Little, Maybe Less: *Little Dorrit*'s Minimal Moralia

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ALTHOUGH the novel opens on a character whose outsized villainy is descended straight from melodrama and features a heroine whose categorical goodness seems derived straight from Christian hagiography, it has never been exactly straightforward to read Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857) as a novel particularly concerned with individual morality. Indeed, the profound moral stasis of both Rigaud (always bad) and Little Dorrit ("Always Little Dorrit!") already suggests a novel that has, at both its center and its periphery, turned away from conventional questions of characterological *bildung*.[1] Faced with such difficulties, Lionel Trilling sought to corral matters into a standardly novelistic framework by presenting Arthur Clennam, *Little Dorrit*'s stubbornly adrift protagonist—"I have no will," he says (*Little Dorrit*, p. 20)—as an admonitory case study in ethical lethargy.[2] But whatever we think of Arthur in particular,

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[1] Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 714. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

[2] See Lionel Trilling, "Little Dorrit," *Kenyon Review*, 15 (1953), 577–90.

any standardly liberal reading of *Little Dorrit* is bound to bump up against the novel's obvious interest in systemic conditions—debtors' prisons, the Circumlocution Office, etc.—that perplex questions of action and consequence. Thus, Alexander Welsh moved away from Trilling's focus on personal moral dramas, arguing that Dickens came to see his working title—"Nobody's Fault"—as too literal for a novel whose central concern had become "the refusal of responsibility in the world at large."[3] And more recently, Elaine Hadley has linked *Little Dorrit* to a mid-century "accountability crisis" rooted in increasing bureaucratic complexity and statistical abstraction.[4] Positions like Welsh's and Hadley's revise Trilling's approach, orienting themselves not around the fact that particular persons are particularly bad (or good) but around the fact that no one "in the world at large" seems to particularly care. Still, even as this attention to social systems constitutes a real critical advance over the simpler grammar of Trilling's primal moral scenes, these revisions nevertheless remain underwritten by an assumption that Trilling would happily share: that the novel's ultimate aim and urging is a reformed system of accountability. From the perspective of an account like Welsh's or Hadley's, Trilling's mistake lies not so much in his moralism as in his presumption that access to some functional machinery of moral accountability might be taken for granted. The systemic account of *Little Dorrit* registers a skepticism about the availability—but not really the advisability—of a substantiated moralism, a world in which all our verdicts can show cause.[5]

[3] Alexander Welsh, *Dickens Redressed: The Art of "Bleak House" and "Hard Times"* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), p. 29. For Welsh's hypothesis regarding the novel's title (that Dickens changed direction when he realized that "Nobody" was not "the satiric name of an identifiable target"), see Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 51.

[4] See Elaine Hadley, "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody," *Victorian Studies,* 59 (2016), 65.

[5] The conclusion of Hadley's position, for instance, sees Dickens pointing to the prospect of a "'somebody,' who 'shall be no fiction'" (Hadley, "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody," p. 83); Hadley is quoting from [Charles Dickens], "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody," *Household Words,* 14 (1856), 146. That somebody, Hadley writes, "is determined but also syntactically indeterminate: we only know as of now that he will be held accountable" (Hadley, "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody," pp. 83–84).

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The argument that follows here shares the critical intuition exemplified in Welsh and Hadley: that *Little Dorrit* is a novel in which the mechanisms of moral accountability have ceased to function. But in contrast to our usual way of proceeding, I will not be arguing that the refusal of responsibility is a condition that the novel thinks it can correct. More surprisingly, I do not think that it is a condition the novel *would* correct, even if it could. This admittedly estranging position—the novel's willingness, and maybe even its eagerness, to let accountability slide—marks the key difference between *Little Dorrit* and the targeted rage sounded by many of Dickens's journalistic pleas for social reform. In *Little Dorrit* the goal is to survive, rather than correct, a world that seems to be not only without meaningful shape but beyond meaningful shaping.

One readily apparent indication of this shapelessness can be found in the sheer size of the company Arthur Clennam keeps in his desultory inaction. Fanny Dorrit wishes she were dead, and the running joke about her uncle, who lives most of his life in a dark orchestra pit, is that he is "dead without being aware of it" (*Little Dorrit,* p. 231). John Chivery writes and rewrites his epitaph throughout the novel, dying one way and then dying another. Even Daniel Doyce—the text's most apparent avatar of moral intelligence and patient resolve—spends seven hundred pages patiently begging his friends and partners to "abandon [his] invention" (p. 654) and the promise of rational order it represents. Character after character in this novel seems to be living through—or to be living after—a version of what Rigaud's signature exclamation (*Mort de ma vie*!) would call the death of their lives. For some—for Plornish, Caveletto, Maggy—the possibility of a tomorrow that could be meaningfully different from today seems never really to have appeared. For others—for Doyce (who wants to just let it go), for Flora Finching (who has been let go), for Mrs. Clennam (who survives on pride and the occasional oyster), or for Mr. and Mrs. Meagles (orbiting the globe after the death of a child)—the future that was once on offer seems to have been replaced by the shadowy half-life of a counterfactual facsimile. The affects with which these stranded islands of time are weathered vary widely: there is rage (Miss Wade and Tattycoram), comic self-

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deprecation (John Chivery), barely rippled placidity (Amy Dorrit), and maudlin nostalgia (Arthur, Flora). But the basic existential condition of living out a life that has outlived the possibility of a meaningful future is all but universal. Mrs. Clennam's salivating vigilance for the millennium may be an ugly feeling, but its more important mistake in this post-rapture text is historical. In this novel, the days of judgment, if there ever were any, are behind us; *Little Dorrit* is what's left.

If the novel's only thought were that meaningful, consequential action lies lost in some all-but-heroic past, we might still construe it as a plausible, if possibly quixotic, plea for responsibility's resurrection. But *Little Dorrit* not only declines to indicate such a future but also marshals a consistent critique of the kinds of appraisals and moral scorekeeping it would require. Among the deepest ideological surprises of this novel is its decision to pair Circumlocution with the Marshalsea: the symbol of a world made futureless by the absence of meaningful action and the symbol of a world made futureless by a pathological obsession with accountability. On the one hand, *Little Dorrit* clearly recognizes that the impulse to demand that the present account for itself—disclose its financials, as it were—is part of an entirely comprehensible desire for an explicable world. But on the other hand, the novel also sees in this demand a maniacal reduction of the present into nothing more than a permanent audit of the past. Mr. Pancks, who serves as something like the novel's head moral and financial auditor, will routinely describe his work as "fortune-telling." But because his sole concern is with recovering dead-lettered inheritances, to "tell" really means only to "count," and "fortune" has nothing to do with the future. Rent collecting (what you owe) and Pancksian fortune telling (what you are owed) are two aspects of the same operation, and both understand the present only and entirely as a scene of compensation. It is thus that the pursuit of accountability ("I deserve a return," says William Dorrit; "I claim a return" [*Little Dorrit*, p. 464]), quite as much as its unavailability, produces a world that never moves forward.

Only when we have these two thoughts up and running simultaneously—the meaninglessness of a world without responsibility and the meaninglessness of a world with nothing

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but—do we have the full description of the entrapment that *Little Dorrit* projects. The walled-off routes, no thoroughfares, and blocked futures that appear all over the novel are—like the moment in which Arthur turns "towards the window, and [sits] looking out at the wall" (*Little Dorrit,* p. 730)—doubly walled: blocked one way, then blocked the other. The Circumlocution Office ensures that the future never comes, and the Marshalsea ensures that the past never goes away. This double bind makes it nonsensical for *Little Dorrit* to argue for more accountability, and nonsensical to argue for less. There is no way out, exactly, only the route the novel's conclusion projects: "quietly down" into a world where lots are shared ("inseparable and blessed"), the conditions are mixed ("in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain"), and no one is keeping score (p. 802).

Much of Dickens's editorial writing proceeded on the entirely Trillingesque assumption that society's ills stem from a combination of active immorality and immoral inactivity, and that social reform therefore requires mustering individuals toward a good they can be counted on, in their heart of hearts, already to recognize. But not all of it.

On 10 March 1855, just as he was busily multiplying the "immense number of little bits of paper" that would be his first notes toward *Little Dorrit,* Dickens published an astounding essay in *Household Words* called "Gone to the Dogs."[6] Here is how that essay begins:

> We all know what treasures Posterity will inherit, in the fulness of time. We all know what handsome legacies are bequeathed to it every day, what long luggage-trains of Sonnets it will be the better for, what patriots and statesmen it will discover to have existed in this age whom we have no idea of, how very wide awake it will be, and how stone blind the Time is. We know what multitudes of disinterested persons are always going down

[6] Charles Dickens, letter to Wilkie Collins, 4 March 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, 555.

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> to it, laden, like processions of genii, with inexhaustible and incalculable wealth. We have frequent experience of the generosity with which the profoundest wits, the subtlest politicians, unerring inventors, and lavish benefactors of mankind, take beneficent aim at it with a longer range than Captain Warner's, and blow it up to the very heaven of heavens, one hundred years after date. We all defer to it as the great capitalist in expectation, the world's residuary legatee in respect of all the fortunes that are not just now convertible, the heir of a long and fruitful minority, the fortunate creature on whom all the true riches of the earth are firmly entailed. When Posterity does come into its own at last, what a coming of age there will be!
>
> It seems to me that Posterity, as the subject of so many handsome settlements, has only one competitor. I find the Dogs to be every day enriched with a vast amount of valuable property.[7]

Having thus established its punchline, "Gone to the Dogs" proceeds to run variations on the ever-increasing account balance of the Dogs. "It is," the essay says, "overwhelming to think of the Treasury of the Dogs" ("Gone to the Dogs," p. 123). The "shining castle" of our youthful expectations? "Gone," of course, "to the Dogs." The "friend[s] of [our] youth" and the "whole . . . estate" of our early loves—all now in "Canine possession" (p. 121). Even shiftless old Bob Tample seems to have finally managed, after many years "nearly dead and never quite," to "run the Dogs wholly down" (p. 122). Financial empires go to the Dogs overnight. "Inanimate streets of brick and mortar houses, go to the Dogs" (p. 122). Even key institutions of our national culture—drama, leisure-time, and Sunday amusements—have, it would appear, run dogward.

Through all of these examples the essay's tragicomedy is pitch perfect. In the final two paragraphs, though, the essay takes a dark and ferocious turn. Here is how it ends:

> Consider the last possessions that have gone to the Dogs. Consider, friends and countrymen, how the Dogs have been enriched, by your despoilment at the hands of your own blessed governors—to whom be honour and renown, stars and garters,

[7] [Charles Dickens], "Gone to the Dogs," *Household Words*, 11 (1855), 121. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

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> for ever and ever!—on the shores of a certain obscure spot called Balaklava, where Britannia rules the waves in such an admirable manner, that she slays her children (who never never never will be slaves, but very very very often will be dupes), by the thousand, with every movement of her glorious trident! When shall there be added to the possessions of the Dogs, those columns of talk, which, let the columns of British soldiers vanish as they may, still defile before us wearily, wearily, leading to nothing, doing nothing, for the most part even saying nothing, only enshrouding us in a mist of idle breath that obscures the events which are forming themselves—not into playful shapes, believe me—beyond. If the Dogs, lately so gorged, still so voracious and strong, could and would deliver a most gracious bark, I have a strong impression that their warning would run thus:
>
> "My Lords and Gentlemen. We are open-mouthed and eager. Either you must send suitable provender to us without delay, or you must come to us yourselves. There is no avoidance of the alternative. Talk never softened the three-headed dog that kept the passage to the Shades; less will it appease us. No jocular old gentleman throwing sommersaults on stilts because his great-grandmother is not worshipped in Nineveh, is a sop to us for a moment; no hearing, cheering, sealing-waxing, tapeing, fire-eating, vote-eating, or other popular Club-performance, at all imports us. We are the Dogs. We are known to you just now, as the Dogs of War. We crouched at your feet for employment, as William Shakespeare, plebeian, saw us crouching at the feet of the Fifth Harry—and you gave it us; crying Havoc! in good English, and letting us slip (quite by accident), on good Englishmen. With our appetites so whetted, we are hungry. We are sharp of scent and quick of sight, and we see and smell a great deal coming to us rather rapidly. Will you give us such old rubbish as must be ours in any case? My Lords and Gentlemen, make haste! Something must go to the Dogs in earnest. Shall it be you, or something else?" ("Gone to the Dogs," p. 124)

We end in a very different place: one governed not by the quotidian Dogs of Decline but by the extravagant Dogs of War. As the reference to Balaklava makes clear, the immediate historical context is the Crimean War and Dickens's seething anger over the lack of accountability for its conspicuous mismanagement and its masses of wasted life. But it is hard to

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square the incandescent energy of this closing critique—let alone the properly revolutionary suggestion that if someone needs to die it should be the aging "Lords and Gentlemen"—with the more mundane forms of decline that "Gone to the Dogs" spends most of its time describing: the way fortunes vanish, or neighborhoods decline, or we fall out of love, or lose interest in life. Our first thought may be that the discrepancy is one of scale or value. The Dogs of War are, in their inordinate violence, about to consume the entire world—and what's a now-faded teenage dream or even the life of sweet Bob Tample when put up against the value of everything? But if the Dogs of War seem cosmically fearsome in comparison to the more domestic Dogs of Decline, it is in fact only the Dogs of War that the essay suggests we can do anything to change.

"Gone to the Dogs" does not, to be sure, promise that change will be simple. In calling back to Henry V, it suggests that the War Dogs are a product of a much longer history of militarized ambition, a mercenary greed papered over by a national myth of freedom and a popular press whose "columns of talk," in a beautiful image, ink over the columns of the dead. But however aided, abetted, and richly endowed they may be, the essay continues to suggest that the War Dogs are not necessary beasts. They are creatures of moral failure—greed, ignorance, self-serving negligence—and therefore correctable by moral vigilance. If we want to starve the Dogs of War, the essay suggests, then we should start by starving our governors.

It is for this reason that what initially appears to be the darkest part of "Gone to the Dogs" is in fact, on a slightly longer thought, its most hopeful. For if it is to our blessed governors that the Dogs of War might be traced, then it is far less clear how we might curtail the Dogs of Decline. To whose hands, exactly, would we look? What joins economic recession, collapsing financial empires, declining public cultures, and diminished private hopes is that no one can say where, exactly, their diminishment begins. If the paradox of Posterity sketched in the first paragraph is that it causes us to train our benevolence on a pointlessly distant (because ever-receding) horizon, then the mystery of Decline is one of origin rather than aim.

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Like the information that, in *Little Dorrit*, leads Mr. Meagles to Miss Wade (one of those "odd impressions . . . which nobody seems to have picked up in a distinct form from anybody, and yet which everybody seems to have got hold of loosely from somebody" [*Little Dorrit*, p. 315]), the declines charted in "Gone to the Dogs" appear as an emergent consensus gathered up from everywhere and nowhere at once. These are not Dogs that one can let slip; they are, rather, something like the Dogs of Slipping. And compared with these shadowy processes, one might in fact prefer the Dogs of War and feel that the essay has done us a kind of favor in evolving the one out of the other. Governments that are in the hands of governors can, at least in principle, be re-leashed.

This, anyway, was liberalism's core promise—that if you did not like the despoiling incompetence of your governors, you had options, not only at the ballot box but, as John Stuart Mill's vigorous defenses of free speech knew, in the public and the published spheres. After the past five decades of theoretical reflection, in which the critique of liberalism has constituted a principal focus for the humanities, no reader today is likely to take liberalism for the transparent ticket to social progress that Mill imagined.[8] But one does not need to rehearse (let alone defend) the full political apparatus of liberalism in order to see that there is an obvious sense in which *any* program of reform—whatever the substance of its political doctrine—requires something that we might think of as a formal or metaphysical liberalism. The commitment to the idea that the good (however defined) can be aimed at requires us to believe that the world is susceptible to managed adjustment. And our outraged disbelief, when faced with the greed of war merchants or the inefficiency of sinecured bureaucrats, presumes that actions derive in intentional ways from particular agents and that consequences can be traced back to their causes. If moral

[8] The list of work that could plausibly be included in the critique of liberalism is obviously far too vast for a note, but for a recent and important taxonomy of the organizing claims of the critique of liberalism, an energetic dissection of its aggrandizements and oversimplifications, and a defense of some key liberal thinkers against some of the main charges made against them (abstraction, uncritical optimism, etc.), see Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016).

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accountability is not on offer—if it really is Nobody's Fault—then why complain at all?

This metaphysical liberalism may seem somehow too basic to mention, let alone to seriously question. And two of Dickens's more typical attacks on the Crimean War take it entirely on faith. "Stores for the First of April" (published 7 March 1857) treats the failure of the official inquiries to assign responsibility not just as shameful but as flagrantly self-disqualifying; for whole stretches, Dickens's "critique" consists entirely in adding some outraged exclamation points into an otherwise verbatim quotation of the committee's own exculpatory conclusions.[9] Similarly, "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody" (published 30 August 1856) parodies the official determination (that nobody is responsible) by chronicling in mock astonishment all of the impressive accomplishments this "Nobody" has achieved.[10] On one level, "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody" shares with "Gone to the Dogs" its basic rhetorical trick of seeming to take a figure literally (*How prolific is this Nobody! / These dogs! What will they not inherit?*). But that rhetorical parallel belies a crucial divergence. "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody" proceeds on the assumption that there *is* a somebody behind the Nobody who has mismanaged the war; if it didn't, it wouldn't be a critique but something else (a description). But clearly there is no equivalently substantial and intentional agent behind the Dogs of Decline. "Gone to the Dogs" is, in this sense, a rhetorical chimera: an inverted personification, a critique of War Dogs who really are people, welded on to a colloquial catachresis (gone to the dogs) deployed to body forth a set of phenomena—time, change, decay, decline—that are themselves without objective form.

Behind this rhetorical chimerism, then, is a philosophical dualism. And the final effect of "Gone to the Dogs" is not to blur but to light up the distinction between the kinds of human error that are susceptible to correction and the worldly forms of damage for which there is no direct redress. Unlike the moral

[9] See [Charles Dickens], "Stores for the First of April," *Household Words*, 15 (1857), 217–22.

[10] See Dickens, "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody."

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mistakes of war or greed, decline names a general condition rather than an aberrant event. Because decline is not, in this sense, rooted in actions or agents, it cannot be remedied by more aggressive forms of moral policing. Decline might be lamented and/or lived through, but it cannot be corrected. Decline is a matter of being, rather than doing—ontological rather than ethical in nature. The fact of decline might incline one toward a certain ethical disposition (and, as we will soon see, *Little Dorrit* does propose something like an ethics), but that ethical program is an internal response, not an external corrective, to the world as we find it: a way of surviving, rather than saving, a dog-gone world.

Recession and decline are written all over the urban geography of *Little Dorrit*, which picks up in the mid-1820s in the wake of the economic depression that had beset post-Napoleonic England. Everywhere are signs of thwarted intentions, abandoned plans, and precariously managed decay. Think, for instance, of the Clennam house's tenuously arrested collapse ("Many years ago, it had had it in its mind to slide down sideways; it had been propped up, however, and was leaning on some half dozen gigantic crutches" [*Little Dorrit*, p. 32]) or the "baulked countenance" of Mr. Casby's street, which had "set off" from the Gray's Inn Road "with the intention of running at one heat down into the valley, and up again to the top of Pentonville Hill; but which had run itself out of breath in twenty yards, and had stood still ever since" (pp. 137–38).

But if one wanted to point to the locus extremis of general decline in *Little Dorrit*, it is certainly to Bleeding Heart Yard that one would turn. Here is the account of one of its residents, Mr. Plornish, on its conditions:

> They was all hard up there, Mr. Plornish said, uncommon hard up, to-be-sure. Well, he couldn't say how it was; he didn't know as anybody *could* say how it was; all he know'd was, that so it was. When a man felt, on his own back and in his own belly, that he was poor, that man (Mr. Plornish gave it as his decided belief) know'd well that poor he was somehow or another, and you

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> couldn't talk it out of him, no more than you could talk Beef into him. Then you see, some people as was better off said, and a good many such people lived pretty close up to the mark themselves if not beyond it so he'd heerd, that they was "improvident" (that was the favorite word) down the Yard. For instance, if they see a man with his wife and children a going to Hampton Court in a Wan, perhaps once in a year, they says, "Hallo! I thought you was poor, my improvident friend!" Why, Lord, how hard it was upon a man! What was a man to do? He couldn't go mollancholly mad, and even if he did, you wouldn't be the better for it. In Mr. Plornish's judgment, you would be the worse for it. Yet you seemed to want to make a man mollancholly mad. You was always at it—if not with your right hand, with your left. What was they a doing in the Yard? Why, take a look at 'em and see. There was the girls and their mothers a working at their sewing, or their shoe-binding, or their trimming, or their waistcoat making, day and night and night and day, and not more than able to keep body and soul together after all—often not so much. There was pretty well all sorts of trader you could name, all wanting to work, and yet not able to get it. There was old people, after working all their lives, going and being shut up in the Workhouse, much worse fed and lodged and treated altogether, than—Mr. Plornish said manufacturers, but appeared to mean malefactors. Why, a man didn't know where to turn himself, for a crumb of comfort. As to who was to blame for it, Mr. Plornish didn't know who was to blame for it. He could tell you who suffered, but he couldn't tell you whose fault it was. It wasn't *his* place to find out, and who'd mind what he said, if he did find out? He only know'd that it wasn't put right by them what undertook that line of business, and that it didn't come right of itself. And in brief his illogical opinion was, that if you couldn't do nothing for him, you had better take nothing from him for doing of it; so far as he could make out, that was about what it come to. (*Little Dorrit*, pp. 136–37)

The narrative voice will refer to this as "a confused summary of the interior life of Bleeding Heart Yard" (p. 136), but Plornish's monologue is in fact among the novel's more incisive renderings of a world in which the moral machinery of accountability seems to have become incapable of bringing the world to any meaningful order. The reality of the Bleeding Hearters' suffering, of course, is clear enough—there is no point,

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Plornish says, in disputing the hunger of the hungry—and Plornish has no trouble thinking of himself and his fellow Bleeding Heart residents as targets: easy enough to "tell you who suffered." But there is, at the same time, no telling exactly who is doing the targeting: impossible to "tell you whose fault it was." The grammar of accountability thus lingers on as just another pre-recession holdover—a philosophical street, like Casby's actual one, with nowhere to run. In the absence of this connective infrastructure, Plornish's diagnosis has no headway to make and falls, therefore, tautologically back into itself: "all he know'd was, that so it was"—just one example of echoing, or referentless speech, in a novel full of utterances that fail to move forward.[11] In this light, Plornish's apparent confusion between "manufacturers" and "malefactors" is less a quaint failure of eloquence than the sign of a world in which the origins of both goods (manufacturers) and bads (malefactors) are equally notional. In housing these recognitions, Plornish's sociology is only apparently floundering, and it constitutes, in any case, an important conceptual advance over the commonplace diagnoses—"'improvident' (that was the favorite word)"—that in their simple-minded entitlement continue to miss the point. The diagnosis of improvidence is not just uncharitable but, in its baffled insistence that the poverty of the systematically unemployed is actually a moral problem, philosophically blind. Like the debtor's prison or the workhouse that Plornish's father-in-law calls home (*Little Dorrit*, p. 358), "improvidence" is an attempt to incentivize individual action in a world that is neither responsive to it nor comprehensible according to its terms. Plornish's real object of critique, therefore, is not the moral inhumanity ("how hard it was upon a man") but the structural asymmetry between the morally accountable agency

[11] A complete set of examples is not possible here, but see, for example, Plornish's and Maggy's automatic repetitions of the ends of other people's sentences ("'this is Maggy, sir.' 'Maggy, sir,' echoed the personage" [*Little Dorrit*, p. 96]); Casby's tendency to say everything twice; Caveletto's use of "altro" for pretty much everything; "the monotonous boy" and the absent voice "continually calling out. . . . 'One, two, three, four, five, six—go! One, two, three, four, five, six—go!'" (p. 228) that appear in Book I, chapter 20.

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that liberalism believes in and the "mollancholly" world liberalism has actually made.

In his sense that there is a fundamental slippage in the basic mechanics of liberalism (between cause and effect, actor and action, input and output), Plornish is a kind of early adopter of a position that has begun to take more defined shape in nineteenth-century studies over the past decade or so. As a number of critics (including myself, but also Elaine Hadley, Catherine Gallagher, Audrey Jaffe, and Emily Steinlight, among others) have recently been illustrating, the rising scale of economic activity posed significant (and, in some cases, insurmountable) challenges to the basic assumption that singularly accountable human persons comprise the fundamental units of the social world.[12] In some sense, this line of argument continues a long-standing interest in the ways literature reflected the increasingly unreal and abstracted, because speculative, nature of Victorian economic activity. But whereas the older critical tendency was to treat this abstraction as a correctable condition (and to see the novel as a form that might teach us how to correct it), more recent work has seen the Victorian period as one that confronts the categorical, unbridgeable divide between two political ontologies: between the abstraction of actually existing modernity, on the one hand, and the individualism that constitutes liberalism's core theoretical commitment, on the other. Thus I have pointed to the ways the corporation—an artificial person whose defining feature is that it cannot be reduced to the individual human persons who seem to comprise it—rather than merely diminishing the sway of human individuals, instead gave legal form to their absolute irrelevance vis-à-vis the question of corporate action. Similarly, other critics have shown how the rise of a statistical and/or

[12] See Daniel M. Stout, *Corporate Romanticism: Liberalism, Justice, and the Novel* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2017), esp. pp. 21–52; Hadley, "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody"; Elaine Hadley, "On a Darkling Plain: Victorian Liberalism and the Fantasy of Agency," *Victorian Studies*, 48 (2005) 92–102; Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006); Audrey Jaffe, *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock-Market Graph* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2010); and Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2018).

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biopolitical state made the identification of particular cases seem not harder but entirely beside the point. Political economy deals in rates and probabilities, not in individual stories, and by mid-century it had come to emphasize the distinction between these aggregate patterns and the actual human lives they seem to sweep up. Abstraction v. substance, corporate v. human, trend v. case, pattern v. instance: these comprise categorical oppositions rather than differences of degree; they represent situations in which one cannot meaningfully work backward from whole to part.

In Plornish's soliloquy this translational dead end takes the form of his final and frankly shocking conclusion: that "if you couldn't do nothing for him, you had better take nothing from him for doing of it." This conclusion marks Plornish's clear, despondent abandonment of the reformist appeal that things be "put right" via some more just distribution. What emerges in place of that reformist promise is a future imagined entirely under the sign of the negative, the exchange of nothing for nothing. The result is something like liberalism degree zero: a future in which the exchange of something for something on which capitalist contract (not to mention Christian redemption) rests has been emptied of its contents and in which the search for a reformed moral algebra, a more just equivalent between a something and a something else, has been rejected in favor of nothing's inevitable equivalence with itself.

Bringing reform's abandonment and the inverted economy of nothing for nothing that takes its place into *Little Dorrit* recasts the stakes of the novel considerably. For one thing, it clearly bars us from reading it in any straightforward sense as (in Edwin M. Barrett's words) "a work of the moral imagination and . . . a work about the moral imagination," or (in Trilling's even earlier and more foundational description) as a story "based upon the primacy of the will" ("Little Dorrit," p. 581).[13] As views of *a* novel, Barrett's and Trilling's descriptions are virtually archetypal in their assurance, first, that *Little*

[13] Edwin B. Barrett, "*Little Dorrit* and the Disease of Modern Life," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 25 (1970), 200.

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Dorrit can be understood in terms of a tension between self and society and, second, that the text's core project involves mounting a defense for the continued relevance, after so many buffeting winds, of the liberal self. But as views of *this* particular novel, one can easily feel how strenuously these classical perspectives have to swim against the tide of their object. The moral imagination could hardly look more imaginary in a novel whose first chapter centers on two characters who do not care that they are in prison and soon won't be ("It's all the same," says one [*Little Dorrit,* p. 5]; "By Heaven! I win, however the game goes," says the other [p. 10]) and whose second chapter is an extended meditation on quarantine's indifference to any individual's actual sickness. The carceral institution of chapter 1 (the prison) seems to let everyone go, and the carceral institution of chapter 2 (quarantine) seems to let no one out. In the face of such difficulties, Trilling's emphatic declaration that "the emphasis on the internal life and on personal responsibility is very strong in *Little Dorrit*" feels imposed and preordained ("Little Dorrit," p. 582). When Arthur declares that he has "no will," Trilling just contradicts him: "He has by no means been robbed of his ethical will" ("Little Dorrit," p. 586).

Trilling is especially strident, but one can feel in even far less preprogrammed accounts a pressure to minimize the dissonance that *Little Dorrit* poses to the genre of the novel as we most typically know it. Thus, a line of critics that includes Ruth Bernard Yeazell, Sherri Wolf, and, most recently, Ben Parker have in different and compelling ways highlighted the difficulties that the novel's manifest interest in totalizing structure poses for conventional features of novelistic form. For Yeazell, the omnivorous appetite of the Circumlocution Office swallows up both accountability and substance; for Wolf, the fact that Amy Dorrit functions as a universal vanishing point replaces subjectivity with a kind of formal principle; and for Parker, Merdle's swindle—a pyramid scheme the size of the national economy—challenges the idea that the economy could ever be given legible form.[14] But even as such accounts have registered

[14] See Ruth Bernard Yeazell, "Do It or Dorrit," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction,* 25 (1991), 33–49; Sherri Wolf, "The Enormous Power of No Body: *Little Dorrit* and the Logic of

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what Trilling called the novel's "powers of generalization and abstraction" ("Little Dorrit," p. 589), these critics have, like Trilling before them, looked for ways to bend *Little Dorrit* back toward the conventional priorities of both the novel form and liberal politics: a restored compatibility between the general and the particular, and the resolution of the abstract and impersonal into the substantial and inhabitable.[15]

Such readings are—admittedly—not without material to work with. *Little Dorrit* does conclude with a series of marriages, reconciliations, and developments that feel like comeuppance (in, say, the implosion of the Clennam counting-house). And in smaller moments scattered throughout, the novel does seem to deploy a conventionally moralizing framework. There is, for instance, the moment in which the narrative steps in to deride Henry Gowan's habit of "bring[ing] deserving things down by setting underserving things up" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 472), or the moments when it implies that there is something importantly amiss with characters like Fanny, Tip, and, William Dorrit who seem to take from everyone (and especially from Amy) with no sense that they owe anything in return. Even more striking, a few occasions actually insinuate that the downtrodden have only themselves to blame. If William Dorrit, the narrative says, "had been a man with strength of purpose to face those troubles and fight them, he might have broken the net that held him" (p. 63); a few chapters later his wife, who has spent her final decade in the Marshalsea, dies of "her own inherent weakness" (p. 64).

Such moments do offer handholds for a reading of *Little Dorrit* as a lesson in the moral obligation to be energetic. But it is a little hard to know how to take them. The assessments of

Expansion," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 42 (2000), 223–54; and Ben Parker, "Recognition or Reification?: Capitalist Crisis and Subjectivity in *Little Dorrit*," *New Literary History*, 45 (2014), 131–51.

[15] Yeazell, in "Do It or Dorrit," begins by noting the way the novel's litany of How-not-to-do-its refuses the question of reference (there is, obviously, no particular "it" behind the pronoun) but then goes on to offer a psychological reading focused on Arthur's maternal relationships and to explain the novel's despondent willessness by reference to Dickens's own biography. Similar turns, away from abstraction and generality and toward particularity (as character, self-making, legibility, etc.), can be seen in Wolf's and Parker's accounts.

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individual wherewithal on which such moments rely seem almost unbelievably pitiless (surely the lesson is not that any death is best understood as shameful inability to face another day?). But beyond their cruelty, these invocations of moral purpose seem at odds with the novel's repeated acknowledgment of the accidental nature of suffering. Whatever one might say about his strength of moral purpose, William Dorrit has no idea where the debt that has imprisoned him has come from, and neither do the "dozen agents in succession" he deploys in order to find out (*Little Dorrit*, p. 64). No one in this novel breaks "the net," and without some moral hero to exemplify the possibility, the standard to which the narrative keeps defaulting seems like a vestigial tic, written somehow into the genre's muscle memory. Like the "fearful remark[s]" (p. 149) of Mr. F's Aunt, whose intimidating and surreal pronouncements bear no perceptible relation to present circumstance, or the occasional bouts of accountability that break out even in the Marshalsea ("insolvency [was] the normal state of mankind, and the payment of debts . . . a disease that occasionally broke out" [p. 84]), these invocations of moral volition are less the ethical thesis of *Little Dorrit* than the strawman exception that lights up its unaccountable rule. About halfway through the novel the narrative voice hypothesizes a counterfactual moment of moral passion for William Dorrit—"ask me, her father, what I owe her; and hear my testimony touching the life of this slighted little creature" (p. 459). It is, narratologically, a deeply strange moment: not free indirect discourse so much as a kind of hallucination that measures the distance between the sorts of things people say in novels generally (e.g., Miss Havisham's "What have I done! What have I done" in *Great Expectations* [1860]) and the things they say in this one: "No such adjuration entered Mr. Dorrit's head" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 459).[16]

For reasons I discuss toward the end of this essay, I do not think it makes sense to describe *Little Dorrit* as a novel of grace,

[16] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 396.

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exactly. But it is perfectly clear that, whatever credit it lends the mechanical world of Daniel Doyce, it is certainly not a novel of works. The obvious promise of Doyce's beautiful blueprints, religious in all but name, is the total submission of contingency to design, but the novel goes on to register significant skepticism about our ability to engineer a better world. The difficulties begin early and appear, with a subtlety the Dogs of Decline would admire, as an all-but-imperceptible loosening in the works. The recently established headquarters of Doyce and Clennam sports a "little counting-house . . . of wood and glass," a vision of clarity presumably meant to contrast with the dank and lightless weight of the counting-house Arthur grows up in (*Little Dorrit*, p. 259). But we do not have to get very far into the orderly list of tools on the mechanical floor—"benches, and vices, and tools, and straps, and wheels"—for things to tilt out of control: the wheels "tearing round as though they had a suicidal mission to grind the business to dust" (pp. 259–60). By the next sentence Arthur's clear architecture is reimagined as a warren of trapdoors whose light-effects make him think of fratricide: "A communication of great trapdoors in the floor and roof with the workshop above and the workshop below, made a shaft of light in this perspective, which brought to Clennam's mind the child's old picture-book, where similar rays were the witnesses of Abel's murder" (p. 260). Whether this image of fratricide foreshadows the partnership's financial ruin or an industrial accident (a statistical guarantee) that lies somewhere beyond the novel, the basic warning is clear: that even the best-laid plans, once they are in the world and therefore no longer plans, are subject to time, accident, and damage. Doyce, at one point, will express his faith that his invention has a kind of timeless value ("The thing is as true as it ever was" [p. 185]), but by the end of the novel this feels less like a promise that one day it will all work out than a way of marking the categorical difference between the easy perfection of an idea of the world and the disheveling, loosening grind of the world as it is.

In a late fit of romantic heroism Arthur will seek to take all the responsibility for the firm's bad investments, finally scratching his novel-long reparative itch by throwing himself into the

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nearest possible jail: "I must take the consequences of what I have done," he says; and earlier, "I must work out as much of my fault—or crime—as is susceptible of being worked out, in the rest of my days" (*Little Dorrit*, pp. 697. 693). It is hard to fault the heart, but the moment is, at the level of concept, a misguided effort to retroactively convert the systemic failure of the Merdle scheme into a case of individual malfeasance. The debts Arthur is referring to are the firms' debts, not just Arthur's personal debts, so there is no real way for him, and him alone, to "take the consequences of what [he has] done." And more generally, the value of the investments themselves was always and at every point a structural abstraction, an aggregate estimate of probability, rather than an individual determination about actual substantial value. This elevation of aggregate and probabilistic structure over the substance of individual action may seem merely to let Arthur off the hook. But to confuse structure and substance—to treat, with Arthur, the impersonal condition as requiring a personal sacrifice—is to continue to miss the point, made first via Plornish and now via Merdle, that outcomes have very little, and sometimes nothing, to do with intention.[17] The poor are not poor because they are improvident, and even provident investments go south all the time. As we sometimes do ourselves, Arthur will talk about "speculative" capital as if there were some other kind.[18] But when the Merdle investments go south, it is not because of a moral failing but because of the mundane reality that investments may lose value. In fact, since pyramid schemes appeal not so much to greed, via their rate of return, but to an aversion to risk, via

[17] For a careful survey of the history and legal conceptualization of debtor's prison in the eighteenth century, see Joanna Innes, *Inferior Politics: Social Problems and Social Policies in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), esp. chapter 6, "The King's Bench prison in the later eighteenth century: law, authority, and order in a London debtors' prison" (pp. 227–78).

[18] For a recent account of *Little Dorrit* and the question of speculation, see Colleen Lannon, "Whose Fault? The Speculator's Guilt in *Little Dorrit*," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 45 (2017), 413–32. Lannon's conclusion, that the novel "caution[s] against the larger structural dangers posed by speculative schemes" in order to send us back toward a morally sound "investment in . . . personal responsibility" ("Whose Fault," pp. 428, 427) invokes a distinction between the speculative and what Arthur calls "safe investments" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 653) that, I am arguing, the novel exposes as a delusion.

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their promise of a can't-lose investment, if there is a moral mistake here it goes the other way. "I've gone into it," says Pancks to Arthur; "I've made the calculations. I've worked it. They're safe and genuine" (*Little Dorrit,* p. 565). What Arthur and Pancks will lose their money to is not the fantasy of unbounded wealth but the fantasy of a safe, genuine, and thoroughly accountable world.

But risk—it is somehow necessary to say—comes for you whether or not you are courting it. The promise of a world in which contingency might be contained by the energetic pursuit of substantive value is given an especially clear rendering in one of Pancks's earliest lectures on the demanding regime of self-accountability that is modern "business":

> "What else do you suppose I think I am made for? Nothing. Rattle me out of bed early, set me going, give me as short a time as you like to bolt my meals in, and keep me at it. Keep me always at it, I'll keep you always at it, you keep somebody else always at it. There you are, with the Whole Duty of Man in a commercial country." (*Little Dorrit,* p. 154)

But the moral metaphysics that underwrite Pancks's homily on commercial duty are immediately gainsaid when Arthur, leaving the conversation, immediately encounters "a crowd of people" carrying "a litter, hastily made of a shutter . . . ; and a recumbent figure upon it": "An accident going to the Hospital" (p. 155). Caveletto, it turns out, has been hit by a mail-coach. "Them Mails," says one of the men, "ought to be prosecuted and fined"; it's a wonder more people aren't killed, and "it an't for the want of a will in them Mails, if [they] an't" (p. 155). The bystander's theory sees the capacity for harm as an almost linear function of malign intention; but just as poverty is not a function of providence, mailcoaches are quite capable of doing significant harm with absolutely zero will. So while the bystander's outrage is understandable (in his insistence that *someone* must be responsible, he has adopted the editorial position of Dickens's "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody"), the moment lights up the asymmetry between his theory of responsibility and the unintended harms that were an increasing feature of a dense and

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accelerating nineteenth century.[19] As Plornish could have told our righteous Samaritan, the Mails are not a problem that an appeal to the will can solve.

In this short juxtaposition of scenes—a sermon about the need to keep always at it followed by a fable about the irrelevance of volition—we have a microcosm of the Pancks plot more generally. In both its short and longer forms, the Pancks plot turns on the failure—not just the hopelessness, but the harm—of trying to foist the grammar of accountability onto a world defined by intentionless agents (e.g., Mails) and structural dynamics (e.g., national and international economic production) that cannot be traced back to any visible hand. That Pancks, with his signature steamship energy and electrified hairdo, works for what feels like our side (for Amy, for Arthur) makes him an unlikely philosophical antihero. He is, moreover, a formidable force trained on the task—the restoration of property to its unsuspecting, poor, but rightful owner—that seems to define The Good for so many novels. And his late downdressing of his long-term employer, the novel's slummy rentier, Mr. Casby, seems similarly to forward Pancks as a noble bulldog for accountability:

> "What do you pretend to be," said Mr. Pancks. "What's your moral game? What do you go in for? Benevolence, an't it? You benevolent!" (*Little Dorrit,* p. 777)

Pancks's point, of course, is that Casby is a moral Merdle, a sham Patriarch, bankrupt morally rather than financially. It is hard not to applaud Pancks's exposure of Casby's bad faith. But while we may want to applaud Pancks's exposure of Casby's bad faith, we also need to recognize the clear parallel between Pancks's accusation of moral Merdleism and his far less crowd-pleasing theory of rent: "If a man takes a room of you at half-a-crown a week, and when the week comes round hasn't got the half-crown, you say to that man, Why have you got the room, then? If you haven't got the one thing, why have you got the

[19] For more on the problem of negligence in law and the novel, see Sandra Macpherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010); and Stout, *Corporate Romanticism,* esp. pp. 21–52.

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other? What have you been and done with your money? What do you mean by it? What are you up to?" (p. 148). It is not just the rhetorical questions—a Pancksian specialty—that align these two moments. Both rent collection and character verification involve checking the correspondence between real substance (what you have really got) and apparent value (what you seem to have). The Pancks mandate: everyone who has the one thing must also have the other.

As a theory of character, Pancks's view—that those who go in for benevolence need to put their morals where their mouths are—may seem to make perfect sense. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine *Little Dorrit* (or anyone, really) recommending a theory of a character in which moral designations would be, Merdle-like, entirely detached from substance. But in calling down an audit on a world in which "Grubbers [get] nothing but blame" and the Proprietors get "nothing but credit" (*Little Dorrit,* p. 778), Pancks cannot help but commit himself to a project of endless accounting not unlike Mrs. Clennam's airless evangelism. Like Mrs. Clennam's obsessive moral tallies, the judgment Pancks demands requires that everything, as Arthur says, be "weighed, measured, and priced" (p. 20). And for that measuring to be possible, a whole set of other things have to be true, too: all actions have to be assigned a fixed value, they have to retain that value forever, and we have to remember everything in order that we can be "always balancing [our] bargain with the Majesty of heaven" (p. 48), so that when the repo-man comes we can prove we are up to date. Like the Marshalsea, which turns a single transaction into a life sentence, Pancks's rationalized theory of moral value presumes an intensely scorekept world, one that is as full-on Imperative Mood Present Tense as any world Casby ever created. Every past, for Pancks, is a balance for which each present must pay.

Where our most familiar critiques have seen the horror of liberalism to lie in the idea of a present under constant surveillance, *Little Dorrit* conceives it in terms of a past that you can never leave or outlive—as, that is, a state with no present at all. Fanny Dorrit is not *Little Dorrit*'s most sophisticated locus of existential reflection. But her aggrieved questions—"Is it not enough that we have gone through what is only known to

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ourselves, but are we to have it thrown in our faces, perseveringly and systematically. . . . Are we never to be permitted to forget?" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 441)—house something deeper than mere self-interest. For in her indignant desire to live beyond reproach we can hear a far less disposable plea for an early version of what our age of big data now knows as the right to be forgotten, for an outside to an airless world governed by the imperative engraved on Mr. Clennam's (stopped) watch: Do Not Forget.[20] After Rigaud refers to the engraving, Mrs. Clennam says:

> "No, sir, I do not forget. To lead a life as monotonous as mine . . . is not the way to forget. To lead a life of self-correction, is not the way to forget. To be sensible of having . . . offences to expiate and peace to make, does not justify the desire to forget. Therefore I have long dismissed it, and I neither forget nor wish to forget." (p. 350)

In turning away from the paralyzing mnemonics of Mrs. Clennam, *Little Dorrit* turns away from the defining framework of what Boyd Hilton calls the Age of Atonement. Hilton's important argument describes a genetic bond between nineteenth-century political economy and Evangelical Christianity. He shows the complicated, ambivalent ways in which religious ideas of a future state both animated the Age of Improvement—by incentivizing social reform—and obviated those same meliorating impulses, by making it possible to see immiseration (exactly as Mrs. Clennam does) as a constant reminder of all the "offences" yet "to expiate." Pain, in this latter view, is rebranded as the intimacy of divine attention.[21] In either of its forms, though, this singular focus on the Day of Judgment requires subsuming everything—even natural phenomena (like earthquakes) and accidental phenomena (like runaway

[20] The right to be forgotten, as one legal scholar has put it, involves the right of "an individual to determine the development of his life in an autonomous way, without being perpetually or periodically stigmatized as a consequence of a specific action performed in the past" (Alessandro Mantelero, "The EU Proposal for a General Data Protection Regulation and the Roots of the 'Right to be Forgotten,'" *Computer Law & Security Review*, 29, no. 3 (2013), 230.

[21] See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

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Mails)—to a total system of accountability. Pain is what we deserve for not being better, or a gratifying reminder and a preview of what we will deserve for not having been as good as we ought. Everything, in this view, is punishable because all outcomes are understood as punishment earned or—for the "saved," the "spared"—punishment withdrawn, conserved. Thus if the Circumlocution Office looks like one nightmare of the modern liberal state (a bureaucratic thicket in which all purposiveness can be exhausted), then Mrs. Clennam's looks like another: an unforgiving and exceptionless record that sees purposiveness everywhere.

It is one of the brave and complicated facts about *Little Dorrit* that it sets these two nightmares in motion simultaneously. For it is their cofunctioning that works to bar the way to what would seem like the commonsense solution: a humane middle ground of well-managed and nonpathological accountability. In place of this benevolent Benthamism, *Little Dorrit* seeks a way outside of the question of counting altogether. That surprising decision is, in its way, also a stoic one, for it means forsaking the promise of a resolving justice—an eventual future state in which lots and claims, outcomes and deserts, have been finally brought into correspondence. In place of the transactional promise of atonement the novel points us toward an ethics of waiting, of abiding, and togetherness—a kind of minimized, recessive, or non-future-oriented action suited to a world in which the future seems already foreclosed.[22]

The pointless waiting that looks, to Trilling, like a moral failure in Arthur looks, to everyone, like a talent in Jean Baptist Caveletto, who waits out various incarcerations and convalescences with an implacably benign humor. This same indefatigable capacity for attendance marks the heroism of Amy Dorrit—at once almost nothing, and always there. But Amy is just an especially concentrated example of a virtue that appears all over the novel. These attendings are almost by definition

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[22] For a theorization of recessive action as an alternative to liberalism's predisposition toward consequential agency, see Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999). For a treatment of related issues in the Victorian novel in particular, see Elisha Cohn, *Still Life: Suspended Development in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016).

aconsequential; they are not a direct response to anything in particular, and they leave little trace. Like the furniture John Chivery (who has loved Amy forever) will give to Arthur (who has only recently realized that he loves Amy), they come for free, "for nothing":

> "This furniture, sir," said Young John in a voice of mild and soft explanation, "belongs to me. I am in the habit of letting it out to parties without furniture. . . . It an't much, but it's at your service. Free, I mean. I could not think of letting you have it on any other terms. You're welcome to it for nothing." (*Little Dorrit,* p. 702)

Anti-Pancksian in every way, letting out (renting) is here replaced by letting go, letting something be had for no terms or, more specifically ("I could not think of . . . other terms"), for exactly nothing. Such attendings leave no record and, because they are not aimed at recovery, have no use of one. Think of Amy's faithful attendance on her father; of Maggy's faithful attendance on Amy; of Amy's attendance on Maggy; of Flora's moving and bottomless patience for the uneasy companionship of Mrs. F's Aunt; or, especially, of the very beautiful death scene of William and Frederick Dorrit, two brothers whose deaths seem staggered just enough for one to die while resting his head on the other.

It is not only brothers. The characters in *Little Dorrit* are, repeatedly, laying their heads on another: "then they would come back hand in hand, unless she was more than usually tired, and had fallen asleep on his shoulder" (*Little Dorrit,* p. 69); or, "She had joined her at the window and was leaning on her shoulder" (p. 286); or she drew "an arm softly round his neck, laid his head upon her bosom, put a hand upon his head, and resting her cheek upon that hand, nursed him . . . lovingly" (p. 736). Even the silent forward tick of narrative time will occasionally fall slack to make space for these lingering inclinations, flapping indefinitely at the mast while two bodies rest themselves on each other: "For a little while, there was a dead silence and stillness; and he remained shrunk in his chair, and she remained with her arm round his neck, and her head bowed down upon his shoulder" (p. 221). It is still true

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that the stifling and carceral stasis in the first paragraphs of the novel never really breaks: Mrs. Clennam "lived and died a statue" (p. 772); Flora Finching is "turned to stone" and becomes "the statue bride of the late Mr. F" (p. 277); and even before the Dorrits' Grand Tour gets to the dead cities of Italy it files past the alpine bodies of "dead travellers" (p. 421) frozen in suspended animation. Nothing in these moments of companionship or accommodation points outside, to an alternative order. But it does discover something possible, something preferable, in the order that there is: a form of lateral fidelity that involves sitting beside someone else and waiting for nothing together.

In the undefined space of these "little while[s]," then, *Little Dorrit* registers the elective (rather than biological) families that coalesce throughout its pages and points to forms of companionship that exist outside of reproductive/marital futurity. Miss Wade and Tattycoram adopt each other; Maggy and Amy adopt each other; Mrs. Clennam and Arthur are, we will learn, mother and son by adoption; and, in a chiastic braid, Arthur is figured as the father of Amy who is figured as the Little Mother who nurses him. In a recent essay, Jesse Rosenthal has argued that *Little Dorrit* registers the particularly modern fact that "connections between private individuals" are often routed "through any number of intermediate steps in a public medium."[23] But it is also a novel that insists, with a different emphasis, that we take the publicity of our contingent togetherness as intimacy enough. Witnessing the affection of the turnkey for Amy Dorrit, toddler of the Marshalsea, "the collegians would express an opinion that the turnkey, who was a bachelor, had been cut out by nature for a family man. But the turnkey thanked them, and said, 'No, on the whole it was enough for him to see other people's children there'" (*Little Dorrit,* p. 67). These relationships, accidental intersections that are public before they are personal, run counter to the individualistic, privatizing, contractual, and psychologizing ethos of the classical English marriage plot.[24] Companionship trumps the

[23] Jesse Rosenthal, "The Untrusted Medium: Open Networks, Secret Writing, and *Little Dorrit,*" *Victorian Studies,* 59 (2017), 290.

[24] For an account of caretaking (what I have here called companionship) as an alternative to romantic (i.e., companionate) marriage, and for an account that argues

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companionate, or, at the very least, precedes it. And when the mercenary Mrs. Gowan suggests otherwise—that "it never pays. It is in vain . . . for people to attempt to get on together who have such extremely different antecedents; who are jumbled against each other in this accidental, matrimonial sort of way" (*Little Dorrit*, p. 509)—they will be the last words the novel allows her. In that dismissal *Little Dorrit* signals its commitment to the opposite view: that jumbled antecedents permit real bonds and that real bonds might be grounded not on inner likeness but on the basic physical fact of durable copresence. Those ideas are central to the novel's effort to thread a philosophic needle—to develop a form of the good that might be recognizable as a good (and therefore have a value) but that would devolve neither to the individualistic terms of positive entitlement (merit, desert, credit, value, etc.) or the equally individualistic terms of negative obligation (debt, sin, atonement, etc.). In lieu of counting and accountability, the novel suggests—perhaps precisely because "it never pays"—that just being alongside another person, or abiding, or being by, is its own kind of ethical pursuit. In one of the small but amazing moments that bring this counterintuitive idea to light—Maggy, the novel says, "counted as nobody, and she was by" (p. 371)—not counting and being by are held together additively or adjacently, with an "and" rather than a "but." "Count[ing] as nobody" and being by go together, or they do not go apart.

As in any novel that sets itself against the transactive valuations that underwrite the marriage plot, *Little Dorrit* cannot entirely dodge its generic obligation to a kind of final settlement. But it does what it can to evade the pressure. The question of actual wealth is nicely obviated: first, every account that isn't Amy Dorrit's vanishes directly into the Merdle scheme, and then even Amy's inheritance is liquidated, secondarily, by Arthur's Merdle debts. Getting even, here, means getting to zero. And beyond these explicitly financial questions, a more general move toward the negative hangs over the closing

that the romantic marriage plot I have just described as the "classical" is far less the rule than we have said, see Talia Schaffer, *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), esp. chapter 5, "Disability Marriage: Communities of Care in the Victorian Novel" (pp. 159–98).

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passages of *Little Dorrit.* The final movement of the final chapter unfolds in the unplaceable register of the negative. After the breath of a section break, these last paragraphs get under way via one of the strangest sentences in the novel: "The autumn days went on, and Little Dorrit never came to the Marshalsea now, and went away without seeing him. No, no, no." (*Little Dorrit,* p. 795). The negatives turn a positive account of Amy's faithful attendance (*she always came; she always saw him*) oddly oblique. The "never" of "never came" is presumably really meant to modify "went away" (so *she came and never went away without seeing*). But its strange, earlier location in the sentence, combined with the definitiveness of the "now" and that clause-dividing comma, causes the sentence to set in motion a counter-indication: that Little Dorrit never comes at all now, or even, in a still more puzzling compilation of negatives, that she somehow *both* never comes and always goes away without seeing him. The sentence is not an example of pure negativity; it still gives us something. But it is a sentence that does its work, not by affirmative or positive designation, but, a little like an object rendered by negative space, by sketching things that keep—"No, no, no."—not happening.

The negative triplet that launches the final paragraphs of *Little Dorrit* echoes the "quiet desolation" of Amy's much earlier answer to Arthur's question about whether she is engaged to anyone ("No. No. No." [*Little Dorrit,* p. 376]). The force of that reprise is to leave the promises of that unpromised state unstated and unclaimed. Rather than a mid-novel negative (*nope—not engaged—who's asking?*) that would condition the affirmative conclusion of a marriage impelled by a yes-I-said-yes-I-will-yes, *Little Dorrit* opts for the echoing desolation—the "slow repetition" (p. 376)—of three negatives. When Amy signs herself into marriage, she does so in what her old friend the clergyman calls "the third volume"—the one that comes after both the register of births ("what I call the first volume") and the register of deaths ("what I call the second volume") (p. 801). Amy and Arthur's marriage thus seems to stand not as a contractual obligation undertaken in life, but as a state positioned somehow after it. This final, curious substantialization of the negative, in a novel that has repeatedly worked to

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imagine an economy outside of somethings, lays the groundwork for the Miltonic echoes of the novel's last sentences, which usher the blessed couple, like an earlier couple exiting a different atonement trap, into a noisy, clamoring, and uncompensated world.

It is thus that *Little Dorrit,* a novel that begins by talking all about reparation—"Reparation!" says Mrs. Clennam; "Reparation!" (*Little Dorrit,* p. 48)—ends by talking about it not at all. "I *don't* like the term 'reparation,'" says Mr. Rugg (p. 695; emphasis in original). And in the end even Arthur, who has liked the term "reparation" quite a bit, will tip into the fire the record that would have allowed him a version of it. What has replaced reparation is something like a tolerance for debt, or a recognition of debt as a universal and therefore unremarkable and nonpathological condition. "None of us," the novel says, "clearly know to whom or to what we are indebted in this wise, until some marked stop in the whirling wheel of life brings the right perception with it" (p. 700). And even if we did know—if we did have "the right perception"—the point would still not be to repay it. There are—we should be clear—real consequences to this abandonment of the logic of atonement and reparation, this willingness to let the deficits ride, to accept less, and maybe nothing, in return. But since it is also true that, in the alternative world of atonement, our debts are (also) never paid, the novel knows that there is, in that sense, never any justice there either. And with that thought in mind, it becomes less hard to see our way to the possibility that, if we cannot make liberalism's promise of something for something work, we might, with Plornish, accept the position of taking nothing for nothing instead.

I have been arguing that this abandonment of the dream of commensurability constitutes the importance of *Little Dorrit,* and that its suggestion of a world outside of commensurability constitutes its aesthetic and philosophical interest. But it is admittedly a little hard to know how to take, or what to do with, the alternative that the novel proposes. Given our pervasive dissatisfaction with liberal regimes of accountability and the fantasy of commensurability on which they rest (the fantasy, as Wai Chee Dimock formulates it, that we might resolve "the

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world into matching terms"), there might seem something therapeutic in the vision of a world without assessment.[25] But there is something clearly self-betraying, covertly liberal, about adopting incommensurability after having run the cost-benefit numbers on the philosophical options. It seems built in to the nothing-for-nothing proposition that it never be for sale; the function of the idea is not to recommend a life but to make life livable in a landscape with no other options. Its primary intellectual value would be historical rather than ethical or admonitory. Nothing for nothing is a strategy for the world we have, not the one we want.

It is for this reason, I think, that *Little Dorrit* is so little concerned to give us an example of a character who seems to actually inhabit, as a kind of native air, the extraordinary equipoise of a life beyond good and evil. The example it does give is not Pancks, or Arthur, or even Amy, but a character almost entirely unmarked by the criticism—Physician:

> Physician was a composed man. . . . Many wonderful things did he see and hear, and much irreconcilable moral contradiction did he pass his life among; yet his equality of compassion was no more disturbed than the Divine Master's of all healing was. He went, like the rain, among the just and the unjust, doing all the good he could, and neither proclaiming it in the synagogues nor at the corners of streets. (*Little Dorrit,* p. 683)

Even to suggest that Physician constitutes an example—which presumes the possibility of imitation—is already putting it wrong. Physician is, as his name indicates, less a character than a philosophical possibility given something like human form. Because he walks and speaks and occupies the same diegetic space as everyone else in the novel, he seems to have a body and a history. But because nothing accrues to him, he might as well not. Physician is what, in a world truly without scorekeeping, we would all look like: the witness of all experience but the

[25] Wai Chee Dimock, *Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1996), p. 6. For another view of an outside to accountability, see Stanley Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)," in his *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 105–30.

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owners, the "proclaim[ers]," of none. As an alternative to the Evangelical obsession with atonement and messianic salvation, the novel gives us Physician—a Divine Master who specializes neither in justice, nor even forgiveness, but in a kind of dispassionate compassion (an "equality of compassion"). Whatever "irreconcilable moral contradiction" was in the world when Physician arrived is still there when he leaves. He does not repair or reapportion suffering, he merely lightens it—or, even more merely, simply "see[s] and hear[s]" it. He seems to take nothing and leave little more. His only real intervention is presence, and even that does not stay for long; he is as itinerant and implacable as the rain, and as inimitable. He might as well be a novelist, or at least this one.

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ABSTRACT

Daniel M. Stout, "*Little*, Maybe Less: *Little Dorrit*'s Minimal Moralia" (pp. 207–238)

Against our ordinary ways of reading the novel, this essay argues that Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857) represents a stark refusal of the logics of accountability that necessarily underwrite any program of social reform. In pairing its critique of Circumlocution (which programmatically undervalues desert) with its critique of the Marshalsea (which programmatically overstates debt), the novel points not toward a future of happy proportionality—in which innovation might be meaningfully recognized and infractions responded to humanely—but toward a way of thinking that stands outside the liberal logics of exchange (of action and consequence, of sin and redemption, of debt and repayment) that animate both social critique and social reform. Rather than a reformist text, *Little Dorrit*'s horizon is a world beyond good and evil—or, as we might also call it, after liberalism.

Keywords: Charles Dickens; *Little Dorrit*; Liberalism; social problem novel; reform

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