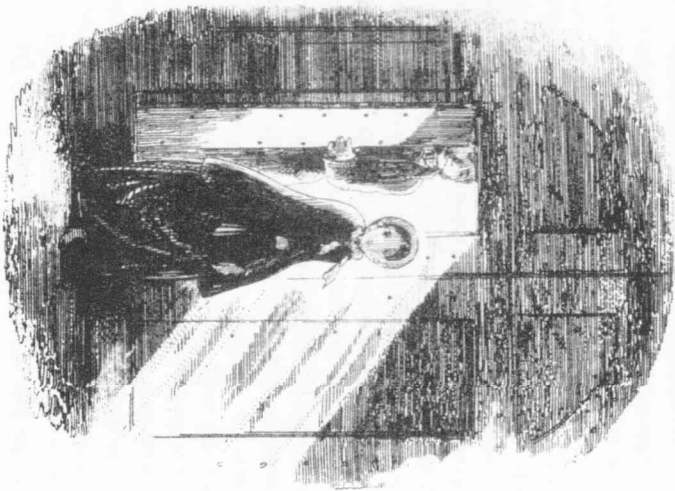


LITTLE DORRIT

CHARLES DICKENS



LONDON:

BRADBURY & EVANS BOUYERIE STREET

1857

THE TICKLISH TOPIC: FINANCE AND IDEOLOGY

IN **LITTLE DORRIT**

BY SILVANA COLLELLI

Clearly this capitalism was a more sophisticated beast than I had thought.—Iain Pears, *Stone's Fall*

In Mr. Dorrit's perception, the "ticklish topic" par excellence is money, a painful referent that he would rather consign to silence (589). His denial of economic materiality is exposed in the narrative as one of the many illusions that structure the characters' relation to their social reality. The topic of money or, more broadly, capitalism, is also "ticklish" for the novel itself, especially in connection to the claims of realism. Several critics have questioned Dickens's apparent reluctance to represent salient particulars related to the sphere of money and work. In George Orwell's words: "Nothing is queerer than the vagueness with which [Dickens] speaks of Doyce's 'invention' in *Little Dorrit*. It is represented as something extremely ingenious and revolutionary, 'of great importance to his country and his fellow-creatures,' and it is also an important minor link in the book; yet we are never told what the 'invention' is!" (92). Ruth Yeazell observes that *Little Dorrit* "relentlessly worries the issue of 'doing it' in every sense of the idiom" (33), but the representation of what is to be done remains problematic, since the novel "consistently . . . refuses to let us see 'it'" (35). Even more indirect is the treatment of financial crime, as Mary Poovey argues in *Genre of Credit Economy*: Dickens, Trollope and other Victorian novelists were engaged in a "distancing campaign" expressed in their writing as a well-codified "critical attitude toward money" (373). In *Little Dorrit*, "the Merdle plot figures only briefly, the details of the financier's crimes remain vague, and the effects of the speculation he inspires are registered in a moral vocabulary that obscures his actual crimes" (375). Intruding upon a controversial factual scenario, the "moral vocabulary" functions as a distancing device in the service of literariness, hence the abstract quality of Merdle's crimes in Dickens's fictional rendering of events that had been amply documented in the public press.¹ Literary writing, Poovey concludes, is thus emphatically distinguished from "informational writing" (373). To the list of textual omissions, one could also add the lack of concrete information regarding the commercial dealings of Clemam and Co.—is it a "private bank," as in Gail Houston's deduction (80), or a commercial house trading in tea and other Chinese goods? The secrets that this "debilitated old house in the city" (Dickens 178) hides in its interiors include the absent "it" of trade.

Many useful insights can be derived from a model of reading that problematizes the unsaid and values omissions or gaps as part of an aesthetic strategy, whether deliberate or not. But this analysis is less interested in the unknowable or the vague that might signal textual distance from historical reality; rather, it reconsiders the tension between the knowable—what gets included within the representative space of the novel—and its misrecognition. The picture of mid-Victorian capitalism Dickens draws in *Little Dorrit* is remarkable for its attentiveness to both the fantasies that mediate participation in the capitalist game and the disavowals that render this participation possible.

¹ Merdle's character is based on John Sadler (1813–56), Irish MP and financier whose numerous speculations were so disastrous that he committed suicide. The scandal created a media frenzy.

The most basic definition of ideology, writes Slavoj Žižek, “is probably the well-known phrase from Marx’s *Capital*: ‘Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es’—they do not know it, but they are doing it” (*Sublime* 24). Žižek’s own revision of this formula emphasizes that subjects know, while acting *as if* they did not: “They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing as if they did not know” (30). What Žižek calls “the paradox of an enlightened false consciousness” (25–26) might be helpful in explaining Arthur Clemann’s subject-position vis-à-vis the world of capitalist production. Just as the fiction of “Nobody” structures his relation to the affective sphere, a similar disavowal sustains his vocational trajectory from commerce (the Gothicized House of Clemann) to industry (the moralized Doyce and Clemann partnership), or from anti-capitalist indignation to pro-capitalist adaptation. The final section of this paper analyzes Arthur’s belated *Bildung*, focusing on those amorphous moments in the text in which the distance between his “knowing” and his “doing” is more visible.

There is little doubt that, in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens confronts the fetish of money and illegal enrichment most ardently. One could agree that the representation of Merdle’s portentous scheme lacks concreteness, but this referential vagueness is counterbalanced by Dickens’s critical engagement with the fantasy structure of speculation, with the dreams it sanctions, and the desires it legitimates. As *Little Dorrit* suggests, finance as fever and finance as fantasy are two sides of the same coin. Pancks, more than Merdle, deserves the honor of historical particularity as he fully understands and experiences the libidinal force of “investments.” “Nineteenth-century realist fiction,” writes Harry Shaw, “makes most sense when it is viewed as an attempt to deal with situations which involve partial knowledge and continual approximation” (29). Dickens represents the already structured, constituted, and symbolized realities of mid-nineteenth-century capitalism not only through the evocative force of concrete particulars (including absent referents), but also by re-modulating the “moral vocabulary” (to use Poovey’s expression) so effectively in place in the Victorian marketplace, as Paul Johnson has recently demonstrated: “Hand in hand with the formal institutions and the commercial and financial information that constitute the modern marketplace go the informal institutions that make this market structure work—the moral codes, the behavioural assumptions, the rules of thumb, the unspoken agreements” (11). Victorian novels focus in diverse ways on these “informal institutions,” capturing the historicity of the market especially when attending to the “valuations, opinions, talk on the street, imagination, expectations, hope” that in Deirdre McCloskey’s assessment “are what drive an economy” (8). In this respect, the referential accuracy of *Little Dorrit*’s realism may reside in objectives and procedures, rather than in the presence (or absence) of particular objects or details.

The Magic of Finance

Like Timon of Athens, whose “magic of bounty” (*Tim*, 1.1.8–9) dazzles the Athenians in Shakespeare’s play, Merdle is most visible when least engaged in financial transactions. Both characters are cast in the role of host, presiding over banquets or elaborate dinners through which they consolidate a position of power that derives from an accumulation of wealth whose origins remain undisclosed. Timon’s flatterers admire his unbounded generosity, just as Merdle’s social acquaintances (Bar, Treasury, Bishop, Admiralty) admire him and praise his ability to coin money. The more detached these moneyed

characters appear from the material sources of their wealth,² the more grandiose is their stature and unquestionable their prestige, both conveniently expressed in the words of self-interested friends: “At dinner [Merdle] was envied and flattered as a being of might, was Treasured, Barred and Bishoped as much as he would” (387). The analogies between Timon and Merdle suggest that the lack of specific details regarding Merdle’s operations in the City is a time-honored convention. What captures the interest of Shakespeare and Dickens is the social network that pivots on money and the intrinsic fragility of an architecture of belief which provides dramatic interest when its artificiality is finally exposed. Timon takes himself off to the woods, cursing the Athenians for their ingratitude, while Merdle takes his life, like many other fictional and real financiers of the time, guilty of speculating with other people’s money.³ Dickens was inspired by the events leading to John Sadlier’s suicide and was presumably well acquainted with the particulars of Sadlier’s crimes. His imaginative reformulation of financial felony speaks the language of social satire, with abstractions and personifications taking precedence over accurate information or technical details.⁴ As Mary Poovey suggests, “Dickens might well have wanted to capitalize on readers’ interest in Sadlier to support sales of *Little Dorrit*, but he did not want curiosity about the real-life financier to interfere with the moral lesson about the redemptive capacity of love that his reconfigured novel was shaped to deliver” (375). Such indirectness in the representation of finance capital, however, is not the only framing device Dickens employs. The narrative openly engages with what is most puzzling about finance: less the incidence of crime than the astonishing resilience of speculation as a popular dream. No matter how many scandals and frauds the Victorian press denounced, or how painstakingly committed financial journalists, like David Morier Evans, exposed the criminal particulars of commercial crises, speculation retained a powerful grip on the imagination of ordinary citizens.⁵ Dickens traces “the progress of an epidemic”—the speculative frenzy preceding Merdle’s collapse—among the inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard, where even Cavalletto is considering an unlikely investment in Merdle’s enterprise:

As a vast fire will fill the air to a great distance with his roar, so the sacred flame which the mighty Barnacles had fanned caused the air to resound more and more, with the name of Merdle. It was deposited on every lip, and carried into every ear. There never was, there never had been, there never again should be, such a man as Mr. Merdle. Nobody, as aforesaid, knew what he had done, but everybody knew him to be the greatest that had appeared. . . . Down in Bleeding Heart Yard, where there was not one unappropriated halfpenny, as lively an interest was taken in this paragon of man as on the Stock Exchange . . . Mr. Baptist, sole lodger of Mr. and Mrs. Plornish, was reputed in whispers to lay by the savings which were the result of his simple

² Timon slams the steward’s warnings about the uncertain state of his lord’s finance—“O my good lord, / At many times I brought in my accounts, / And them before you; you would throw them off” (*Tim*, 2.2.820–22) while Merdle appears most modest and aloof among his guests.

³ On suicide as a paradigm of financial fiction, see Nancy Henry.

⁴ See Myers (91) and Knezevici (162).

⁵ Meeley’s and Egan’s works document in different ways the force of popular delusions. See also Hollingshead.

and moderate life, for investment in one of Mr. Merdle's certain enterprises. (548)

Spreading with the "malignity and rapidity of the Plague" (547), the "epidemic" is a democratic contagion, sparing no one. While the metaphor of speculation as infectious fever carries unequivocally negative connotations in Dickens's novel as well as in other contemporary accounts (journalistic or fictional), the propensity for risk-taking and the fantasy sustaining it play an important role in the narrative as springboards for action, especially in relation to Pancks's progress. Locked in the subordinate and underpaid role of Mr. Casby's confidential man of business, Pancks appears as the agent of oppression, urging the tenants of Bleeding Heart Yard to pay their rent in words that echo Shylock's cry: "I'll have my bond!" (*Mer* 3.3.4; *LD* 273). His rise from downtrodden rent-collector to chief clerk and partner involves a public moment of rebelliousness that sets him free from the constraints of a dependant position and opens up the more rewarding prospect of entering into partnership with Arthur Clennam and Daniel Doyce.⁶ "In terms of their essential formal position," Alex Woloch claims, "minor characters are the proletariat of the novel" (27). Pancks fits this description quite well: he is made to bear the burden of the business philosophy—"grinding, drudging, toiling, every minute we're awake" (162)—from which Arthur can conveniently distance himself. However, although Pancks's "minorness" remains unchallenged in the novel's "character-system," to use Woloch's narratological categories, his "character-space" acquires centrality as he turns detective or "fortune-teller" to help the Dorrits regain their wealth.⁷

How does he do that? Pancks's scheme, unlike Merdle's, is copiously detailed. Prompted by Arthur's insistent questions, Pancks reveals how he raised the money to carry out extensive research throughout the country that could substantiate his initial hypothesis: Arthur admires him for his "sagacity," "patience" and "secrecy," but Pancks takes pride, more specifically, in his ability to borrow money:

"I said to that—boiling-over old Christian," Mr. Pancks pursued, appearing greatly to relish this descriptive epithet, "that I had got a little project on hand; a hopeful one; I told him a hopeful one, which wanted a certain small capital. I proposed to him to lend me the money on my note. Which he did, at twenty: sticking the twenty on in a business-like way; and putting it into the note, to look like a part of the principal. If I had broken down after that, I should have been his grubber for the next seven years at half wages and double grind." (397)

Like a well-intentioned company promoter, Pancks persuades the Ruggs and Mr. Casby to invest in his secret scheme, facing considerable hazards of which he is fully aware. He bases the whole project on a piece of information randomly acquired through his compulsive reading of "advertisements of next of kin" (163) in the press and is willing to risk seven years of bondage to float this uncertain scheme. In terms of size, Pancks's design is substantially different from Merdle's, but it remains a gamble analogous to other, bigger plots ordained in the City. Nor is this benevolent plan purely charitable.

since Pancks names a specific sum of money—"a thousand pounds" (398)—as adequate recompense for his efforts.⁸ The speculation pays off and both the Dorrits and Pancks stand to benefit from it. It is in relation to the character of Pancks that Dickens tests the effective reach of speculation—not just as synonymous with crime but as a fantasy of emancipation. While Pancks's first "conspiracy" (294) is prevalently pro-social, granting freedom and wealth to others, his second attempt at "investment" is motivated by a desire for redistributive justice that is charged with seditious energy: "Why should you leave all the gains to the gluttons, knaves and impostors?" asks Pancks; "Why should you leave all the gains that are to be got to my proprietor and the like of him?" (361). The "magic name" of Merdle may offer just a vague "consolation" (548) to the inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard, but in Pancks's case it provides the stimulus for change.

Noteworthy in Dickens's treatment of the financial plot is the juxtaposition of ideological and utopian elements. By the time he convinces Arthur to invest in Merdle's scheme ("Go in and win!" 561), Pancks has fully assimilated the ideology of finance, which revolves around two main tenets: decisions are reduced to calculations; what *one* can do, *many* can replicate. As Pancks confidently states: "I've gone into it. I've made the calculations. I've worked it. They're safe and genuine" (558). In the "kaleidoscope of finance," as Alex Preda defines the "public positive discourse on markets and speculation" (80) that developed from the 1850s onwards, "financial behavior was made dependent on knowledge and presented as thoroughly rational: it was a matter of studying, observing, analyzing" (92). Central to this legitimating discourse was also the redefinition of speculation "not according to whether it contributes or not to society, but as a universal force, as intrinsic to human nature and as present in all societal domains" (176). The legitimacy of financial markets today, Preda argues, is the result of a series of successful symbolizations through which the "boundaries of finance" came to be redrawn to include "apologetic as well as critical stances with respect to financial speculation" (203):

the kaleidoscope of speculation encompasses laudatory stances towards speculators, as well as critical ones. During the nineteenth century much of the criticism nests itself within fiction writing, due to the protesting voices being partially displaced by the authority of brokers and investors writing "factual" accounts of speculation, "histories" and "documentaries." Nevertheless, criticism, as well as an apology of speculators, operated to a large extent with the same categories and figures.

Preda insists on the flexibility of this kaleidoscope as a classificatory system able to accommodate contradictory elements: rationality and irrationality, playing by the rules and daring to break them, "calls for exclusion" and "calls for inclusion" (194), approval and disapproval of the figure of the charismatic speculator. This ideology gained ascendancy in the second half of the nineteenth century and contributed considerably to sustaining the dominance of financial markets despite much criticism.⁹ Preda's insights are

⁶ For a perceptive reading of the "minorness" figure of Pancks, see Dyvork.

⁷ Woloch defines the "character-space" as "that particular and changed encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole" (14). The "character-system" is described as "the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure."

⁸ "Your own recompense for all this, Mr. Pancks," said Clennam, "ought to be a large one: 'I don't mistrust getting it, sir,' said Pancks. . . . 'Money out of pocket made good, time fairly allowed for, and Mr. Rugg's bill settled, a thousand pounds would be a fortune to me'" (398).

⁹ Central in the analyses of both Preda and De Goede is an awareness of the role played by different strands of criticism, over the centuries, in naturalizing the image of global finance as a "Phoenix" ever rising from the ashes (*De Goede* 3).

useful to reassess Dickens's position vis-à-vis speculation. *Little Dorrit* encourages mistrust of finance while at the same time showing that the desire to speculate is indeed universal and that some forms of gambling may be for the common good. The new "science of financial markets" (86), of which Pancks is an advocate and a victim, entailed a democratic myth of social mobility, making room for egalitarian yearnings. Dickens does not reward Pancks with unearned wealth but links his liberation from the mastery of the Patriarch to the financial vicissitudes of the thousand pounds he obtained from his first conspiratorial scheme. "'Do you mean, my good Pancks,' asked Clemm, emphatically, 'that you would put that thousand pounds of yours, let us say, for instance, out at this kind of interest?'" 'Certainly,' said Pancks. 'Already done it, sir'" (Dickens 558). By investing and losing all he has, Pancks finds the inspiration to turn rebellious, publicly accusing his "proprietor" and emerging as "the voice of truth and justice" (Young 75):

"I have discharged myself from your service," said Pancks, "that I may tell you what you are. You're one of a lot of impostors that are the worst lot of the lots to be met with. Speaking as a sufferer by both, I don't know that I wouldn't as soon have the Merdle lot as your lot. You're a driver in disguise, a screwer by deputy, a wringer, and a squeezer, and shaver by substitute! You're a philanthropic sneak! You're a shabby deceiver!" (Dickens 763)

That Mr. Casby is here depicted as a more despicable impostor than Merdle himself may owe something to the fact that the fever of speculation, unlike the oppressive "drudging" and "grinding" of everyday business, is sustained by dreams and utopian fantasies that the novel is not inclined to dismiss as mere delusions. Pancks's belief in "investments" (557) becomes truly contagious after Arthur confesses his desire to make reparations for the wrongdoing of the House of Clemm; it is on the strength of this desire that Arthur too is hooked. Pancks provides him with a double rationale, based on the one hand on the mantra of "calculations" and on the other on his past experience of successful risk-taking: "Be as rich as you honestly can. It's your duty," he urges Arthur. "Not for your sake, but for the sake of others" (561). Dickens does not absolve the desire to speculate even when carried out "for the sake of others," but he does connect this desire to the unmistakable satisfaction of debunking the powerful. The punishment Pancks has in store for his employer—the cutting off of his long hair¹⁰—"will be understood by any reader," as Lionel Trilling observed, "with the least tincture of psychoanalytic knowledge" (289). The comic pleasure yielded by this scene has radical overtones, and it is significant that Dickens ultimately redeems the speculator by turning his economic losses into a political gain.¹¹

Dickens's distaste for the nebulous scheming of the grand financier is conveyed in the scathing accents of social satire, but the narrative of Pancks's rise from "money-grabber" to "fortune-teller," speculator, and finally "partner" is infused with a good deal of sympathy. While indirectness prevails in the treatment of enormous financial speculations,

¹⁰ "Quick as lightning, Mr. Pancks, who, for some moments, had had his right hand in his coat pocket, whipped out a pair of shears, swooped upon the Patriarch behind, and snipped off short, the sacred locks that flowed upon his shoulders" (765).

¹¹ On Dickens's relation to the popular radical heritage, see Ledger and Sen. Dvorak argues that "The scene in which Pancks discharges himself from Casby's service . . . needs to be read as the most important in the novel, for it brings together Dickens's themes about money and disguise in an effective—and often wonder-fully comic—way" (342).

particularly is the prerogative of the small speculator, whose wishes and fantasies are restored to the centre of the picture as vital forces that propel the plot and instigate the will to change. As Aaron Matz explains, realism tends to be "associated with the specific and the local," while satire is "a fundamentally a-historical, context-resistant mode of writing. Satire tells us the same, continuous truth about mankind's folly; realism articulates it in new ways" (xii). The oscillation between satire and realism, in Dickens's treatment of speculation, projects a double image of finance as both a trans-historical realm of unbridled greed and folly, and a localized sphere of individual action where corrections are still possible and imaginable. As an intervention in the heated mid-nineteenth-century debate about the excesses of finance capitalism, *Little Dorrit* is interesting precisely to the extent that it acknowledges the vices as well as the virtues of speculative dreams, the fever and the fantasy that render the magic of finance so very powerful. If denouncing financial felony, as the Victorians relentlessly did, was sufficient to curb the power of financial markets, crises would be more easily avoided. This is the realistic lesson that *Little Dorrit* delivers; moral indignation is an important component of this lesson, but so is the recognition of the residue of hope that lingers on when the accusations have all been vented.

"something Wrong omgwörz"

Despite the infectious potential of speculation, some characters in the novel are immune to this plague. Notable among them is Mrs. Clemm, a most inflexible figure of female Ur-capitalist, acquisitive, self-interested, and stubbornly attached to her business identity. The House of Clemm is a remnant of the past in more than one way: it conflates "home" and "work," it is run by a stern, Calvinist widow, and it proves impervious to modern finance.¹² Its collapse is a matter of self-combustion, not a consequence of ill-advised investments. When Arthur returns home from China, the House appears to him "out of date and out of purpose":

Mother, our House has done less and less for some years past, and our dealings have been progressively on the decline . . . the track we have kept is not the track of time; and we have been left far behind. . . . Even this old house in which we speak . . . is an instance of what I say. In my father's earlier time, and in his uncle's time before him, it was a place of business—really a place of business, and business resort. Now it is a mere anomaly and incongruity here, out of date and out of purpose. (56)

It is not just the confusion between "House" and "home" that Arthur finds incongruous. Even more disturbing is Mrs. Clemm's enduring role as "the moving power of all this machinery" (59), a role that appears unnatural and casts a long shadow over the business of the House and, more generally, over the sphere of economic agency: "In grasping at money and in driving hard bargains . . . some one may have been grievously deceived,

¹² "Mrs. Clemm is presented as a stony and omnipotent figure, her power is quite simply emasculating, and in this she is connected to other mother surrogates in Dickens's fiction" (Showalter 34). See also Schor, who includes Mrs. Clemm in the group of heroines that "have fierce desires, a passion for narrative, and an obsession with property" (137). See also Davidoff and Hall (1987) for an historical account of the role of women, especially widows, in the management of family businesses in the early decades of the nineteenth century (279-89).

injured, ruined" Arthur reminds his stepmother: "You were the moving power of all this machinery before my birth; your stronger spirit has been infused into all my father's dealings; for more than two score years." Arthur's suspicion that a wrong of some kind has been committed in the past is almost redundant here, since in his perception money-making is already equated with illicit "grasping," and driving bargains is loaded with unfavorable connotations, being associated with suffering, deception, and ruin: "I have seen little happiness come of money," he concludes.¹³ Whether there is a real secret tainting the biography of this House, Arthur rejects the possibility of replacing or aiding his stepmother in the running of the business out of sheer distaste for the predatory capitalism she embodies. Mrs. Clemm resents Arthur's depiction of her own and her husband's work—the "wear and tear and toil and self-denial"—as "so much plunder" (58), but the narrator sides with Arthur and his indictment of the "grasping" at the heart of the capitalist game. As Amanda Anderson avers, "the vague sense of guilt haunting this commercial traveler from the east, and his forceful resigning of all connection with Clemm and Co. upon his return to England, suggest a wider sensitivity to the violence of British global capitalism and imperial concerns, and to the vast economic imbalances generated thereby" (72).

At the beginning of the novel, the main character already knows that "economic imbalances" are the dark flipside of the notion of progress. Arthur enters the novel in the shape of an accomplished anti-capitalist, with enough experience to pronounce his conclusive, negative judgment on money, and a clear perception that there is something wrong (if not monstrous) in the "machinery" over which his mother is such a commanding figure. He knows all this, yet in the unfolding of the story, he acts as if he did not, choosing to persevere along the business trajectory, albeit in a different direction. The illusion, as Žižek reminds us, does not reside in the knowing but in the doing. Arthur's knowledge renders his participation in the sphere of capitalist production possible once again: by distancing himself from the "plundering" of his mother, he finds new reasons to be active. So long as he believes, in his heart, that capitalism is bad, he is free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange.¹⁴ This belief is renewed with every visit he pays to "the grim home of his youth":

As he went along, upon a dreary night, the dim streets by which he went seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting-houses, with their secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes; the banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the keys of which were in a very few secret pockets and a very few secret breasts; the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill, among whom there were doubtless plunderers, forgers and trust-betrayers of many sorts, whom the light of any day that dawned might reveal; he could have fancied that these things, in hiding, imparted a heaviness to the air. (520)

¹³ The result of his homecoming, as Monica Cohen suggests, "is that the whole notion of business, along with the figure of a businessman, assumes a malevolent hue" (114).

¹⁴ "Clemm's willingness to 'lay down all he has' is less a matter of filial ingratitude than a willingness to play by a rule of equivalent exchange which ensures that the portability of property never rests" (Nunokawa 22).

In Arthur's "impressible" imagination, not even the dead are "at rest from doing harm." Secrecy defines the essence of capitalism, regardless of what "the light of any day" might eventually disclose. As William Myers noticed, secrets "do not make for any real suspense" in this novel (77), but their ubiquity reinforces the sense of ineradicable darkness at the heart of a system that goes on perpetrating the plunder and deception which Arthur perceives all too clearly. What is it then that makes Arthur's intervention in this system stand apart from the compulsion to do harm, which is seen as endemic? The narrative of his professional rejuvenation depends on the possibility of differentiating between good and bad forms of participation in the capitalist game. "I have no will," Arthur confesses to Mr. Meagles, on his way back from China, "I am the son . . . of a hard father and mother. I am the child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything, for whom what could not be weighed, measured and priced, had no existence" (33). His belated *Bildung* is, in a sense, willed by others and steered in the right direction by sagacious men of business—Mr. Meagles, Daniel Doyce, and even Pancks—who are emphatically different from his "hard" parents. No longer in business, Mr. Meagles has already been removed from the source of potential harm when he encounters Arthur for the first time and encourages him to behave "like a practical man." The chapter in which Arthur comes to a decision regarding "what he was to do henceforth in life" (189) is entitled "Nobody's weakness" and in it two narrative strands—the vocational and the sentimental—are interwoven. The feelings he has for Pet (Miss Meagles) are acknowledged only indirectly as "Nobody's weakness," the object of a "supposition" (200) or a denial. A similar gesture of misrecognition guides his choice of a new career: he settles for business once again. Although this choice is a confirmation of his previous identity, it is made to appear as a rupture with the past, a new commencement: "having disembarrassed myself from an occupation that was painful to me for many reasons, [I] wish to devote myself and what means I have, to another pursuit" (199).

Arthur's initial indecision is bound up with his "misgiving" about the secret guilt of the House of Clemm: he is reluctant to embark upon a new occupation, fearing that there is some "unsatisfied claim upon his justice" (189). From past experience he knows that weighing, measuring, and pricing everything is wrong, and suspects that this habit has caused harm to an unspecified third party. But this knowledge is effaced when he encounters Daniel Doyce, who enjoys in the novel the same mythic status that was reserved for the "heroes of invention," glorified as national champions by Macaulay and Francis Jeffrey among others:

A composed and unobtrusive self-sustainment was noticeable in Daniel Doyce—a calm knowledge that what was true must remain true, in spite of all the Barnacles in the family ocean, and would be just the truth, and neither more nor less, when even the sea had run dry—which had a kind of greatness in it, though not of the official quality. (Macleod 192)

Seemingly unperturbed by the gross inefficiencies of the Circumlocution Office, immune to the petty habit of reducing everything to market value, Doyce stands for a noble ideal of "unobtrusive" self-sufficiency. He runs the Works and takes an active part in the "machinery" of capitalism, but the way Dickens presents him minimizes Doyce's actual involvement in this system and maximizes his remoteness from its darkness and ugliness. The "fictish" that enables Doyce to "fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist

game, while sustaining the perception that [he] is not really in it" (Žižek, "Spectre" 15) is the invisible invention to which he has devoted his life, the absent referent that suffices his work with the glow of pure art.¹⁵ The refusal to name this invention, to reduce it to the status of a recognizable product, is at one with the disavowal that structures Dickens's representation of good or ethical capitalism.

Arthur opts for the "truth" that Doyce represents, a truth antithetical to the secrecy and guilty opacity that he continues to perceive everywhere, in the social geography of London, in the paper labyrinths of the Circumlocution Office, in the gloomy recesses of his family home.¹⁶ Doyce's account books, that Arthur audits before accepting the partnership, are a marvel of transparency—"all the results of his undertakings during many years were distinctly set forth, and were ascertainable with ease" (260)—just as Doyce himself, with his modesty, good sense, and plain speaking, is a champion of honesty and simplicity. The novel encourages readers to believe that there is a model of capitalist enterprise functioning according to softer, more humane rules, the Doyce and Clemann partnership being synonymous with friendship.¹⁷ The acquisitive and predatory mentality that Arthur identifies with his parents has been replaced by Doyce's heroic creativity, and Arthur's business identity, no longer painful to him, appears as a "welcome change": "he glanced at these things with a feeling of pleasure in his pursuit that was new to him" (263).

Going against the grain of the novel's totalistic vision of the darkness and systemic violence of capitalism, tangible in its effects on the deprived inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard for whom the word "manufacturers" sounds like "malefactors" (146), the representation of Doyce's factory is remarkable for the cheerfulness and lightness associated with it. In the chapter entitled "Machinery in motion," the industrial *intérieur* is observed from Arthur's viewpoint in the counting-house: "The noises were sufficiently removed and shut out from the counting-house to blend into a busy hum, interspersed with periodical clinks and thumps. The patient figures at work were swarthy with the filings of iron and steel that danced on every bench and bubbled up through every chink in the planking" (263). This attenuated, muted picture of industrial work serves the ideological purpose of cordoning off the sense of oppression otherwise palpable in the novel. But when Flora and Mr. F's Aunt appear unexpectedly, "laboring up the step-ladder," their vision from below alters the picture significantly: "Good gracious, Arthur,—I should say Mr. Clemann, far more proper—the climb we have had to get up here and how ever to get down again without a fire-escape and Mr. F's Aunt slipping through the steps and bruised all over and you in the machinery and foundry way too only think, and never told us!"

Flora's anarchic loquacity is not always nonsensical. In this episode, her words belie Arthur's idyllic vision, introducing a jarring note of discord: the climb is

¹⁵ As Claire Pettit remarks, Doyce's labor is represented as "unlaminated" (197); the figure of the inventor, in this novel, "reflects the deep uncertainties of Dickens's own thinking about creativity and intellectual property" (191). Yeazell suggests that "to give any particular name to Doyce's invention would risk diminishing his mythic stature, reducing the generic Maker to a particular, bathetically limited figure" (36).

¹⁶ Julian Wolfreys claims that "Dickens's text maintains the very idea of London as a 'land of fragments,' hinting at the 'otherwise invisible who haunt the structures of power and law on which the city is built, as London's silent inhabitants' (96). In Nancy Metz's words, "the distinctive atmosphere of *Little Dorrit* owes more to the generalized evocation of decline than it does to the immediacy with which particular scenes are rendered" (65).

¹⁷ Taylor points out that there was "a substantial body of opinion," in the 1840s and 1850s, defending partnership law as "the natural providential system governing business activity, rooted in notions of personal responsibility and reinforcing the primacy of character in commerce" (49).

uncomfortable, the vertical structure of the workshops ill-conceived, and the lack of a fire-escape dangerous for all the "patient figures" working inside. Flora sees potential and real harm where Arthur perceives a pleasant "busy hum." Their divergent views may not have equal significance, since Flora's monologues are meant to be comic; but, like other minor characters in Dickens's novels, Flora "compels our attention" with her exuberant idiom and random observations that upset "the balance, or the proportion, between a minor character's place in the *histoire* and in the *discours*" (Woloch 129). In her interaction with the protagonist, Flora is the character that most artlessly calls into question Arthur's new identity. She insists on addressing him as "Arthur—Doyce and Clemann," joining together the past and the present, the son and the partner, regardless of his wish to break with the past. When she speaks of business, it is to remind Arthur that "business is equally business call it what you will and business habits are just the same" (265). The very structure of her rolling sentences seems resistant to subtle distinctions. In one scene, Arthur's goodness comes under attack when a startling memory of his boyish cruelty is evoked by Flora:

Arthur—confirmed habit—Mr. Clemann—took me down into an unused kitchen eminent for mouldiness and proposed to secrete me there for life and feed me on what he could hide from his meals when he was home for the holidays and on dry bread in disgrace which at that halcyon period too frequently occurred. (656)

This memory anticipates by a few paragraphs the scene in which Arthur relentlessly interrogates Affrey, exasperated by her refusal to reveal what she supposedly knows about the secrets of the House of Clemann. Locked in the "dragon closet" (658), "rembling and struggling the whole time," Affrey repeatedly implores him to leave her alone, while he persists in asking questions she does not want to hear: "Don't ask me nothing . . . I have been in a dream for ever so long. Go away, go away!" (661). Arthur is not a Gothic oppressor, but in this chapter he behaves like one, increasing the dose of terrors that Affrey has to bear. Since he fails to obtain even a morsel of information, his pressing appears all the more gratuitous.

Flora's comments function as humorous reminders that, despite Arthur's best intentions, his involvement in the "machinery" of business remains dubious.¹⁸ Through her interventions, the narrative hints at lines of continuity between benevolence and cruelty that run counter to the "intensified polarities" of Dickens's "melodramatic fix" (Crosby 75). A similar pattern emerges in the interaction between Arthur and his putative mother. In their dialogues, Mrs. Clemann deftly deploys the rhetoric of business as the one idiom that she still has in common with her son, implicitly reminding Arthur that his and her standard of values descends from the same matrix. For example, when the villain Blandois is introduced to Mrs. Clemann, she brushes aside Arthur's solicitous warnings as contrary to the finest rules of business that imply placing trust in strangers and foreigners:

"The gentleman," pursued Mrs. Clemann, "on a former occasion brought a letter of recommendation to us from highly esteemed and responsible correspondents . . . Therefore, Arthur . . . the

¹⁸ In the figure of Flora, "memories are disseminated through profligate speech . . . Thus, it may be said that Amy's role is to restrict the economy of memory, while Flora's is to emphasize performatively a blurring content of memory's fragments" (Wolfreys 101).

gentleman comes here as an acquaintance, and no stranger; and it is much to be regretted that your unreasonable temper should have found offence in him. I regret it. I say so to the gentleman. You will not say so, I know; therefore I say it for myself and Flintwinch, since with us two the gentleman's business lies." (524)

Arthur's objections are silenced by Mrs. Clemm's faith in the principles and tacit agreements of the business community; a letter of recommendation from "esteemed and responsible correspondents" is more dependable than Arthur's vague suspicions still unsupported, at this stage, by any evidence of wrongdoing. She stands by a method that is recognizably profitable—the same method that has allowed Arthur himself to enter into partnership with Doyce (previously a stranger to him), thanks to the recommendation of a common acquaintance. Having no counter-argument to oppose to his mother's sharp reasoning, he is forced to leave. The most frustrating element in this scene is Arthur's dumbness, his inability to find convincing arguments to prove his mother wrong. The plot, of course, will confirm the villainy of Blandois, but it will not entirely dispel the impression that Arthur's weakness vis-à-vis his mother is a consequence of their unacknowledged similarities, as both are actively engaged in the running of business ventures and show an analogous tendency to stick to business habits, which, as Flora aptly remarks, "are just the same" everywhere.¹⁹

By associating the evils of capitalism with the Medusa-like figure of a business woman, unable to be officially in charge of her own family firm but all the more eager to steer it the way she likes, Arthur's progress can be configured as a struggle to reclaim economic agency from the grips of a castrating maternal figure. This structure facilitates the perception that once order has been restored, and the secret machinations of a usurper of masculine prerogatives have been uncovered, economic agency will emerge purified. However, the narrative also shows that the distinction between good and bad forms of participation in the capitalist game is not always tenable, hence Arthur's persistent sense of frustration in his dealings with Clemm and Co.; his inability to withstand the allure of speculation; and his ambivalent attitude vis-à-vis the only minor character in the novel—Cavalletto—that can be identified as a "worker," an employee of Doyce and Clemm.

As Fleishman argues, the "human relationship most frequently found in the world of *Little Dorrit* is that of master and servant" (575). Introduced in the first chapter, alongside his master Rigaud/Blandois, Cavalletto appears as "the perfect type of the unrepellous servant" (577), whose otherness is a source of comic pleasure. After the accident, Arthur offers him "odd jobs" at the Works (298), but refuses to be classified as his "proprietor": "No!" he objects to Pancks, "I am rather his adviser than his proprietor" (557). A social relation of production, not an interpersonal one of dominion and servitude, regulates the interaction between the employer and the Italian "Altro." Yet no more than one occasion Arthur's "proprietary share in Cavalletto" comes to the fore. He feels entitled to dispose of the Italian as he pleases, suggesting that Cavalletto should accompany the Meagles on their way to Rome as an unlikely interpreter (506). In terms of humor, Dickens makes the most of Cavalletto's linguistic otherness and ineptitude; Arthur's proposition, therefore,

seems all the more incongruous. But the episode in which his dominion over Cavalletto becomes most visible occurs while Arthur is in the debtors' prison, finally confronting Rigaud, whom Pancks and his friend have managed to track down. This is the only scene where Cavalletto shows a modicum of insubordination, unwilling to take new orders from his previous master who treats him as if he "were an Italian horse or mule" (717). The dynamic Dickens imagines places Arthur in the position of the new master who echoes the orders issued by Rigaud:

He set down his glass and said:
"I'll not fill it. What! I am born to be served. Come then, you Cavalletto, and fill!"

The little man looked at Clemm, whose eyes were occupied with Rigaud, and, seeing no prohibition, got up from the ground, and poured out from the bottle into the glass. The blending, as he did so, of his old submission with a sense of something humorous; the striving of that with a certain smouldering ferocity, which might have flashed fire in an instant . . . and the easy yielding of all, to a good-natured, careless, predominant propensity to sit down on the ground again; formed a very remarkable combination of character. (714)

Whether with a nod, a few words or simply by remaining silent, Arthur instructs the Italian to "fetch [Rigaud] what he wants" (713) and to remain submissive, effectively keeping at bay the potential "ferocity" of this otherwise harmless servant. This scene is a variation on the theme of villainy introduced in the first chapter of the novel, and shows Arthur's implication in the system of oppression that pivots on Rigaud. It is a symptomatic scene for it reveals the "obscure" bond (Showalter 31) connecting Arthur and Rigaud as well as the persistence of patterns of domination and servitude even in the modern relation of production (in which work is exchanged for money) that Arthur claims to have established with Cavalletto. In this case too, the narrative oscillates between a belief in good, responsible capitalism (championed by Arthur) and a diffuse perception of "something wrong somewhere,"²⁰ a recognition that darker forces are still at work.

In *Little Dorrit*, this recognition is an integral part of the social picture Dickens draws: it crops up in his descriptions of the London streets and in the "confused" vision of Mr. Plornish—"He could tell you who suffered, but he couldn't tell you whose fault it was" (146); in the representation of the "atavistic" debtors' prison (Cohen 103); and in the ostensible gloominess of the House of Clemm. Dickens's sensitivity to social inequalities is unquestionable. What makes it unique is the emphasis on the various types of illusions, fantasies, and misrecognitions that help sustain the "machinery" that produces those inequalities: *Little Dorrit* offers an extended exploration of the powerful sway of fantasies, some of them openly acknowledged as such. Mr. Dorrit's fiction of gentility, buttressed by his daughter's kind lies; Pancks's mathematical delusions, legitimized even by Doyce ("There was an error in your calculations" [783]); Mrs. Plornish's "little fiction" of painted happiness (550); and Arthur's suppositions about Nobody in love are all presented as explicit fantasies that help mediate the characters' relation to their social reality. In stark contrast to these innocent mediations stands the cynical realism of jaded

¹⁹ Significantly, it is Amy Dorrit, early in the narrative, who connects Arthur's "earnestness" to his step-mother's, "with the great difference that she was earnest in asperity and he in gentleness" (Dickens 168). The quality of earnestness is valued highly by Amy as it is the standard against which she gauges the failings of such characters as Henry Cowan who lack firmness of purpose.

²⁰ "Something Wrong Somewhere" is the title of chapter 5 in book II.

characters, from the cosmopolitan villain Rigaud to the blasé artist Henry Gowan, who accept the rule of money as the only determinant of their lives.

Somewhere in the middle between explicit fantasies and cynical realism lie the more nuanced symbolizations of the economic sphere that are at play in the financial plot and in the story of Arthur Clemann's professional development. The financial plot has a dual focus, revolving around both Merdle and Pancks: it is in relation to the latter that Dickens tests the resilience of speculation as a popular dream. Fuelled by the desire for social justice, this dream culminates in an act of "spectacular" rebellion—an "act of personal redemption," not a social revolution, as Fleishman points out (578)—that adds a positive dimension to risk-taking. The character that is willing to hazard all he has, gains a new life, emancipated from pre-modern forms of bondage still present in the capitalist world of *Little Dorrit*. This twist renders Dickens's take on international finance historically cogent: alerting Victorian readers to the incidence of financial crime is one thing; showing them how the fantasy of fast capitalism works in the minds of ordinary outsiders lured by the prospect of rapid change is a different and arguably more effective way of pinning down the potency of financial fictions. The novel embraces the moral lesson of individual responsibility by punishing Arthur for his speculation while ultimately redeeming Pancks. Speculation stands condemned when a middle-class character, actively involved in the industrial sphere, attempts a leap forward towards the illicit goal of unearned wealth, but the same fantasy appears less illusory when experienced by a character that has not yet been granted the kind of bourgeois freedom that Arthur already enjoys.

Arthur Clemann's story suggests that crucial distinctions between good and bad capitalism can and ought to be drawn: in this respect, the novel is attuned to mainstream public discourses about business, management, and finance that insisted on the moral question.²¹ Reading *Little Dorrit* alongside Walter Bagehot's 1857 essay on the Crédit Mobilier (joint-stock company), one is struck by the similarities in the final lesson both authors derive from their very different explorations of modern commerce: "As times go," writes Bagehot, "the making of money by work is perhaps the most innocent employment of man; but no passion is so dangerous as an avarice which is at the same time inactive and intense" (283). But Dickens's novel insinuates doubts about the possibility of differentiating between "innocent employment" and "avarice." Arthur's indictment of the "plunder" he identifies with Clemann and Co., his belief that there is something wrong, or evil, in the "machinery" of business is the kind of knowledge that allows him (paradoxically) to renew his participation in the same game, to choose business once again under the new auspices of a project of reparation that he will only carry out on the emotional, affective level, as Tamara Wagner claims (103). The central consciousness in the narrative is in the thrall of ideology; as Žižek redefines it: "I know very well, but still . . ." (*Sublime* 12). This reading gives precedence to minor episodes or scenes—Flora's comments on the Works, for instance—in which the fantasy of goodness that serves to support Arthur's reality shows some cracks. This does not imply that the main pattern of meanings is disrupted. Daniel Dayce and his branch of industry are described, from

first to last, in entirely positive terms. But it is Arthur's perceptions and experiences that frame the narrative and guide the reader's approach to the imagined world of the novel. By making the subject-position Arthur inhabits uncomfortable and beset by a persistent sense of "liberal guilt" (Born 29), Dickens tests the limits of his character's (and possibly his own) belief in the moral critique of capitalism. The ubiquitous feeling of entrapment in *Little Dorrit* is contingent upon "its deeply pessimistic analysis of mid-Victorian economics" (Herbert 196). Central to this analysis is the role played by Arthur Clemann's occluded knowledge, which is functional to his reinvention in the system of economic production. The focus on this process—rather than any direct reference to financial details or technological inventions—defines the scope of Dickens's (bleak) realism.

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²¹ Whether market values could be reconciled with ethical imperatives, and economic efficiency with morality, was the object of much debate throughout the nineteenth century. Steele provides an excellent overview of various attempts to moralize the market. See also Keath on criminal capitalism and Taylor on the highly controversial reception of the principle of limited liability.

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