Wolff’s ‘pioneering essay’ on Victorian journalism, discusses a reflective/constructive model in which periodicals, on the one hand, ‘reflect Victorian culture’ and on the other hand, ‘are a means of constructing opinion and identity’. Lyn Pykett, ‘Reading and the Periodical Press’, in *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, ed. by Laurel Brake, Aled Jones and Lionel Madden (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990), pp. 5–6.
55 Letters: Vol. 6, p. 27.
thinking through his primary concerns: connection ('comrade', 'tree'), detailed observation or the ability to be singled out ('microscope'), movement ('highway'), technology ('microscope', 'lever'), and time in motion ('rolling years'). We know he eventually chose Household Words, and, as I have argued above, the figure of the house is crucial, but in the ‘Preliminary Word’ that introduces the journal, he underscores many of the themes expressed in these potential titles:

Our Household Words will not be echoes of the present time alone, but of the past too. Neither will they treat of the hopes, the enterprises, triumphs, joys, and sorrows, of this country only, but, in some degree, of those of every nation upon earth. For nothing can be a source of real interest in one of them, without concerning all the rest.56

Dickens contributed heavily during these first years. He wrote approximately one hundred pieces for the periodical during 1850–52. Indeed two-thirds of the works collected in Reprinted Pieces, the collection of his own contributions to the journal made for the 1858 Library Edition of his works, come from these first two years. A closer look at the first few months of the journal, both Dickens’s own contributions and those he solicited, selected, and edited, shows how his editorial emphasis on institutions, technology, mobility, and home work together to become a vision of the nation.

Many of Household Words instalments contain pieces on some kind of institution from post offices to prisons, reflecting both Dickens’s own reformist enthusiasms as well as the spirit of the age. The journal’s deep interest in institutions does several things. It reveals an interest in form (how its various parts work together – or not – to express or achieve common social goals) and it provides a framework for reflecting on time and making the abstract imaginable (through comparisons between institutions then and currently), as well as affording opportunities to create new kinds of connections between people caught up in, to use Prince Albert’s phrase, ‘this period of most wonderful transition’, or Dickens’s ‘the summer-dawn of time’. Finally, it also enables a self-reflexive commentary as the journal is itself an institution, a part of the larger communications revolution. Connections are often made between institutions, such as between newspapers and the post office, as Dickens and his writers explore the idea of a network of synergistic systems, or to use Buzard’s phrase, an ‘ecology of local, national, and cosmopolitan’.57 ‘Valentine’s Day at the Post-Office’, written by Dickens and Wills, was the third piece to run in the first instalment, after ‘A Preliminary Word’ and the first part of Elizabeth Gaskell’s short story ‘Lizzie Leigh’.

Dickens repeatedly made clear that ‘elegance of fancy’ was essential to the journal’s voice,58 and so this examination of the operations of the ‘Great National Post Office’ is not simply about stamping and sorting but focuses on the numbers of letters that move through the Post Office on that most sentimental of holidays: Valentine’s Day. It nevertheless has abundant details, including a chart showing the number of letters, amount of postage, and time of collection. The Post Office also delivers newspapers – ‘70,000,000 newspapers pass through all the post-offices every year’ – and this is something in which the new editors took a keen interest. As the journal reflects here on itself as an integral companion to these mighty inventions, we see how it works to establish connections between the various forms that provide order amidst chaos. The Post Office looks closed by six o’clock in the evening, but

what a chaos within! Men up to their knees in newspapers on great platforms. […] All the history of time, all the chronicled births, deaths, and marriages, all the crimes, all the accidents, all the vanities, all the changes, all the realities, of all the civilized earth, heaped up, parcelled out, carried about, knocked down, cut, shuffled, dealt, played, gathered up again, and passed from hand to hand, in an apparently interminable and hopeless confusion, but really in a system of admirable order, certainty, and simplicity, pursued six nights of every week, all through the rolling year!’59

Here the chaotic contents of the chronicle of modern life are indistinguishable from the chaos of the Post Office. But unlike the chaos of the Great Exhibition, Dickens gleans an orderly system underneath seeming disorder. He both brings the system of ‘admirable order’ to the attention of the journal’s reader and connects it with the work of bringing into the English home the ‘stirring world’ around it in the form of the newspaper. Similarly, in a piece six weeks later, ‘A Paris Newspaper’, Joseph Archer Crowe explains: ‘For rusty dinginess, perhaps there is nothing to equal a London [editorial] office, with its floors strewed with newspapers from all parts of the world, parliamentary reports, and its shelves creaking under books of all sorts thumbed to the last extremity. Notwithstanding these appearances, however, there is discipline, – there is real order in the apparent disorder of things’.60

Not all pieces on institutions cheerfully discover hidden order amidst chaos. Despite Dickens’s desire to keep the tone light and to avoid a ‘dreary, arithmetical […] dustiness’, many contributions to Household Words are

58 See Letters: Vol. 6, p. 523.
Forster’s ‘New Life and Old Learning’ laments the outdated education received at Oxford, from which there issue into the world yearly reinforcements of the upper classes of society, less able to cope with the wants and duties that surround them, and less acquainted with the laws and operations by which the present is to be guided into the future, than any self-taught merchant’s clerk at the Liverpool, or any sharp engineer’s lad at the railway in Euston Square.

The message is clear: the England of Oxford risks being left behind as the England of the engineer and railway move forward. The Oxford experience reinforces only his particularly rigid category, whereas the engineer’s and merchant’s clerk’s fluid positions enable them to move with rather than resist the laws of time. The piece ends underscoring the theme of the journal: ‘The Earth is in incessant motion. The time when it was supposed to be permanently fixed in the centre of the universe has passed away for ever, and modes of study only suited to that time will have to share the fate that has befallen it’ (p. 132).

Amanda Anderson points out that Dickens’s criticism of state bureaucracies in his fiction is also a ‘lament for the lost opportunities to foster and benefit’ its subjects. Similarly, in his journal, his criticism of outdated institutions is directed towards their improvement. The collective voice of the journal speaks in support of the idea of form (structure, system), but it is an often critical conversation. There is less a party line than a party, where many voices fill the space. ‘The Troubled Water Question’ reports on a visit to the Water Company and introduces the reader to the ‘great engine [. . .] a monster!’ that provides London with her water supply. While ‘the water supplied to the metropolis was, generally speaking, bad in quality, extravagantly dear, and, from excessive waste, deficient in quantity’, the writer argues that this can be remedied with ‘continuous supply, filtration, and a uniform scale of rates’. ‘Pet Prisoners’, Dickens’s own Carlylean look at the Model Prison at Pentonville, is mostly critical of the difference between ‘the physical condition of the convict in prison, and that of the hard-working man outside, or the pauper outside’. An article by Wills in the same number contains a humorous assault on the office of Coroner. Wills details the absurdity of holding inquests in pubs and other dubious places, and argues that

61 Letters: Vol. 6, p. 523.
63 Anderson, Powers of Distance, p. 69.
such practices need immediate amendment. But while ‘Pet Prisoners’ and ‘A Coroner’s Inquest’ are critical of the current criminal justice system, they do not have the final word even in that single instalment. Sandwiched between the articles by Dickens and Wills is ‘A Tale of the Good Old Times’, by Percival Leigh. Leigh describes a fictitious debate between a man with ‘an extraordinary regard for all things obsolete’ and a talking medieval statue who reminds him that the past was actually far worse, particularly in terms of criminal justice: ‘men were hanged by the dozens’ and ‘prisons and prison discipline’ were a national disgrace. The statue sums it up by saying ‘Yes, my good friend. These are the best times that we know of – bad as the best may be. But in proportion to their defects, they afford room for amendment’. These conversations — between speaker and statue and between Dickens, Wills and Leigh — encapsulate one of the main messages of the journal: we have to be honest about the past and the present to shape the best future imaginable. The statue, a fixed object, suggests a fluidity about time as he says ‘the true good old times are yet to come’ (p. 106).

The journal frequently makes the point that institutions can bring individuals together as each person plays a role in making the larger system work. Richard Horne’s ‘The Fire Brigade of London’ praises the well-run system ‘divided into four sections, and having nineteen stations in the most central quarters of the metropolis’. The article is full of details about how ‘owing to this simultaneous action, each according to his special and general duties […] the engine has been got out and put in working order’. Just as in subsequent years, Dickens would follow the Metropolitan Police around watching the system in action. Horne follows the Fire Brigade ‘along the midnight streets’. Even with all the fancy technology that is lovingly — and lengthily — described (‘branch-pipes, goose-neck, dogs’-tails […] canvas sheet […] rope handles […] dam-board […] portable cisterns, strips of sheep-skin […] balls of cord, flat rose, escape-chain, escape-ropes, […] saw, shovel, pole-axe, boat-hook, crow bar […] &c’), human volunteers are still needed to make it work. Unlike the frenzy of the Great Exhibition, which Dickens thought would bore viewers, the operations of the Fire Brigade spurs bored Londoners into action. They do so with a ‘fury that is perfectly frantic’. Horne explains, ‘Who, that did not know them, would believe that these outrageous pumpers were the very same people who stood with lack-lustre eyes at some tedious operation in trade of workshop, all day long; or, who sat

stolidly opposite each other in an omnibus, without a word to say, and seeming too dull for either thought or action? Look at them now!’ (p. 147). Modern life can be isolating, but *Household Words* – thematically and formally – makes connections.

As illustrated by the interest in the mechanics of supplying water and fighting fires, *Household Words* frequently features pieces on technology, those mighty inventions for which it is a companion. A recurring feature of the early years of the journal is Charles Knight’s series titled ‘Illustrations of Cheapness’, which focuses on the manufacture of affordable goods. The first one is on the Lucifer Match and, given the journal’s tendency to time travel, begins with a look back at the social impact of being able to control fire. But lest this read like a simplistic triumph of modern control over ancient chaos, in the same instalment ran the second of Horne’s series on ‘The True Story of a Coal Fire’. A few weeks later, Dudley Costello’s piece, ‘Alchemy and Gunpowder’, about Roger Bacon’s thirteenth-century science experiments, shows the uneven development associated with progress.69 Dickens was committed to having poetry in each instalment, and this further illustrates his commitment to formal variety. But even the poetry entered into the number’s conversation. ‘The Railway Station’, by Dora Greenwell, addresses the reader’s presumed fear that the noisy, intrusive spread of the railway system will end forever the spirit of old England and will leave us fragmented and isolated:

> They judge not well, who deem that once among us  
> A spirit moved that now from earth has fled;  
> Who say that at the busy sounds which throng us,  
> Its shining wings for ever more have sped.

> We need not linger o’er the fading traces  
> Of lost divinities; or seek to hold  
> Their serious converse ‘mid Earth’s green waste-places,  
> Or by her lonely fountains, as of old:

> For, far remote from Nature’s fair creations,  
> Within the busy mart, the crowded street,  
> With sudden, sweet, unlooked-for revelations  
> Of a bright presence we may chance to meet.

> E’en now, beside a restless tide’s commotion,  
> I stand and hear, in broken music swell,

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Restless tide, broken music, ebb and flow. The journal’s recurring theme of movement, fragmentation, and connection are also expressed formally as the reader moves from poetry to history to fiction to investigative journalism. The image here of the railway station is a parallel form to the journal itself as they both provide a safe harbour and a meeting place amidst all this commotion.

Travel, embodied by the railway, enables the journal’s work of comparing and contrasting – between here and there, between then and now – that helps instantiate its vision of a national identity that embraces the fluidity of time and space. Travel rivals institutions and technology as an obsession of the journal and, indeed, the ‘traveller’ is the figure that Dickens finally settles on for the majority of his remaining contributions after *Household Words* becomes *All The Year Round* in 1859. He would publish thirty-six essays as ‘The Uncommercial Traveller’. Countless travel narratives in *Household Words* afford within each instalment an opportunity both for praise and critique of England, an opportunity both for fragmentation and for connection and a chance to underscore the journal’s main message that ‘home’ can house all this movement. ‘The Schoolmaster at Home and Abroad’ by Wills (20 April 1850) responds to a report by Joseph Kay on the ‘Social Condition and Education of the Poor in England and Europe’, the result of travels he made throughout England and Europe in the 1840s. The piece argues that ‘in a great part of Germany and Switzerland, the children of the poor are receiving a better education than that given in England to the children of the greater part of our middle class’. The conclusion of the article sounds a similar note to the journals’ other critical articles: ‘Surely the contrast presented between the efforts of the schoolmaster abroad and his inactivity at home – refuting, as it does, our hourly boasts of “intellectual progress”, – should arouse us, energetically and practically, to the work of Educational extension’ (p. 84).

An early contribution of Dickens’s, ‘Some Account of an Extraordinary Traveller’, finds him flirting with a figure that contains echoes of his description of ‘a certain Shadow’. Here in ‘Some Account’ we have the very idea

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70 ‘The Railway Station’, *Household Words* 6, (4 May 1850), 132–33.
71 The actual works to which Wills is referring were probably *The Education of the Poor in England and Europe* (London, 1846); *The Social Condition of the People in England and Europe*, 2 vols (London, 1850).
72 ‘The Schoolmaster at Home and Abroad’, *Household Words* 4 (20 April 1850), pp. 82–4 (p. 83).
of the journal embodied in a figure – someone who can ‘go everywhere, without the least difficulty’ – who can compare and contrast England’s progress with that of other nations. The traveller, Mr Booley, does not take a lot of baggage. (Dickens describes ‘his usual absence of preparation’.) However, one of the things that always accompanies Mr Booley is his own irreducible Englishness: ‘In all the immense journeys he has since performed, he has never laid aside the English dress, nor departed in the slightest degree from English customs. Neither does he speak a word of any language but his own’. His observations, like the journal’s, always tend towards noticing technology and what it reveals about progress. Here Mr Booley is ascending the Mississippi: ‘the river itself, that moving highway, showed him every kind of floating contrivance, from the lumbering flat-bottomed boat, and the raft of logs, upward to the steamboat, and downward to the poor Indian’s frail canoe’. Mr Booley began ‘to consider how, in the eternal current of progress setting across this globe in one unchangeable direction, like the unseen agency that points the needle to the pole [...] the Medicine-men who know no Medicine but what was Medicine a hundred years ago, must be surely and inevitably swept from the earth, whether they be Choctawas, Mandans, Britons, Austrians, or Chinese’. This list, while the ‘current of progress’ goes in ‘one unchangeable direction’, shows no partiality for any particular nation, sets up no hierarchy between local, national, and international. This piece makes the point made in so many other places in the journal that progress can be brutal – ‘swept from earth’ – but that ‘civilization, Mr Booley concluded, was, on the whole, with all its blemishes, a more imposing sight, and a far better thing to stand by’. And as you move around the stirring world, you do not have to give up the benefits of home: your English friends and family. Mr Booley voyages to the ‘ice-bound Arctic Regions’ only to discover ‘in the remote solitude to which he had penetrated [...] two Scotch gardeners, several English compositors, accompanied by their wives, three brass founders from the neighbourhood of Long Acre, London [...] and several other working-people from sundry parts of Great Britain who had conceived the extraordinary idea of “holiday-making” in the frozen wilderness’. Here it finally dawns on the reader (or at least this reader) that Mr Booley does not have to know other languages or carry any baggage or that he always runs into his English neighbours because he has not actually left London.73 His travels have been through visits to the diorama and panoramas on display in London and visited by Dickens himself.74

74 See Alison Byerly on panorama and Victorian culture in her forthcoming Are We There Yet? Victorian Travel and Virtual Realism.
Here, in this turn of the article, Dickens merges two of the journal’s interests. Travel becomes technology when we realize that ‘all of [Mr. Booley’s] modes of conveyance have been pictorial’ (p. 77). ‘It is a delightful characteristic of these times’, Dickens writes, ‘that new and cheap means are continually being devised, for conveying the results of actual experience, to those who are unable to obtain such experiences for themselves; and to bring them within the reach of the people [. . .]. Some of the best results of actual travel are suggested by such means to those whose lot it is to stay at home’ (p. 77). The parallel forms of the panorama and the periodical bring the world home to English readers, changing what the space of home can mean while preserving its place-ness. Other pieces in the same number work to underscore this idea of using technology to see the world from home and thus home in a new global context. The number ends with another of Knight’s ‘Illustration of Cheapness’. This time the featured manufacture is globes.

Of all the places covered by the journal in its opening months, Australia gets the most attention. If one of Dickens’s priorities was ‘fancy’, Australia, England’s wild west, provides it in spades. In the first month of its run, there were five pieces on Australia, including ‘Milking in Australia’, ‘An Australian Ploughman’s Story’, and ‘Two-handed Dick the Stockman, An Adventure in the Bush’. Dickens had his own interest at this time in whether Australia could provide a happy home for unfortunate English women, in his work with Angela Burdett Coutts on Urania Cottage which promised that ‘abroad [. . .] in a distant country, they may become the faithful wives of honest men’.75 This emigration-marriage plot provides the ending for a number of stories in Household Words, including the three-part story ‘The Miner’s Daughters’ by William Howitt.76 What Dickens sees in emigration is clearest in ‘A Bundle of Emigrants’ Letters’ which he co-authored with Caroline Chisholm and which ran in the opening number of the journal. This piece makes Dickens’s frequent argument that the public should support emigration not only because there is opportunity for new homes in Australia, but also curiously because it will strengthen national sympathies: ‘from the little communities thus established, other and larger communities will rise in time, bound together in a love of the old country still fondly spoken of as Home’.77 Home here is capitalized, signalling that the reader has moved in a single piece from home as a material place to

home as an idea that is portable. This is again shown in a number four weeks later in ‘Artic Heroes’. Richard Horne’s dramatic dialogue has men trapped ‘midst the sea’s unfathomable ice’ who have been ‘three years […] cut off from the world’. Their thoughts turn to their ‘distant home’ and as the scene ends, one man shares a ‘consoling thought’ that ‘We, to the last, / With firmness, order and considerate care, / Will act as though our deathbeds were at home’ (p. 109). It is often the critique of cosmopolitanism that it uses ‘elsewhere’ to ‘support nationalism’, but as Anderson points out, this position fails to see ‘what is most interesting in the configured tension between the terms’. Home, as actual place and idea, even when in the far corners of the earth, does not illustrate a ‘rigid tectonics of core and periphery’, but rather functions more like a portal.

Given that this is Dickens’s journal, ‘Home’ is frequently sentimentalized. But lest we start thinking of Esther Summerson jingling her keys, ‘Home’ in Household Words is always in the process of being fragmented or put back together. Home is flexible because it is an idea, like the editorial shadow or the nation itself. Despite its images of sacred boundaries, ‘home’ is not a restrictive idea. Dickens knows that if you are not moving on you are dying out, like the doomed medicine men Mr Booley saw on the banks of the Mississippi. So, while ‘home’ does provide a knowable, familiar location (as the journal provides a familiar location for these stories, or the station houses a train), it is not always comfortable. Dickens himself was at times uncomfortable as we see in his relationship to Gaskell’s contributions. He very much wanted Gaskell to be a frequent contributor to Household Words and her story, ‘Lizzie Leigh’, ran serially in the first three numbers. This story, like most of Gaskell’s stories, is all about a home and what happens to its inhabitants. The story takes a typical seemingly happy home (married, children), dismantles it (Lizzie becomes pregnant and is banished to the city), relocates it (in the city after the death of the father), and reconstitutes it (back in the country, but as permanently altered, separate—but-connected homes). Dickens wished that happily restored homes could be more frequently featured in Gaskell’s work. He writes to Wills of her later contribution, ‘The Heart of John Middleton’ which appeared on 28 December 1850: ‘I think [it] the best thing of hers I have seen, not excepting Mary Barton – and if it had ended happily […] would have been a great success […] [It] will link itself painfully, with the girl who fell down at the well, and the child who tumbled down stairs. I wish to Heaven, her people

79 Anderson, Powers of Distance, p. 65.
80 Buzard mentions Summerson’s duty of care as the thing that allows Bleak House to be so insular. ‘Country of the Plague’, p. 415.
would keep a little firmer on their legs!’ But despite Dickens’s readerly wishes, Gaskell’s repeated attempts to loosen the structure of home (especially in Cranford, which ran in the journal from 1851 to 1853) suited Dickens’s editorial vision.

Dickens wanted to engage the English reader in a way that would carry him or her on the train of modernity without drowning out the song of ‘greeting and farewell’. Such an ambitious plan required the many voices of Household Words’s contributors, who were all passengers on the journal’s journey, making different stops, sometimes getting back on in different guises, and coming to different conclusions. It also required a conductor who could provide them with a place to house them while they moved. The editor is a conductor, but at Household Words, the editor is also king. But not because, as has often been argued, Dickens held such tight control over the journal. The other figure on the first page of every number is Henry V. The journal’s name is explained by the quote from Shakespeare’s Henry V that runs above the title: ‘Familiar in their Mouths as HOUSEHOLD WORDS’. This phrase is from Henry’s moving St Crispin’s Day speech before the battle at Agincourt when he wanders, partially disguised (he is wearing a cloak) amongst his troops, much like the ‘semi-omniscient, omnipresent, intangible’ editorial figure of ‘the shadow’. Henry urges the men to reflect on those abstract qualities – ‘the spirit of the people and the time’ – that make up the nation. The partially hidden leader wanders among and speaks personally to his men, encouraging them to live not just for the present, but for the past as well as the future, to live as ideas (sacrifice, courage, nation) as well as men. Henry on the eve of battle is a perfect figure for Dickens as editor and national architect. Dickens might have resisted the Prince Consort’s public celebration of the emerging nation in 1851; but as the cloaked king, he makes his journal a home for a thematically and formally diverse conversation about what a nation can mean at the ‘summer-dawn of time’.

81 Letters: Vol. 6, p. 231. Dickens is referring to events in ‘The Well of Pen-Morfa’ and ‘Lizzie Leigh’.