

Writing Bureaucracy, Bureaucratic Writing: Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, and Mid-Victorian Liberalism

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EVEN as Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857) centers on the Marshalsea Prison (indeed, its eponymous character is born in it), the novel invests considerable narrative energy in bringing to life another, albeit fictional, institution: the Circumlocution Office. Ostensibly modeled on the Treasury Office, the Circumlocution Office had "its finger . . . in the largest public pie, and in the smallest public tart."¹ All matters of public interest in *Little Dorrit* are routed through the Circumlocution Office, where they are doomed to languish indefinitely, if not in

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¹ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 100. All subsequent references to *Little Dorrit* are to this edition and are parenthetically cited in the text. I would like to thank Jonathan Grossman, Helena Michie, and the audience at the 2018 Dickens Universe Conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz for their suggestions on earlier iterations of this essay. I am grateful to the anonymous readers for *Nineteenth-Century Literature* for their helpful suggestions.

perpetuity, for if anything at all can be done about them, then the office, in what is its signature trait, would find a way “HOW NOT TO DO IT” (*Little Dorrit*, p. 100). But the “not doing” is not characterized by inactivity; on the contrary, the Circumlocution Office is characterized by a great deal of activity—whose result, though, is to thwart or defer any result or resolution. “If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match,” the narrator tells us, “nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault-full of ungrammatical correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office” (p. 100). Bound by process that is at once excessive, routine, and seemingly aimless, the Circumlocution Office, though parodying the Treasury Office in obvious ways, refers more expansively to the business of officialdom itself: it refers to state bureaucracy.

Little Dorrit has become emblematic in its critique of bureaucracy. In writing about bureaucracy in the nineteenth-century United States, Amanda Claybaugh credits *Little Dorrit* for introducing two new tropes—the Circumlocution Office and the mantra of “How Not to Do It”—that added to a growing discourse about bureaucracy “if only to condemn . . . [its] characteristic workings.”² That there should have been a heightened interest in the role and working of bureaucracy in mid-Victorian Britain is not surprising, given that exigencies of war have historically called for the large-scale administrative expertise that bureaucracies promise.³ Indeed, Britain’s losses in the Crimean Peninsula in the wake of the Battle of Balaclava (1854)—losses that were attributed to official mismanagement—led to rebuke, discussion, and investigation of government offices and protocols of administration. Dickens, an active participant in these exchanges, joined the Administrative Reform Association in 1855, delivering an impassioned speech at its meeting in June 1855. At that point, he was already a few

² Amanda Claybaugh, “Bureaucracy in America: De Forest’s Paperwork,” *Studies in American Fiction*, 37 (2010), 206.

³ See Christopher Dandeker, *Surveillance, Power, and Modernity: Bureaucracy and Discipline from 1700 to the Present Day* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), p. viii.

weeks into writing *Little Dorrit*, termed by some critics as his “most topical” novel.⁴ As Dickens wrote to William Macready in October 1855, “In No. III of my new book I have been blowing off a little of the indignant steam which would otherwise blow me up.”⁵ Notably, the title of the novel at that time was “Nobody’s Fault” (a point that I will return to). But what I would like to emphasize here is the extent to which Dickens’s criticism of bureaucratic bungling has made *Little Dorrit*, particularly in its depiction of the Circumlocution Office, a byword for an anti-bureaucratic sentiment that views bureaucracies as inept at best and tyrannical at worst, an attitude that we are now familiar with but that was only part of an evolving discourse on bureaucracy over the course of the nineteenth century.

What I propose in this essay, therefore, is a reading of *Little Dorrit* that does not take its purported anti-bureaucratism for granted. Dickens’s novel, I suggest, calls for a more layered reading of bureaucracy. It is not only that the bureaucracy forms an important component of the novel, but also that it constitutes what we might consider a “structuring paradigm.”⁶ The bureaucracy in *Little Dorrit* models—quite salubriously, I suggest—a bureaucratic sensibility that in its programmatic routinization we otherwise tend either to disavow or to demarcate from what I very loosely refer to as a “literary” imaginary, one that is seemingly more vital, dynamic, and responsive. It is precisely this movement away from the “bureaucratic” and toward the “literary” that underwrites much of the critical commentary on the Circumlocution Office.⁷ It is also a movement that *Little Dorrit* ostensibly warrants, in ways that foist

⁴ Harvey Peter Sucksmith, “Introduction,” in *Little Dorrit*, ed. Sucksmith, p. xv.

⁵ Charles Dickens, letter to William Macready, 4 October 1855, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeleine House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, et al., 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), VII, 716.

⁶ Dean de la Motte, “Writing *Fonctionnaires*, Functions of Narrative,” *L’Esprit Créateur*, 34, no. 1 (1994), 22.

⁷ My use of “literary” here is very circumspect. What does or does not count as “literary” at any given historical moment is shifting and contingent. In that respect, the distinction from the “bureaucratic” seems in fact to play an instrumental role in defining the literary. For a related discussion about the construction of literariness with relation to market values, see Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998).

a demarcation between the two realms—which, I contend, otherwise bleed into each other, producing what I refer to here as “bureaucratic writing.” “Bureaucratic writing,” I suggest, not only returns us to an earlier moment in the discourse of bureaucracy but also reminds us of the intimate link between “writing” and bureaucracy: bureaucracies, after all, produce a great deal of writing. However, I do not want to flatten the difference between the writing that bureaucracies produce and the writing that, say, novelists produce; rather, I want to use the idea of “bureaucratic writing” to think about the overlap as well as the divergence between the “literary” and the “bureaucratic,” if only because both the overlap and the divergence were equally critical in vivifying mid-Victorian conceptions of liberal politics.

In what follows, I examine Dickens’s engagement with bureaucracy while he was writing *Little Dorrit*. In so doing, I pay particular attention to the two titles of the novel, which indicate a more nuanced engagement with bureaucracy than critics usually acknowledge. Teasing out this nuance is important inasmuch as it reveals a stated contradiction at the heart of mid-Victorian liberalism, which bore a somewhat uneasy relationship with bureaucratic structures. Even as the rationalized expertise of bureaucracy offered a model of disinterested governance and an armature for a reformist liberal state, there was also considerable anxiety about an overly centralized bureaucracy and/or the effects of its routinized working. In this essay, I examine some of these concerns by referring briefly to the work of John Stuart Mill. In the final section of the essay, I then consider how *Little Dorrit* mediates these contradictory attitudes toward the bureaucracy. The novel proffers a response that, I suggest, construes at once a constructive role for the bureaucracy in relation to mid-Victorian reform and also a potentially revisionary role in terms of our notions of bureaucracy that are otherwise strongly influenced by Max Weber, who famously referred to the “iron cage” of bureaucracy.⁸

⁸ See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: G. Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1930), p. 181. The phrase “iron cage,” however, is specifically attributed to Parsons’s translation. For a discussion on Weber’s writing and Parsons’s translation, see Peter Baehr, “The ‘Iron Cage’ and the ‘Shell as



As mentioned, *Little Dorrit* ostensibly warrants a move away from bureaucratic structures—a critical move that Dickens’s readers would have been primed to make, given that Dickens made no secret of his displeasure with the current working of state bureaucracy. In the months immediately preceding his writing of the first installment of *Little Dorrit*, he staged a takedown of bureaucracy in several issues of *Household Words*.⁹ In a thinly allegorical piece in one of the February 1855 issues of the journal (he started drafting *Little Dorrit* in May 1855), Dickens described how the Prince of Bull was enthralled by his fairy godmother, Tape.¹⁰ Tape is hardly a benevolent patron. Rather, she is meddlesome enough to take it upon herself to oversee every aspect of the running of Bull’s kingdom. In doing so, she ruins any chance of progress or development in the kingdom, for as soon as she touches anything with her wand (which she is wont to do), reams of red tape appear that then immediately suspend whatever business is being negotiated. Dicken’s evident animus toward red tape, however, was not of the moment. This 1855 article had a precedent in an article that he published in *Household Words* in 1851. Titled “Red Tape,” the article points to the “public functionary,” the “Red Tapist,” who, “in either House of Parliament . . . will pull more Red Tape out of his mouth, at a moment’s notice, than a conjuror at a Fair.”¹¹ And, as we are balefully reminded, the Red Tapist “bound NELSON and WELLINGTON hand and foot with [red tape]—ornamented

Hard as Steel: Parsons, Weber, and the *Stahlhartes Gehäuse* Metaphor in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,” *History and Theory*, 40 (2001), 153-69.

⁹ In sifting through the terminology of the time (and of Dickens’s writings), Trey Philpotts argues that in calling for administrative reform, Dickens’s animus was directed not toward the civil servants but the politicians heading the bureaucracies (see Philpotts, “The ‘Civil Service’ and ‘Administrative Reform’: The Blame Game in *Little Dorrit*,” *Dickens Quarterly*, 17 (2000), 18.

¹⁰ See [Charles Dickens], “Prince Bull. A Fairy Tale,” *Household Words*, 2 (1855), 49-51.

¹¹ [Charles Dickens], “Red Tape,” *Household Words*, 2 (1851), 481.

them, all over, with bunches of it—and sent them forth to do impossibilities” (“Red Tape,” p. 481).

Whereas in 1851 the bureaucratic impairment of army and naval operations could be lamented with characteristic Dickensian exaggeration and the luxury of hindsight that a relatively long period of peace could afford, by 1855 the ongoing losses suffered by the British army in Crimea on account of official mismanagement added urgency to Dickens’s observations. As Dickens recounts in his 1855 tale of Prince Bull, chances of Bull’s victory in his war with Prince Bear are scuttled by Tape, who visits the troops with the result that provisions and supplies meant for the troops do not reach their intended destination.¹² Indeed, the events at Crimea were a topic of public debate and outcry, and the Commissariat, the department of the Treasury responsible for feeding the troops, paying them, clothing them, and arranging for land transport, was found wanting in the execution of its duties. The Commissary-General, William Filder, was criticized for his rigid adherence to protocol and lack of imagination in responding to rapidly changing circumstances.¹³ Military officials reported that the Commissariat returned requisition forms because signatures were “half an inch too low” (Philpotts, “Trevelyan, Treasury, and Circumlocution,” p. 294). While such stories may well have been apocryphal, they reflected the popular sentiment of the time, one that sought to hold bureaucratic inflexibility culpable for not just the loss of lives but also what was perceived to be a dent to national pride.

But placing blame turned out to be a slippery exercise. When Sir Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and administrative head of the Commissariat, appeared before the Sebastopol Committee, just two weeks before Dickens started writing *Little Dorrit*, he shifted blame away from the Commissariat onto other departments, who in turn did the same.¹⁴

¹² See Dickens, “Prince Bull,” p. 50.

¹³ See Trey Philpotts, “Trevelyan, Treasury, and Circumlocution,” *Dickens Studies Annual*, 22 (1993), 295.

¹⁴ See Philpotts, “Trevelyan, Treasury, and Circumlocution,” p. 294. The Sebastopol Committee was appointed in 1855 to investigate the mishandling of the military campaign.

Trevelyan's evasive testimony was but a culmination of a seemingly endless round of finger-pointing that had already been under way, for works with titles such as "Whom Shall We Hang?" (an 1855 pamphlet) and "Who is to Blame?" (in the January 1855 *Catholic Standard*) had begun to appear even before the much-publicized hearings of the Sebastopol Committee took place. But the difficulty in pinning blame was compounded by the fact that once the obvious face of the bureaucracy—its politically appointed leaders—absolved themselves of any wrongdoing (just as Barnacle does in the House of Commons in *Little Dorrit*, as indeed had Trevelyan before the Sebastopol Committee), one cannot really blame anyone given the necessarily anonymous, faceless nature of the bureaucracy. That the bureaucracy is depersonalized should not be attributed to a lapse on its part; rather, it counts as its precondition. Bureaucracy, as Max Weber points out, "develops the more perfectly the more the bureaucracy is 'dehumanized,' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation."¹⁵ Although comprised of individuals, bureaucracy functions best, then, when it is evacuated of the traces of "personal," the "individual." Therefore, even if the Commissariat was to accept collective blame in the aftermath of the losses in Crimea, in this and every other such case the structure of the bureaucracy can offer no obvious scapegoat: which individual, exactly, can you blame? Whose fault is it? The debacle at Crimea seemed to be "Nobody's Fault"—a term that *Bentley's Miscellany* used in February 1855, one that not only foretold the outcome of the Sebastopol Committee hearings but also commented on the nature of bureaucracy itself.¹⁶

¹⁵ Max Weber, "Bureaucracy" (1921), in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1946), p. 216.

¹⁶ See [Anon.], "State of the Army before Sebastopol—Mismanagement of the War," *Bentley's Miscellany*, 37 (1855), 111. In a compelling argument, Daniel M. Stout considers the difficulty of apportioning blame or culpability in a liberal context that despite its overt individualism is actually split "between the individualism of justice and the corporateness of both actors and actions" (Stout, *Corporate Romanticism: Liberalism, Justice, and the Novel* [New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2017], p. 11).

Dickens's initial decision to title *Little Dorrit* "Nobody's Fault," then, seems to capture the particular crisis of culpability that a depersonalized bureaucracy poses. But to link the original title directly to the Crimean issue seems to particularize the scope of the novel in a way that does disservice to it. Lionel Trilling in fact accounts for the perceived shortcomings of *Little Dorrit*—its lack of Dickens's characteristic verve, for instance—by noting that "the imagination of *Little Dorrit* is marked not so much by its powers of particularization as by its powers of generalization and abstraction. It is an imagination under the dominion of a great articulated idea, a moral idea."¹⁷ Dickens's early notes for the novel suggest a similarly broad idea, though he comes at it from a different perspective. "Nobody's Fault," the notes indicate, was to depict "the people who lay all their sins negligences and ignorances, on Providence."¹⁸ But the title, which was meant to be ironic on a moral register, ceased to be so when the complexion of ongoing political events made the culpability of an entire system so abundantly clear that the idea of individual blame—which the novel had originally intended to portray, albeit in more expansive terms—became either irrelevant or, in the context of the bureaucracy, problematic.¹⁹ Given that Dickens changed the title of the novel soon after writing chapter 10, "Containing the Whole Science of Government" (which is the sustained chapter on the Circumlocution Office), it is plausible to surmise that the question of culpability now bore a more immediate but wider systemic referent. It is significant, then, that commentators such as Harvey Peter Sucksmith view the change to the title *Little Dorrit* as a move away from a negative and pessimistic view of systemic forces to a more (individualized) affirmative "counter-theme of enlightenment, freedom, duty, and love" (Sucksmith, "Introduction," p. xxi). Sucksmith also notes that whereas Dickens's writing process in the earlier stages of the novel was more labored and frustrating than usual, the new title gave him

¹⁷ Lionel Trilling, "Little Dorrit," *Kenyon Review*, 15 (1953), 589.

¹⁸ Quoted in Harvey Peter Sucksmith, "Appendix A: Dickens's Notebook: Memoranda Relating to *Little Dorrit*," in *Little Dorrit*, ed. Sucksmith, p. 804. Also quoted in John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), II, 383.

¹⁹ See Sucksmith, "Introduction," p. xxi.

a clearer sense of direction, ensuring a smoother writing process.²⁰ Dickens's writing of the novel—indeed, his writings about the writing of the novel—is a subject that I will touch upon toward the end of this essay. But for now, I want to suggest that the tendency to track the movement from “Nobody’s Fault” to *Little Dorrit* in the emancipatory or redemptive terms outlined by critics such as Sucksmith seems too easy, too pat. It pits “system” (implied by “Nobody’s Fault”) against “individual” (implied by “Little Dorrit”), with the latter triumphing over the former in ways that, for later readers such as George Orwell, blunt or leave incomplete the systemic critique that Dickens’s novel might have inaugurated or been occasioned by.²¹

My intent is not to read *Little Dorrit* with a view to underlining its effectiveness (or lack thereof) in critiquing systems that are embodied here, ironically enough, by the bureaucracy. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the considerably more complex response that the idea of bureaucracy evidently elicited in the mid-Victorian liberal imagination. It is such a response that *Little Dorrit* registers even as its nuanced treatment of the bureaucracy has been overlooked by literary scholarship that tends to take the novel’s—and, indeed, the period’s—purported anti-bureaucratism at face value. But if we were to take Victorian anti-bureaucratism for granted, then we would be hard-pressed to account for the widespread support for strengthening bureaucratic structures in the colonies from those who otherwise decried it “at home.” We would be able to do so only by resorting to a logic of “colonial difference.” Such a logic is reproduced, howsoever inadvertently, by being taken at face value. For instance, in squaring his observation of the history of anti-bureaucratic sentiment over the course of the nineteenth century with the anomalous redoubling of bureaucratic structures in India (in the aftermath of 1857), Daniel Bivona notes: “Yet, one need not be too surprised by this: imperial and military affairs seem, throughout the nineteenth century, to provide the most consistent exceptions to

²⁰ See Sucksmith, “Introduction,” p. xxi.

²¹ See George Orwell, “Charles Dickens” (1940), in his *Critical Essays*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1946), pp. 52-53. Orwell’s comment referred to Dickens’s purported critique of political and administrative systems.

the general rule of British animus toward the exercise of governmental bureaucratic power.”²² There is no denying that military exigencies elicited the most urgent calls for bureaucratic reorganization. There is no gainsaying, either, the logic of colonial difference that underwrote liberal imperial policy. Yet as Uday Mehta, among others, has shown, the idea that colonies could or should be treated differently than Britain stemmed from a contradiction intrinsic to the otherwise normativizing bent of liberal thought.²³ It is precisely in the contradictions of liberal thought that I locate the more complex bureaucratic response registered by *Little Dorrit*.

The support for colonial bureaucracies, then, emerges not as an exception but as a more pronounced variant of the multivalent response that bureaucracy elicited in England. Admittedly, this essay is not about colonial bureaucracy, although that is something I examine at the end of the essay. But my positioning of a discussion of colonial bureaucracy at the end is not by any measure meant to spatially mark the limits of liberalism (a function that the invocation of colonies performs all too often in our scholarship). Rather, by focusing more on the multivalent response that the bureaucracy elicited in mid-Victorian England, I wish to render the relation between metropole and colony more proximate in ways that highlight the vexations of liberal practice in a broader frame, one that the fabled distinction between “Home” and “Away” otherwise—and misleadingly—forecloses.

In my reading of *Little Dorrit*, therefore, I keep both of its titles in my sight line, rather than reading them sequentially. Doing so allows me to advance a few suggestions. First, the transition from acknowledging the primacy of system to that of the individual, seemingly implied by the change in title, is by no means smooth or complete, if it is attempted at all. Second, even if the plot privileges individual over system, the novel does not do so at the level of character. And finally, this misalignment between plot and character accounts for the novel’s

²² Daniel Bivona, “Conrad’s Bureaucrats: Agency, Bureaucracy and the Problem of Intention,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 26 (1993), 152.

²³ See Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999).

subdued tone. (Trilling referred to *Little Dorrit* as not having “gusto” [“Little Dorrit,” p. 589]; in another context, George Levine refers to the novel as “thematiz[ing] failure of energy.”)²⁴ I read *Little Dorrit*’s subdued tone as a mark of its ambivalence. The novel’s ambivalence signals what I have been calling “bureaucratic writing,” which models a response to bureaucracy—such that we love to hate it or, more accurately, have to love to hate it, if only to keep alive the possibilities of political representation. Loving to hate bureaucracy would be one way of mediating the dilemma of mid-Victorian liberalism that, as Elaine Hadley points out, “disengaged from the intimacy of personalities” but was simultaneously haunted by the thought that the “deliberative subject” so produced would also be “the automatic subject, impelled not by reason and reflection but unthinking reflex fueled externally.”²⁵ Loving to hate the bureaucracy, then, operates along the dual axis of disavowal and attachment that renders the bureaucracy regenerative and animate but does not implicate us in it.²⁶ In terms of Dickens’s novel, therefore, to find comfort in the Dorrits’ release from the Marshalsea or the culminating event of Amy and Arthur’s marriage over and against the soul-crushing unresponsiveness of the Circumlocution Office is not to yield to a compromised reading of the novel but to offer the necessary liberal response that its plotline cultivates. But the significant feature of *Little Dorrit* is the fact that even as it depicts the Circumlocution Office in ways that produce the response outlined above, it does not dispense with a bureaucratic sensibility, which informs not only how the novel writes its characters but also how the novel itself was written.

²⁴ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 156.

²⁵ Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 52, 56.

²⁶ In this respect, the logic of loving to hate the bureaucracy also draws on that of the “complaint” that, as Lauren Berlant notes, functions “as a register . . . of the conditions of bargaining that allow people to maintain both their critical knowledge and their attachments to what disappoints” (Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* [Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2008], p. 22).



In *Considerations on Representative Government*, which was published in 1861 but most of which John Stuart Mill had already been thinking and writing about in the previous decade, Mill underlines the place of bureaucracy in government by noting that a bureaucratic government “accumulates experience, acquires well-trying and well-considered traditional maxims, and makes provisions for appropriate practical knowledge in those who have the actual conduct of affairs.”²⁷ However, as Mill is quick to point out,

But it [bureaucratic government] is not equally favourable to individual energy of mind. . . . In the profession of government, as in other professions, the sole idea of the majority is to do what they have been taught; and it requires a popular government to enable the conceptions of the man of original genius among them, to prevail over the obstructive spirit of trained mediocrity. (*Considerations on Representative Government*, p. 439)

In other words, Mill, though recognizing the benefit of a trained administrative cadre, is also alert to the stultification that a routinized bureaucracy engenders even when that routine is modulated by training and expertise. Bureaucratic structures lack, as Mill points out, “vital principle,” and he looks to “the man of original genius” to add spark or momentum (*Considerations on Representative Government*, p. 439). But as appealing as the idea of a popular government is, as is the sway of “the man of original genius,” Mill is nonetheless considerably circumspect about putting everything in store by the “popular” or the “individual.” As he cautions, “But it is, at the same time, one of the most important ends of political institutions . . . to secure, as far as they can be made compatible, the great advantage of the conduct of affairs by skilled persons, bred to it as an intellectual profession, *along* with that of a general control vested in, and seriously exercised by, bodies representative of the entire

²⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson, et al., 33 vols. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1963-91), XIX, 439.

people” (*Considerations on Representative Government*, p. 440; emphasis added).

If, for Mill, it was a balance between the representative and the administrative (the nonelected), the popular and the bureaucratic, the individual and the system, that yielded the ideal mode of governance, then it is worth noting that, for Dickens, such an ideal seemed remote at the time of his writing *Little Dorrit*. Not only was the bureaucracy compromised, but the ruling class was bankrupt, and the electorate was undiscerning. As Dickens wrote in his October 1855 letter to Macready, “but I have no present political faith or hope—not a grain” (*Letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, 716). And the reasons for his seemingly unremitting despair are manifold:

We appear to me to have proved the failure of Representative Institutions, without an educated and advanced people to support them. What with teaching people to “keep in their stations” . . . what with having no such thing as a Middle Class (for, though we are perpetually bragging of it as our safety, it is nothing but a poor fringe on the mantle of the Upper)—what with flunkeyism, toadyism, letting the most contemptible Lords come in for all manner of places . . . reading the Court Circular for the New Testament . . . I do reluctantly believe that the English people are, habitually, consenting parties to the miserable imbecility into which we have fallen, *and never will help themselves out of it.* (*Letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, 715–16; emphasis in original)

Evidently, Dickens’s displeasure at the bureaucratic aspect of government is proportional to his disappointment in its representative feature. And even as the finality of the forecast in the last line—“and [the English people] never will help themselves out of it”—seems ultimately to put weight on individual choice, judgment, and action, the reference to “English people,” and to the sociopolitical structures that they are imbricated in, makes it difficult to isolate individuals and view them as units of and for political representation.²⁸

²⁸ One should of course note that this letter (and indeed *Little Dorrit*) was written more than a decade before the legislation of the Second Reform Bill that extended the franchise. However, not only was the question of expanded political representation very much part of the conversation in the decades preceding the enactment of the

Significantly, Dickens wrote this letter to Macready after completing chapter 10 of his novel. And, as if in recompense, before the next installment of the novel he changed the title to *Little Dorrit*, which, according to him, had “a pleasanter sound in [his] ears” and, he insisted, was “equally applicable to the same story.”²⁹ Even as the move to the title *Little Dorrit* recuperates the individual (who for the purposes of this argument stands in for the “representative” or “political” element of government), I consider both titles in tandem. I do so because this approach helps navigate between the two poles of the governmental ideal that Mill outlines—the bureaucratic and the representative—and that Dickens wrestles with over the course of his novel in ways that affect its narrative progress and outcome. In the next section of this essay, I trace this narrative outcome, but in so doing I also argue that *Little Dorrit* does not, in any thematic way, realize the governmental ideal adumbrated by Mill. However, by modulating the affective mode of our reading experience, Dickens’s novel creates space for that ideal: an amalgam of the bureaucratic and the representative. And it does so not through the vector of hope but through that of ambivalence. Pointing to this ambivalence may very well be a version of the “bleak liberalism” that Amanda Anderson discusses in her sharp reassessment of the role of liberalism and its relation to aesthetic values. Anderson contends that the “aesthetic,” which values “complexity, difficulty, variousness, ambiguity, undecidability,” has been difficult to reconcile with the “democratic proceduralism” of liberal philosophy and its values of “normative explicitness, reason-giving argument, and transparency.”³⁰ It becomes significant, then, to read *Little Dorrit*’s liberalism through its ambivalence.



Second Reform Bill, but Dickens’s prognosis about the inability of the English people to help themselves also touches upon the liberal conundrum of individual vs. institution, embodiment vs. abstraction that recent scholarship on liberalism (by critics such as Stout, Hadley, Amanda Anderson, and Elaine Goodlad) has variously engaged with.

²⁹ Charles Dickens, letter to the Hon. Mrs. Richard Watson, 10 November 1855, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VII, 740.

³⁰ Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 7.

To be sure, in its depiction of the Circumlocution Office, *Little Dorrit* gives plenty for us to be frustrated about concerning the bureaucracy. Some of the most memorable passages of the novel come from its descriptions of the office's confounding ability to do nothing: "the more the Circumlocution Office did," we are told, "the less was done" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 303). And as the enemy of "doing it" (p. 101), the office ensures that men of promise such as Daniel Doyce are compelled to commit their service not to England but to other countries. However, it seems surprising that a novel that is touted for its criticism of the bureaucracy does not actually feature it all that much. Apart from serving as one of William Dorrit's creditors, the Circumlocution Office plays a relatively minor role in the unfolding of the plot. It has very little to do with the backstory of the Clennams and hardly features in the second volume. And if the main allegation that can be leveled against it is that it does nothing, then one has to ask, as does Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "what exactly *is* 'it' that the Circumlocution Office knows so well How not to do?"³¹ Not only is *Little Dorrit* never clear about the functions that the Circumlocution Office is supposed to perform in the world of the novel, but if the "not doing" becomes the primary feature that prompts our frustration, then it is significant that a credo of "not doing" actually permeates other aspects of the novel as well. If "doing" is to be discerned by the results produced (the lack of which is held against the Circumlocution Office), then Flora's looping verbiage or Mr. F's Aunt's non sequiturs provide a syntactic corollary of "not doing." At a thematic level, we may well echo Yeazell's question to ask: what is it that the others in the novel do? We do not really know what William Dorrit did before he went to the Marshalsea. We are never sure of what commercial enterprise the Clennam business house engages in (very little transaction occurs over the course of the novel). If Arthur manages the business side of his partnership with Daniel, then not only does he do a bad job of it, but he is rarely shown doing it. And even though Amy does manage to support her family by

³¹ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Do It or Dorrit," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 25 (1991), 35.

sewing, the details of her work, as Helena Michie points out, remain vague.³²

Strange as it may sound, however, the Circumlocution Office, in contrast, is always engaged in clearly delineated activity. Sure, the Junior Barnacle is described as singeing his ankles, and then his knees, by the fire when Arthur visits him, and some of the other functionaries are engrossed in polishing a gun-barrel with a pocket handkerchief or spreading marmalade on bread with a paper-knife (*Little Dorrit*, p. 109). But the descriptions of Arthur's interactions with the office are always verb-filled: "form-filling, corresponding, minuting, memorandum-making, signing, counter-signing" (p. 502). When Arthur asks how he can find out which department holds the contract that William Dorrit apparently defaulted on, he is told:

"Why, you'll—you'll ask till they tell you. Then you'll memorialise that Department (according to regular forms which you'll find out) for leave to memorialise this Department. If you get it (which you may after a time), that memorial must be entered in that Department, sent to be registered in this Department, sent back to be signed by that Department, sent back to be counter-signed by this Department, and then it will begin to be regularly before that Department." (p. 111)

Even as "memorialise" refers here to the act of petitioning, its invocation of the word "memory" adds a temporal dimension to the paragraph, which in any case underlines the protracted temporality characterizing the Circumlocution Office. Whatever the Circumlocution Office does—and it seems to do a great deal—counts for naught because it is routed through a labyrinthine process that continually defers resolution, thereby nullifying "action" into "inaction." On the one hand, the reliance on documentation and process, characteristic

³² See Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 36. In her innovative reading of the "floating signifiers" and verbal (dis)articulations in *Little Dorrit*, Rae Greiner remarks that language also fails to do its job in the novel (see Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012], pp. 115-16). However, for Greiner, this syntactic failure forms the basis for sympathetic attachment in the novel.

features of a bureaucracy that account for its protracted temporality, is intended to make for the transparent, procedural decision-making that underwrites the nonarbitrary nature of liberal governance.³³ On the other hand, as Akhil Gupta notes in his anthropology of bureaucracy, the consequent lack, or deferral, of “finished outcomes” “opens up possibilities of interpretation different from those we might posit were we to look only at finished outcomes.”³⁴ In the case of the Circumlocution Office, therefore, delays are read as obstruction; overaction registers as inaction; and our frustration at the office’s incompetence ensures that, at best, it is nothing more than an object of humor.

But if there is anyone who commands attention by doing something in the novel, then it is the financier Mr. Merdle. In fact, the Circumlocution Office’s protracted temporality stands in sharp contrast to Merdle’s money schemes, which, with their get-rich-quick lure, hinge on a compressed temporality. At one level, Merdle, hailed as the “man of this time” (*Little Dorrit*, p. 469), serves as a counterpoint to the Circumlocution Office. Arthur bemoans the fact that the multitudinous Barnacles and Stiltstalkings have “narrowed” a “great nation” to “little bounds” (p. 306). Merdle, by contrast, has single-handedly caused “the British name to be more and more respected in all parts of the civilised globe” (p. 386). Unlike the Circumlocution Office’s prodigious activity, which amounts to nothing, Merdle’s amounts to a lot: he generates wealth, he turns “all he touched to gold” (p. 241). At another level, though, the calamitous consequences of Merdle’s financial ventures (which also had a contemporary point of reference in the bank scandals of the early 1850s) make Merdle the target of censure, more so than the Circumlocution Office. Although the lapses of the Treasury, the inspiration for the Circumlocution Office, cost the country dear, in *Little Dorrit* it is Merdle, rather than the Circumlocution Office, who wreaks more havoc, adversely

³³ See Weber, “Bureaucracy,” pp. 197–98.

³⁴ Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2012), p. 13.

affecting a wider group of people, from those in the Bleeding Heart Yard to the upper reaches of Society.

Given that, as mentioned earlier, the Circumlocution Office has “its finger . . . in the largest public pie, and in the smallest public tart,” it is notable that *Little Dorrit* describes the office’s effects more in the abstract, whereas it individuates the effects of Merdle’s actions. The extent of the damage that Merdle has wrought is brought home by the fact that it visibly affects characters we have come to know: the Pancks, the Plornishes, Daniel, and, of course, Arthur. The novel’s use of characterization, then, makes the Circumlocution Office appear less destructive. This is not to suggest that it is let off the hook. But the cumulative results of Merdle’s unfettered activities, which bear consequence only toward the end of the novel (by which time readers have already established a sympathetic relation with many of the characters and are therefore more sensitive to their plight), stand in contrast to the ill-effects of the Circumlocution Office, which are described only in generalized terms and listed fairly early on in the novel. As a result of the contrasting ways in which the respective “victims” of Merdle and the Circumlocution Office are characterized—who is presented early on in the novel, who is not; who is characterized at all, who is not—Merdle emerges as a menace who must be removed from the world of the novel (and he is), whereas the Circumlocution Office, though immensely frustrating, even affords considerable humor and certainly does not pose a threat to the lifeworld of the novel (so it stays).³⁵ Ironically enough, the potency of “character” allows for a recuperation of disembodied process. The disastrous, embodied effects of Merdle’s dizzyingly accelerated schemes also give pause to consider whether bureaucracy in its

³⁵ Significantly, the fate of the Circumlocution Office stands in sharp contrast to that befalling the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House* (1852-53), where the case of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce languished for years because of a dilatory bureaucratic process. *Bleak House*, however, famously witnesses the “spontaneous combustion” of Mr. Krook, who is a stand-in for the Court of Chancery. No such symbolic indictment visits the Circumlocution Office. That Dickens revisits the question of bureaucratic process (and delay) within a few years of writing *Bleak House* underlines his continued preoccupation with this issue. That he renders it differently in *Little Dorrit*, though, reflects a changing if not more muted and ambivalent response to it.

emphatic process and accountability, its minute-making, signing, and countersigning, might offer a deferral that is more amelioratory than simply aimless.

And if this process and accountability are materialized primarily through paperwork (the Circumlocution Office generates voluminous writing), then Dickens, the writer who submitted himself to a daily regimen of writing, would not have been insensible to “bureaucratic” process. When writing *Little Dorrit*, Dickens, in addition to drawing up plans for each chapter in advance, maintained a separate book for writing numbered memorandum notes that assisted in systematic planning for the chapters. In fact, it is these notes that help trace the evolution of *Little Dorrit* from “Nobody’s Fault.” Cannily aware of the exigencies of serial publication, Dickens also knew the importance of delay, deferral, of protracted temporalities: jottings of “not yet” abound in his memoranda notes.³⁶ D. A. Miller perhaps has *Little Dorrit* in mind when he comments: “the Victorian novel establishes a little bureaucracy of its own, generating an immense amount of paperwork and sending its readers here, there, backward and forward, like the circumlocutory agencies that Dickens satirizes.”³⁷ The bureaucratic mode of writing in and of *Little Dorrit* was evident to Dickens’s friend and biographer, John Forster, who makes note of the elaborate and systematic preparation that Dickens undertook to write the novel but also seems compelled to make amends for a practice that seems routinized, uncreative, if not un-Dickensian. Forster comments: “Never before had his teeming fancy seemed to want such help; the need being less to contribute to its fulness than to check its overflowing” (*The Life of Charles Dickens*, II, 240).

I do not share Forster’s implicit assumptions (and construction) of the distinction between the writerly imagination and bureaucratic process. My point about “bureaucratic writing,” in fact, has been about melding these two seemingly

³⁶ See Paul D. Herring, “Dickens’ Monthly Number Plans for *Little Dorrit*,” *Modern Philology*, 64 (1966), 25, 27, 29. See also Harvey Peter Sucksmith, “Appendix B: The Number Plans,” in *Little Dorrit*, ed. Sucksmith, pp. 808-9.

³⁷ D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1988), pp. 88-89. However, although he focuses on *Bleak House*, Miller’s reading of bureaucracy is more guarded than mine.

disparate categories. I do, however, emphasize that the novel—this one, or any other—is not a bureaucratic document in itself; it is not red tape. For one thing, the fact that *Little Dorrit* in itself furnishes a “finished outcome” makes it a non-bureaucratic document even as it may be produced through a process that I have identified as bureaucratic. But more significantly, the novel is, by design, inventive rather than implementational. It is about creating life-worlds and not just about managing them; the novel possesses what Mill would describe as “vital principle.” But if one of the key ways that the novel claims “vital principle”—and thereby distinguishes itself from a bureaucratic document—is through its creation of characters, then it is ironic that characterization in *Little Dorrit* actually makes a claim for “bureaucracy” precisely by accounting for the inability of bureaucracy to function systematically. In other words, if the Circumlocution Office does not deliver, then its lapses are attributed not so much to an inherent flaw as to the toadyism, favoritism, and nepotism of the characters running it.

The Circumlocution Office is an example of a failed bureaucracy because it is profoundly unbureaucratic. Instead of prioritizing disinterested professional expertise—principles that lay at the heart of the Civil Service Reform exercise initiated by the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1853–54, for instance—the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* is run by and as a family dynasty. The spectacularly incompetent Sparkler is appointed to a high position in it as a matter of personal favor; the heir-apparent, Ferdinand Barnacle, pleads with Arthur not to ask him anything, and Arthur’s pursuit of information makes it necessary to visit the senior Barnacle at home, blurring the lines that the bureaucracy tries to draw between the personal and the professional. It is as if characterization, and the network of sociality that it necessarily embeds individuals in, function to highlight the problems besetting the current bureaucratic structure rather than attributing it to anything intrinsic to the institution itself. But this also means that the problem of bureaucracy would not necessarily be solved if the characters were “good.” In other words, even as one realizes that any operation helmed by the likes of Barnacle or Sparkler could hardly be expected to function well, one also

wonders if the constitutive members of bureaucracy, who are expected to be impartial, disinterested, professional—depersonalized—as a matter of course, can ever be fully amenable to characterization. What would it mean to “properly” portray the bureaucrat? The “good” bureaucrat? This is not to say that bureaucrats *qua* bureaucrats cannot ever be characterized, but, couched as they would have to be in terms of sociality, interiority, familialism, and familiarity, they would always in some ways be compromised. The unrepresentability of a functional bureaucracy, then, is both a cause and an effect of its necessarily depersonalized nature.

If, as it seems to me, *Little Dorrit* makes a muted case for the bureaucracy, then it does not do so by holding out hope for a “good” bureaucrat. That figure, Dickens suggests, can be represented only allegorically. In an article in *Household Words* published in 1856, when he was midway through writing *Little Dorrit*, Dickens issued a call for “Somebody” to take on the work of government, in contrast to the “Nobody” who had been responsible for the public disaster: “Now, might it not be well, if it were only for the novelty of the experiment, to try Somebody a little? . . . what if we were to try Somebody for real work? . . . I want Somebody who shall be no fiction; but a capable, good, determined workman.”³⁸ But even as he calls for the extranarrative reality of “Somebody,” it is also clear that “Somebody” cannot be the subject of narrative: “Where do I, as an Englishman, want Somebody?” he asks, to which he replies: “Before high Heaven, I want him *everywhere!*” (Dickens, “Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody,” p. 146; emphasis added). Dickens describes “Somebody” as capable but elusive in his ubiquity, an individual, but one who cannot be individualized.

This description may well be an accurate one for Amy, who in her littleness is barely noticed (Arthur can hardly see her in the beginning) and whose compassion and sensitivity, though serving as a foil to the Circumlocution Office, cannot be placed along any interiorized trajectory. She just is. Arthur tells Flora, “[Amy’s] life has been one of such trial and devotion, and such

³⁸ [Charles Dickens], “Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody,” *Household Words*, 14 (1856), 146.

quiet goodness, as you can scarcely imagine" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 266). We, as readers, can scarcely imagine it either. Amy's is a fundamental goodness that, as Claudia Klaver notes, remains unexplained and ultimately problematic.³⁹ I am not suggesting that in her temperamental quietness or resistance to individualization Amy stands in for the "good" bureaucrat who cannot otherwise be represented, although Sherri Wolf does forward an argument along those lines.⁴⁰ Rather, I am struck by the fact that though the novel does not really develop any of its central characters, the plot is geared around them in ways that sustain and marshal our interest, so much so that the ending—Amy's marriage to Arthur—seems to provide sufficient closure. Of course, if by "character development" we refer, as I do here, to a trajectory of psychological depth and interiority, the rounding out of characters, then *Little Dorrit* is not exceptional in its lack of character development. Critics going back to E. M. Forster have commented on the lack of psychological depth attending Dickens's characterization.⁴¹ In the context of Victorian liberalism, this particular mode of characterization evinces what Hadley describes as "a function of the logic of the individual as *form* rather than a feature of the individual's psychic richness" (*Living Liberalism*, p. 66; emphasis in original). Commenting on *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), the novel that Dickens would write after *Little Dorrit*, Daniel Stout reads Dickens's "indifference to personhood" as reflective of the later novel's coming to terms with a more distributed sense of agency.⁴²

For the purposes of my argument, the holding back (as it were) on character development can be construed as yet another facet of what I have been calling bureaucratic writing. But what is also important—and this goes back to the political vs. bureaucratic dilemma that I referred to earlier (via Mill)—is

³⁹ See Claudia Klaver, "Natural Values and Unnatural Agents: *Little Dorrit* and the Mid-Victorian Crisis in Agency," *Dickens Studies Annual*, 28 (1999), 31.

⁴⁰ See Sherri Wolf, "The Enormous Power of No Body: *Little Dorrit* and the Logic of Expansion," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 42 (2000), 223-54.

⁴¹ See E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927), pp. 108-9.

⁴² Daniel Stout, "Nothing Personal: The Decapitation of Character in *A Tale of Two Cities*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 41 (2017), 35. For an expanded version of this essay, see Stout, *Corporate Romanticism*, pp. 115-44.

what Alex Woloch describes as the “superficial shell of asymmetry” that Dickens’s novel retains.⁴³ Realist novels, Woloch avers, are asymmetrical inasmuch as narrative space is unevenly distributed among the characters that the novel brings into being. The novel “rounds out one or several characters while flattening, and distorting, a manifold assortment of characters” (Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 31). Therefore, even as Dickens’s novels teem with minor characters, we never lose sight of the protagonists. Although neither Amy nor Arthur is ever really rounded out in *Little Dorrit*, the plot is geared around them. But, even as the mystery of the Clennam will and codicil or the story of Amy’s past and the prospects of her future are what moves the plot along, the novel’s characterological investment in them is decidedly restrained. And this is where Dickens departs from other realist writers inasmuch as his “protagonists are sometimes ‘unable to think,’ because the narrative relentlessly moves away *from* their thoughts, from their interiority, toward the external events, and minor characters” (Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 132; emphasis in original). On the one hand, this skewed relationship between plot and characterization accounts for the novel’s ambivalence: *Little Dorrit* is very interested in what happens *to* the characters, but it is not interested *in* them. On the other hand, this ambivalence, which is directly correlative to the “shell of asymmetry,” is critical to arriving at—or approximating—that delicate balance between the bureaucratic and the political, the administrative and the representative, the system and the individual.

Even as Arthur and Amy’s marriage occasions discomfort (given the filial nature of their relationship for a good part of the novel), the wedding provides a tidy conclusion for Amy, whose diminutiveness is emphasized early in *Little Dorrit* by the fact that, when as a child she did not understand what the Circumlocution Office stood for, she always felt crushed by the sound of Tite Barnacle’s name (*Little Dorrit*, p. 94). In its profession of love and expression of general conviviality, the final wedding scene seems free of the weight of the bureaucracy,

⁴³ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), p. 132.

especially because Daniel Doyce, the character who suffers most at the hands of the Circumlocution Office and who, in fact, had refused to attend the Gowan-Meagles wedding because he did not want to encounter the Barnacles, not only attends this wedding but also plays a role in the ceremony. An ending such as this implies a clear transition from “Nobody’s Fault” to *Little Dorrit*. It is important to follow through with the enabling aspects of that transition and the discreteness that it implies between the two titles, if only because our resultant distancing from the bureaucracy underlines a recognition of its stultifying effects—a recognition that, ironically, can keep the governmental ideal, at least in its mid-Victorian liberal incarnation, alive. In other words, our loving to hate the bureaucracy actually secures its place, while dispelling the danger of our being enthralled by it. Significantly, while *Little Dorrit* makes this possible, it also makes space for a bureaucratic sensibility even as—or precisely because—it is critical of the Circumlocution Office. And if the final scene has the newlyweds but quietly walk away into the crowd (and Dickens’s notes for it explicitly state, “Very quiet conclusion”),⁴⁴ then these details simply underline the necessary ambivalence that both marks and is offered by the novel.



On 11 May 1857, Dickens informed Wilkie Collins that he had completed *Little Dorrit*.⁴⁵ Just a day earlier, on 10 May, half a world away in Barrackpore, Bengal, a native sepoy, Mangal Pandey, refused to use the newly commissioned Enfield rifle in an act of defiance that supposedly triggered the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857, in which Indian soldiers rebelled against their British officers.⁴⁶ The aftermath of the Mutiny, as we know, ushered in the demise of the East India

⁴⁴ See Sucksmith, “Appendix B: The Number Plans,” p. 828.

⁴⁵ Charles Dickens, letter to Wilkie Collins, 11 May 1857, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, VIII, 322.

⁴⁶ The causes for the revolt were considerably more complex and manifold. See Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Dateline 1857: Revolt Against the Raj* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2008).

Company, and India came under the rule of the British Crown. But India was ruled on the ground by an administrative state. The seat of power in Calcutta, the capital of British India, was Writers' Building, which was so called because it was built in the late eighteenth century to house the administrative officers and clerks of the East India Company, who were called "writers" (writing comprised much of their work). Writers' Building still stands, and it currently houses the offices of the Government of West Bengal. The building, and its name, concretizes the link between bureaucracy and writing that I have been trying to make here. But Writers,' as it is commonly called, also serves as a reminder of the absoluteness of bureaucratic power through which India was primarily ruled. Indians could not vote. Writers' serves as a reminder of the liberal bureaucratic ethos of gradualism that sought to defer the granting of representative power to Indians: they were never ready, not yet, not now. In fact, John Stuart Mill, votary of representative government and longtime employee of the East India Company in London, was of the opinion that representative government could justifiably be withheld from dominions such as India.

Yet it was by gaining entrance into the bureaucracy that Indians, many of whom were authors, playwrights, and novelists, variously launched an anticolonial critique that evolved into a nationalist movement.⁴⁷ The point I am trying to make here is not about Indians destroying the master's house with the master's tools, nor about the colonial state's hospitality to critique or opposition. Rather, I want to register the amenability of bureaucracy to the "vital principle" that it is always described against, but with which it bears a crucial complementary relation. Bureaucratic writing of the kind that *Little Dorrit* constitutes presents, formally and thematically, what I here offer a very brief historical overview of (albeit in its more pronounced colonial variant). In discussing Dickens's writing process, Sucksmith notes that although Dickens was initially

⁴⁷ I refer here to nineteenth-century authors such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Oyyarathu Chandu Menon, and Dinabandhu Mitra. Also, the passage from anticolonialism to nationalism is by no means seamless or predictable. See Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India," *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, 7 (1993), 37.

unsure of the title, he was very certain about the prison metaphor that he uses throughout the novel. The prison metaphor, very evident in *Little Dorrit*, however, is not Max Weber's early-twentieth-century notion of the "iron cage" of bureaucracy, which, though ominously prescient in light of the histories of the twentieth century, has also calcified our understanding of bureaucracy.⁴⁸ It may be worth our while to recall how for Victorians, both British and Indian, bureaucracy could be profitably balanced by claims to representative government as much as it could function to temper "popular" men of "original genius."

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ABSTRACT

Sukanya Banerjee, "Writing Bureaucracy, Bureaucratic Writing: Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, and Mid-Victorian Liberalism" (pp. 133–158)

In its famed representation of the Circumlocution Office, Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857) is widely recognized as satirizing bureaucracy. Arguing instead that the novel proffers a more nuanced perspective on bureaucracy, this essay situates Dickens's depiction of the Circumlocution Office amid mid-Victorian debates on liberalism. More specifically, the essay makes note of the tension between ascendant ideals of representative government and the acknowledged importance of a nonelected but competent bureaucracy. Dickens's mediation of this tension, the essay argues, not only informs his representation of the Circumlocution Office but also accounts for the novel's subdued tone and characterization, which the essay reads as ambivalence. But in reading the novel's depiction of bureaucracy through the lens of ambivalence, the essay is also alert to Dickens's bureaucratic method of writing *Little Dorrit* itself. The bureaucratic writing of the novel, the essay suggests, opens up the possibility not only of rethinking the role and place of bureaucracy but also of the boundaries between bureaucratic and literary sensibilities as well.

Keywords: Charles Dickens; *Little Dorrit*; bureaucracy; Liberalism; the novel

⁴⁸ For a literary reading of a more capacious understanding of bureaucracy, see Ceri Sullivan, *Literature in the Public Service: Sublime Bureaucracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).