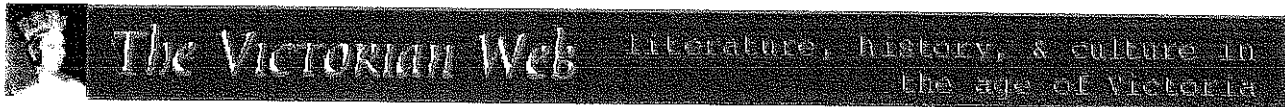


Material Culture as Society Informant: Prisons in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit*

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And who so has sixpence is sovereign (to the length of sixpence) over all men — T. Carlyle

That man is the richest whose pleasures are the cheapest — Henry David Thoreau



Dickens often uses material culture as a vehicle for his moral geometry. Evidence of this can be found both in *Bleak House* (1853) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65). *Little Dorrit* (1857) also exemplifies this tendency of his. As this essay aims to illustrate, in this latter novel, material culture elements such as food, goods, furniture, dress, attire, collectibles, and ornamentation become semiological items which reify, in Dickens's literary universe, visibility and economy. Indeed, in *Little Dorrit* goods become deeply linked to issues of social stratification, the appetite for class mobility, and to a politics of class and identity. Dickens's use of commodities shows that in nineteenth-century society these are shorthand icons for wealth and status, so that class differences and appetites for class mobility are defined by him and deployed in terms of a struggle for material objects and a war of emulation. Through a rags-to-riches development, exemplified by the descent into poverty and the subsequent rehabilitation to riches of the Dorrit family, Dickens portrays opposite ways of living: that of the rich and that of the poor. Nevertheless, as Dickens shows, ways of thinking tend to become uniform, that is: goods are not only the measure of social success but begin, dangerously, to codify the grammar of self-perception: besides being social informants and social propellers, they constitute, for most of the characters, a reference code of identity, thus establishing standards of self-esteem. The way things swallow up people within a regime of appearances is in a masterly way depicted through *Little Dorrit's* prison metaphor and by the many object-synecdoches which Dickens makes use of.

As Dickens shows, the nineteenth-century fascination and obsession with commodities, expressed through object choices and possessions, determines people's longings and desires and reveals their subjection to, and compliance with, the leading market economy, the ever more emergent and reified commodity culture. Society — the "superior sort of Marshalsea" (565) —

simply mirrors and promotes the new economic yearnings, personal attitudes, behaviour, and life styles of this consumerist ethos. Dickens masterfully projects the temptations, desires, and anxieties for the commodity culture onto his characters so that they end up either as Marshalsea prisoners or as prisoners of society. But let us examine the text.

Little Dorrit was published in monthly instalments from December 1855 to June 1857. The novel follows closely on one of Dickens's best-ever written novels, *Bleak House* (1853), and this may partly explain his difficulty in beginning the new enterprise (see Forster, Bk 7, I). The novel can be said, as is usual with Dickens, to be symbolically realistic in that it confronts its readers with the narrator's dissatisfaction about society, government, and, at a general but more interesting level, irresponsible individuals or, as Dickens put it in an article in *Household Words* (30 Aug. 1856), his disappointment with "Nobody, Somebody, and Everybody". Dickens was at this time very much outraged by the inefficiency and mismanagement which he saw in his country. His discontent was directed against what he considered a shameful decline of responsibility at all levels of society, which affected both institutions and single individuals, as the original title of the novel — *Nobody's Fault* — confirms — the same cry he had also uttered in his 1853 Christmas story "Nobody's Story" (59-65), and is re-echoed in Arthur Clennam's frequent reference to himself as "nobody." As Butt and Tillotson state, in this article, Dickens makes the topicality of the novel clear:

The power of Nobody is becoming so enormous in England, and he alone is responsible for so many proceedings, both in the way of commission and omission; he has so much to answer for, and is so constantly called to account; that a few remarks upon him may not be ill-timed. The hand which this surprising person had in the late [Crimean] war is amazing to consider. It was he who left the tents behind, who left the baggage behind, who chose the worst possible ground for encampments, who provided no means of transport, who killed the horses, who paralysed the commissariat, who knew nothing of the business he professed to know and monopolised, who decimated the English army. It was Nobody who gave out the famous unroasted coffee, it was Nobody who made the hospitals more horrible than language can describe, it was Nobody who occasioned all the dire confusion of Balaklava harbour, it was even Nobody who ordered the fatal Balaklava cavalry charge. The non-relief of Kars was the work of Nobody, and Nobody has justly and severely suffered for that infamous transaction. [Butt and Tillotson, 229-30]

Dickens is here reacting, on the one hand, to the death of more than two hundreds of British soldiers who, engaged in the Crimean War, had been killed at Balaklava — an event also dramatised in Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854; text) with the accusation that "someone had blundered", and, on the other, to the misconduct of Parliament. Butt and Tillotson say that, in a letter to the actor William C. Macready, he wrote:

In No. 3 of my new book [*Little Dorrit*] I have been blowing off a little of indignant steam which would otherwise blow me up, and with God's leave I shall walk in the same all the days of my life; but I have no present political faith or hope — not a grain. (226)

His disparagement, as shown by the letter, also came from the result of the suffrage ballot which did not enfranchise the people:

As to the suffrage, I have lost hope even in the ballot. We appear to me to have proved the failure of representative institutions without an educated and advanced people to support them. [. . .] I do reluctantly believe that the English people are habitually consenting parties to the miserable imbecility into which we have fallen, and never will help themselves out of it. Who is to do it, if anybody is, God knows. (Ibidem)

Dickens had read and admired Thomas Carlyle to whom he dedicated *Hard Times* (1854). In *Past and Present* (1834), Carlyle had taken to task the governing classes, which he considered to be under the spell of the "Gospel of Dilettantism", the "Donothingism in Practice and Saynothingism in Speech" (145). Against the "much-consuming Aristocracy" (169) he had written: "the law of your position on this God's Earth [. . . is] True government and guidance; not non-government and Laissez-faire; how much less, misgovernment and Corn Laws!" (170). The failure of institutions had already been presented by Dickens as the butt of ridicule in *Bleak House's* indictments of the English Law — in particular of the disparaging Equity system in its Chancery-practice outcome — and its unacceptable delays, which resulted in its inefficiency (see my study of the legal metaphors of *Bleak House* in Bezrucka, *Oggetti*, 105-22, and in "Law vs. Equity"). Bureaucracy and the ills of privilege now became his target of criticism, making of *Little Dorrit* "his most politically outspoken novel" (Schlicke, 342). The novel can, in fact, be read as a class-conscious book, though not on an outspoken and direct level, rather on a secondary level of reading, as an underlying subtext inscribed, as it were, in the material culture it presents. In fact, objects utter in this novel a language of their own, which is mostly a language of identification: objects, that is, bespeak of their owners.

The other target of the book is, of course, the new market economy. As Christopher Herbert rightly points out, after the Hungry Forties, the eighteen-fifties "seemed like unbounded prosperity", an era which "coincided with a perceived shift of influence from traditional structures of wealth based on the massive fixities of landed property to the ones based on the liquidities of manufacturing, commerce, speculation, and credit" (Herbert, 188, see also Brantingler, *Fictions of State*). *Little Dorrit* is precisely reacting to the virtuality of money, of credit — "that complex of paper transactions which does the work of money without the actual passing of currency" (Russell, 17) — which fosters, Dickens hints, the dream of 'unearned' income, and to unearned income we can also ascribe Dickens's constant attacks on usury, the passport to easy money which he much despised, which was proposed as being there, ready at hand not only for the gentility, the aristocratic moneyed class, and for the rich bourgeoisie and the nouveaux riches, but also for large sectors of the lower middle-class: "Manufacturers, merchants, factors, bankers, people on fixed incomes, retired half-pay officers, governesses, widows, trustees of orphans' funds, shopkeepers, aristocrats, and gentry, all rushed in those years to the stockbrokers to claim their stakes in the new Age of Gold" (19-20). On the speculative mania — and the connected speculative bubbles — Dickens will comment extensively in *Little Dorrit*, portraying the ruin of Mr Dorrit, Arthur Clennam, Pancks, and indirectly of Doyce; whereas in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), he will make extensive use of economic metaphors connected with vampiric blood-thirst to critique "the direst of Victorian economic sins: market speculation" (Scoggin, 102). This is exactly the issue Dickens wants to underline: the shift from an old entrepreneurial work ethics — which Samuel Smiles was to set down in *Self-Help* as a recipe for the self-made man a few years later: "character, conduct and perseverance" (2), or as Dickens had laconically but proudly expressed through Rouncewell, the ironmaster, who irritates Sir Leicester Deadlock, "a strong Saxon face [. . .] a picture of resolution and perseverance" (*Bleak House*, 451), showing openly where his sympathies lie. This ethnic specification must, I think, be understood as referring to the ancient qualities of his countrymen rather than a racial hint, which would become prominent later in the century (Bezrucka, 154-61).

Dickens, nevertheless, does not side with a particular class; he is not a progressive novelist. For this reason David Lodge has taken him to task for the supposed mildness of his representations of single individuals who are not necessarily regarded as representative of their class (153-73). Rather, he reacts, on moral grounds, to what he perceives as a general collapse of what he still considered to be a shareable ethos founded on mutual respect, liberty, and reciprocal responsibility. This old work ethic is the unwritten law behind the Clennam and Doyce company which will go bankrupt as a result of the Merdle scandal. Clennam, who has been seduced by the desire for unearned money — "a moral infection" (627) — has in fact invested all the company's capital in the

Merdle speculation, a *faux pas* he will later term as "crime" (779). When the "world-famed capitalist and merchant-prince[s]" (296) goes bankrupt, Clennam and Doyce follow suit. As N. N. Feltes points out, Clennam at this point accepts "unlimited responsibility for his investments, to his 'last shilling and acre'" (364) neglecting the new forms of capital investment which were just then reset in terms of 'limited liability' through two main economic laws: the Limited Liability Act (1855) — which contributed to rendering capital "'blind' and 'anonymous'" (259-60) — and the Joint Stock Companies Act (1856). Doyce, inventor and engineer, is also one of the 'old men', as it were — "[i]f I have a prejudice connected with money and money figures it is against speculating" (736) — for whom, nevertheless, as Dickens shows, there is no room in Great Britain. The Circumlocution Office with its endless red tape will prevent him from realising his inventions and, significantly, he will be forced to emigrate. Here Dickens is certainly commenting on the Patent Law which was passed in 1852. As Carlyle points out in *Past and Present*, the governing class had also been guilty of "a frightful over-abundance" of goods, produced in the "Workhouse Bastilles [. . .] Ugolino Hunger-cellars" which resulted in a glut: "You produce gold-watches, jewelries, silver-forks, and epergnes, commodes, chiffoniers, stuffed sofas — Heavens, the Commercial Bazaar and multitudinous Howel-and-Jameses cannot contain you [goods]" (164). Nearly two decades later, Dickens voiced his discontent about the 1851 Great Exhibition, in a letter to a friend, in the same terms:

I don't say 'there is nothing in it'--there's too much. I have only been twice; so many things bewildered me. I have a natural horror of sights, and the fusion of so many sights in one has not decreased it" (Butt, Tillotson, 181, *Letters*, II, 327.)

Dickens, as critics have often noted, had always used objects as vectors for his imaginative universe. Two critics in particular, amongst others, have underlined Dickens's ability for prosopopoeia: J. Hillis Miller (1968) and Dorothy van Ghent (1950). Both underline the fact that Dickens humanises his objects (e.g. umbrellas, chimney-pots, etc.). Nevertheless, this figure of speech is of course different from Dickens's use of "symbolic or emblematic devices" (Trilling, 222), such as fog in *Bleak House* or dust in *Our Mutual Friend*, where these are used as extended metaphors. Particularly in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens deploys objects and commodities as shorthand display-icons and markers of wealth and status, consequently, as vehicles for an albeit masked class and identity politics. Objects here stand for properties: they 'belong' to someone who uses them as status emblems. Goods come to codify the grammar of both society, but also, and, what is much worse, self-perception: objects and things become, through consumption and display, the silent semiological code of people's identity and of their place in life. Things, nevertheless, not only represent affluence and class, but through their visibility and recognisability, act as social informants and social propellers. In short, they represent, substitute, are, the self. A good example of this synecdochic representational strategy can be found in *Our Mutual Friend*:

Hideous solidity was the characteristic of the Podsnap plate. Everything was made to look as heavy as it could, and to take up as much room as possible. Everything said boastfully, 'Here you have as much of me in my ugliness as if I were only lead; but I am so many ounces of precious metal worth so much an ounce;--wouldn't you like to melt me down?' A corpulent straddling epergne, blotched all over as if it had broken out in an eruption rather than been ornamented, delivered this address from an unsightly silver platform in the centre of the table. Four silver wine-coolers, each furnished with four staring heads, each head obtrusively carrying a big silver ring in each of its ears, conveyed the sentiment up and down the table, and handed it on to the pot-bellied silver salt-cellars. All the big silver spoons and forks widened the mouths of the company expressly for the purpose of thrusting the sentiment down their throats with every morsel they ate. [177]

Objects, material things, become personal extensions, but, in this guise, as Dickens underlines, they produce the worst aspect of reification: subjecting people to their own ends, they dominate their owners, rendering them their slaves. Things, in commodified societies, Dickens shows us, substitute people so thoroughly that they make people dependent on them, rather than the other way round.

Clearly, objects are metonymies for money, and Dickens is here coming to his main underlying Carlylian point: society is dominated by Mammonism (Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 139-44). The money-motif is clearly confirmed by the design of *Little Dorrit* which divides into two books respectively titled "Poverty" and "Riches". As the novel paradoxically points out, in Society money has become the guarantee of virtue and capability, the foremost judgement-standard of identity:

True, the Hampton Court Bohemians, without exception, turned up their noses at Merdle as an upstart; but they turned them down again, by falling flat on their faces to worship his wealth. In which compensating adjustment of their noses, they were pretty much like Treasury, Bar, and Bishop, and all the rest of them. [440]

Money has, indeed, for the Carlyle of *Past and Present*, become the "Hell" of "the modern English soul" (140) and is connected to "The Terror of 'Not succeeding;' the infinite terror of Not getting on, especially of Not making money" (244), a hell which finds its corresponding heaven in the gospel of Mammonism: "The making of money" (140-41). In this 'society', even though Carlyle points out that this is not the exact world for relationships governed by a mutual hostility called "fair competition" (141), the cash nexus regulates everything: "all human dues and reciprocities have been fully changed into one great due of 'cash payment'" (65). The same sort of indignation was to be uttered by John Ruskin in his speech "Traffic" (21.4.1864) where he speaks of the "ideal of human life" being "the worship of the Goddess of Getting-on" (J. Ruskin, in J.D. Rosenberg, *The Genius of John Ruskin*, 289). As Werber long ago pointed out, this ethics can be brought back to the Puritan code regulated by thrift and industry and also to the obsession with money that characterises all classes of Victorian society, whether for affluence or poverty reasons.

The pervasiveness of monetary concerns — As Ruskin points out in *Sesame and Lilies*, "[o]ur science is simply the science of getting rich. . . . 'the art of establishing the maximum inequality in our own favour'" (166, 169) — is precisely the aspect Dickens is reacting against and of which he was fully conscious. Self-expression and, what is much worse, self-esteem, as Dickens will masterfully point out, function in a materialistic and market oriented society through one's possessions, one's appearances and exterior objects, the Universe of what *Past and Present* calls "the Shows and Shams of things" (131), where objects represent their owners to such an extent that they actually substitute their owners. Just such a case in point is Mrs Merdle, who metonymically becomes the "capital bosom" where "jewels showed to the richest advantage" (293), a bosom "bought" by Mr Merdle "who wanted something to hang jewels upon" (*ibidem*, my emphasis).

Dickens, in this sense, anticipates by many years Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which will clearly portray the tragedy of the disappearance of the self, which Dorian Gray, Wilde's aesthete, will undergo. Dorian, Wilde tells us, consciously quoting Walter Pater, is a "dry beauty", a perfect, "hieratic Dorian" greyness: one who need not be banished from the "City of the Perfect" because he is, as Pater had written in *Plato and Platonism*, the result of the perfect homologation: he embodies the passive acquiescence to society's dicta (Bezrucka, 72, 137-146). Dorian 'is' what his society wants him to be, he embodies its expectations and is at its beck and call: he incarnates Carlyle's "Elegant Vacuum" (*Past and Present*, 124). Dorian, in one of his masks, is the perfectly void dandy, represented by, and identified only through, his objects and his collections, whose fetishism betrays the need to fill his spiritual void and probably to sublimate

'culturally' his personal feeling of guilt: living, as he does, on his income of unearned money, and, at a more general level, as a result of his 'colonial' bad conscience. This shift of 'being' into 'having', and Debordian-wise into 'appearing' — the reading of appearances and possessions as a passport of sufficient appraisal to an affluent society — is exactly, and this is my point, what *Little Dorrit* as a novel, with a tremendous foresight of later fin de siècle extremes, undermines. Dickens, as usual, does not take sides directly, his prose is admonitory, he points out problems but does not come up with final solutions, yet his literary indictment, imaginatively set, is, nevertheless, no less searing. The disappearance of the self — the total acceptance of and acquiescence to society's expectations — which acts as a disturbing constriction of one's liberty, is acted out as a progressive limitation of one's personal space and development, and presented in *Little Dorrit* as progressive imprisonment, until: "the shadow of the wall was on every object" (291).

Many critics have pointed out that the prison image and prison metaphor work on every level of the book, some, like D.W. Jefferson, find it so pervasive as to make the novel claustrophobic. It is undeniably the unifying element in the novel. The book begins in a Marseilles prison, moves on to focus on people confined in barracks by a quarantine, in order then to focus on the Marshalsea Prison in London. But, if here we are talking of imprisonment as a tangible and spatial reality, made of jails and jailers, there is also a spiritual imprisonment which interests all the main characters of the novel. Indeed, that imprisonment has to be read beyond its topicality and projected onto an ontological level is confirmed by the fact that when Dickens wrote, the Marshalsea Prison for Debtors had already been closed down (1845), notwithstanding the fact that he sets the novel in the 1820s. In fact, the prison metaphor is then expanded to comprehend familial relations, and Society: London Society at home, London Society abroad (at the St Bernard's monastery in Switzerland, in Venice, in Rome).

Society is, indeed, the main prison of the novel. Society coheres thanks to an unwritten code regulating hierarchies of identity which work according to the well-known categories of class, race, and gender. It is no surprise that when Clennam arrives he perceives that his surroundings in their "sameness" of "close wells and pits of houses" would need only a "stringent policeman" to be complete (68).

In Victorian society, the understanding of class position and rank is taken so much for granted, that nothing has to be stated directly, it only needs to be hinted at, through its well-known and thus self-evident semiological 'material' code of "premises . . . furniture . . . yourself, Mrs Merdle . . . an ornament to Society" (446-47). Indeed, as Janice Carlisle has pointed out, it even works on the immaterial yet perceivable code of smell (Carlisle, "The Smell of Class"), like the "smell of leather and mahogany" (149), representing power and authority, oozing from Tite Barnacle's office at the Circumlocution Office. Another way in which class differences and, silently, inequalities, are expressed is through food. Food, as usual with Dickens, figures prominently also in this novel. Dickens had already created for his public the hilarious gluttonous eating practices of the Pickwickians and had contrasted it to the paucity and dearth of "the desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery" (*Oliver Twist*, 56; see also Houston, 14-37). Oliver's peremptory request, uttered to the members of the board: "I want some more" (56), has, of course, not only to be read in an alimetal sense. Appetite acquires here the political undertone of those who aspire life-wise to something more, as Fagin's band and the prostitutes also do.

In *Little Dorrit* the people of Bleeding Heart Yard survive "living chiefly on farinaceous and milk diet" (351), and probably share Maggie's dream of going to hospital in order to eat "broth and wine" and "Chicking" (143), at Merdle's dinners "Society had everything it could want, and could not want . . . It had everything to look at, and everything to eat, and everything to drink" (295):

The rarest dishes, sumptuously cooked and sumptuously served; the choicest fruits; the most exquisite wines; marvels of workmanship in gold and silver, china and glass; innumerable things delicious to the senses of taste, smell, and sight where insinuating into its compositions. (618)

so that those present can marry "golden liqueur glasses to Buhl tables with sticky rings" (626), whilst observing a Cuyp painting (616). Other material culture objects are attire and ornamentation: Fanny will measure her success by means of bonnets and "the latitude as to dress" (650); means of transport: pha'tons, one-horse (or more) carriages, such as the one hired by Mrs Meagles to impress Mrs Merdle, gigs, cabs (hackney-coaches), etc.; retinue; and properties: houses (book 1: ch. 13, 16), mansions (book 1: ch. 20-21), buildings (the Hampton Court residence of the snobs, the make-believe "gipsies of gentility", (358), land properties, incomes, rents, and so on. On the immaterial side, leisure time and entertainments — "Mrs Merdle's receptions and concerts" (293) — triumph.

As J.M. Brown points out, at the time when Dickens was writing *Little Dorrit* "the values traditionally associated with the middle classes in the earlier, entrepreneurial stage of English capitalist development — self-dependence, perseverance, patience, duty, etc." (41), no longer function, they are no longer the sufficient behavioural reference code for this class. According to the same critic, Dickens thus reacts against the secularisation of these values, which had resulted in the downright worship of money, by using them "as a means of criticising the contemporary social situation and behaviour of the mid-Victorian middle class itself" (41), because these values "no longer accurately embody the essential nature of moral behaviour in a middle-class world dominated by Merdle, Podsnap, and Veneering." (41). Dickens's attack on the middle-class and its own misreading of its former values emphasises their materialistic turn. How much the values of different classes tend to become uniform and tend thus to become blurred has been noted by modern critics who tend therefore to replace the notion of class with a concentration on "the people" (Carlisle, 3). Dickens seems to be very conscious of this fact. Indeed, he deprecated and disparaged an alliance between the upper and the middle class to gain affluence. This shift is often depicted as the inclination of characters to assume imitative models which testify to their class appetite and which moves them to assume codes of disrespectful moral behaviour. In a letter to William C. Macready dated October 1855 he wrote that Victorian society had "no such thing as a middle class (for though we are perpetually bragging of it as our safety, it is nothing but a poor fringe on the mantle of the upper)" (see Brown, 170-71n2; for the Victorian desire for goods and class appetite see the very useful study by A.H. Miller, 14-49). By imitating their superiors in station, Dickens implies, the lower classes do not gain gentility. A case in point is the Dorrit family: Mr Dorrit and his children Fanny and Edward, called Tip, with the exclusion of Amy. *Little Dorrit* is in fact immune from class mobility appetite, money hunger, and mimicry, and will thus relinquish two inheritances so as not to diminish Arthur's position towards her, and thus escaping the competitive market economy of Society in general (the cash-nexus system) and of the marriage market in particular.

Fanny, who unlike Amy has not been born within the walls of the Marshalsea prison, through her sister, begins her dancing career in a small theatre where her uncle Frederick Dorrit, a clarinet player, acts as her guardian and escort. Like Tip, her brother, she behaves patronisingly towards Amy who has to clean and mend clothes for them both and does so charitably. They, in fact, like barnacles themselves exploit Amy by downplaying her role in the "family fiction" (280) — she is the "plain domestic little creature, without the great and sage experience of the rest" (279-80) — in order not to make too much of her "services" (280). Fanny, convinced of "being superior" (283), and Tip, "loftily conscious of the family name" (277), boast of their high-station and do not miss an occasion "to air the miserably ragged old fiction of the family gentility" (257). They act like real snobs who flout and spurn the people of the Marshalsea just as they themselves are spurned by their

superiors in class who consider them "infidel Snobs who were going to question the Nobs of their statesmanship" (807). The Father of the Marshalsea, whose "dignity" cannot make him "see so low" (257), is another example of false pretence, benignantly condescending to take the Collegians' offers as if they were due to him. Patronisingly, he looks down on his brother, children and visitors, so that, paradoxically, he, "William the bond, was so courtly, condescending and benevolently conscious of his position", and his brother "Frederick, the free, was so humbled, bowed, withered, and faded" (264). In fact, as Amy perfectly understands ("[p]eople might not think so well of him outside as they do [t]here", 139) William Dorrit has made the Marshalsea his reign, a reign "safe within the walls" (269) where he dominates:

At certain stated hours of the day, you will find me on the parade, in my room, in the Lodge, reading the paper, receiving company, eating and drinking. I have impressed upon Amy during many years, that I must have my meals (for instance) punctually. Amy has grown up in a sense of the importance of these arrangements, and you know what a good girl she is. (267)

She is indeed a good girl, a real Dickensian, the altruistic and unselfish 'daughter of the house', a real captive of her father, a "small bird, reared in captivity." (144). But she is also the clever daughter of the house. She is the first to recognise that outside the Marshalsea, the close-shaven gentlemen who attend the theatre where her sister works look "not at all unlike Collegians" (278). She is the one who knows that without, in the arena of Society, things are only subject to a wider but substantially identical social reference system, as the constant reference to the "shadow of the wall" (291, 609, 798, 827, my emphasis) — which points to the unstable nature of the boundary — and not the wall itself, reminds us.

Fanny, Merdle's alter ego in that she has also accepted and is completely subdued by societies' economic dicta, will lead her personal struggle for social station with Mrs Merdle through the objects that represent, par excellence, wealth itself and that are the consummate symbols of all ornamentation, the emblems of the invisible walls within outside-Society: jewels. At first, letting herself be paid off and bought with "a cheap and showy article", a bracelet (287), then by taking her personal revenge and vengeance by bestowing with indifference, as a marriage present to Mrs Merdle's maid, "a trifling little keepsake (bracelet, bonnet, and two dresses, all new) about four times as valuable as the present formerly made by Mrs Merdle to her" (672). Her triumph, seen from her perspective, which is at one with Society's, is that of being established in Mrs Merdle's own room "surrounded by every luxurious accessory that wealth could obtain or invention devise" (672), a triumph which finds its climax with her final metamorphosis into a 'bosom' herself: "she saw the fair bosom that beat in unison with the exultation of her thoughts, competing with the bosom [Mrs Merdle] that had been famous so long, outshining it, and deposing it" (672). As we can see, in a materialistic world, objects swallow up people and become the visible, informant icons of the values and the assumptions of the culture they stand for. Significantly, the same bracelet will be "entombed" (767) under Mr Merdle's coat-cuff the day he asks her, his double, for the pen-knife with which he will buy his liberty and set himself free by committing suicide, thus laying to rest the ethos of riches and wealth that has devoured him already.

Mr Merdle, the "uncouth object . . . of adulation" (777), is based on John Sadleir, a Member of Parliament, and banker, who decided to put an end to his life on Hampstead Heath, when realized his company went bankrupt in 1856. Sadleir, an Irish solicitor, had made his way into London society through his promotion of the Irish Railway Bills at Parliament. The Railway mania of the period quickly led him to his becoming chairman of the Royal Swedish Railway Company and director of the East Kent line, before changing his grandfather's private bank into a joint-stock enterprise (Tipperary Joint-Stock Bank). At the height of his success, rumours about his affairs led

many financial institutions to ask for prompt payment of his debts. Sadleir could not do this because his securities were covered by fraudulent seals of the Encumbered Estates Commission. Faced with bankruptcy he decided to poison himself with prussic acid on Hampstead Heath, leaving his investors to deal with the consequences of his issue of false shares to the value of £ 150,000. As Norman Russell points out in *The Novelist and Mammon* (137), this happened on 14 February 1856 and influenced Dickens's writing of chapters 19 to 22 of LD, a fact confirmed by a letter of his to Foster: "I shaped Mr Merdle himself out of that precious rascality" and by the Preface to the novel (LD: 35-36). (Further information on Sadleir can be found in Morier, and on his parliamentary career in O'Shea. For Merdle and his wife see also Hawes, 151-52).

Merdle, notwithstanding the scatological double entendre of his name, is the main prisoner and victim of the novel and outdoes the Dorrits by far. Always "clasping his wrists as if he were taking himself into custody" (445), he despises Fanny, now Mrs Sparkler, his stepson's wife, who has been bought by money and whom he refuses to welcome by retiring his hand into his coat-cuffs: "as if he were his own Police officer, saying to himself, 'Now, none of that! Come! I've got you, you know, and you go quietly along with me!'" (672). Besides taking himself into custody, a victim of his own will, Merdle is in the custody of his wife, Society (reified into a list of roles: Bar, Bishop, Physician, and the "clan" of circumlocutionists [451], emblematic Barnacles and Stiltstalkings), but, more revealingly, even of his servants who, paradoxically, are the direct measure of his confinement and imprisonment. Servants, who in this society are shown and displayed as 'items' of wealth, are by the narrator depicted as the real masters of their employers. As Avrom Fleishman, who analyses *Little Dorrit* in terms of the master-servant relationships, has noted, this social model can be overcome by various attitudes: love, which permits "equilibrium in equality" of which Amy and Arthur are an example (and, we could add, the standard Victorian solution of class conflicts); rebellion (Tattycoram's, Pancks's); submission (Cavalletto's); or as a servant's triumph: "by making himself indispensable to his master, he makes his service a power and his master a conquest" (Fleishman, *Master and Servant*, 581). This is what happens in *Little Dorrit* where servants become masters. William Dorrit and his retinue are "brought into these foreign towns in the custody of couriers and local followers, just as the debtors had been brought into the prison" (565); Merdle, is the slave of his Chief Butler, "the next magnificent institution of his day", who despises him: "[h]e was Mr Merdle's last gift to Society. Mr Merdle didn't want him, and was put out of countenance when the great creature looked at him; but inappeasable Society would have him — and had got him" (296, my emphasis). The main prison is therefore Society, the invisible cage of the many birds of the book (elegantly symbolised by Mrs Merdle's shrieking parrot), which cages people and commands acquiescence and connivance to its rules. The moral centre of the book is reached when *Little Dorrit* gives voice to her knowledge that Society 'without' is only "a superior sort of Marshalsea" (565):

Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home. They were brought into these foreign towns in the custody of couriers and local followers, just as the debtors had been brought into the prison. They prowled about the churches and picture-galleries, much in the old, dreary, prison-yard manner. They were usually going away again to-morrow or next week, and rarely knew their own minds, and seldom did what they said they would do, or went where they said they would go: in all this again, very like the prison debtors. They paid high for poor accommodation, and disparaged a place while they pretended to like it: which was exactly the Marshalsea custom. They were envied when they went away by people left behind, feigning not to want to go: and that again was the Marshalsea habit invariably. A certain set of words and phrases, as much belonging to tourists as the College and the Snuggery belonged to the jail, was always in their mouths. They had precisely the same incapacity for settling down

to anything, as the prisoners used to have; they rather deteriorated one another, as the prisoners used to do; and they wore untidy dresses, and fell into a slouching way of life: still, always like the people in the Marshalsea. [565, my emphases]

A Society of "surface and varnish and show without substance" (557) enslaved by "received form[s]" (566) such as those which Mrs General wants *Little Dorrit* to learn, in order "to have the entrails of their intellects arranged according to the taste of that secret priesthood [Society]" so that acquiescence can reign: "Nobody had an opinion." (565) The predatory nature of Society is masterfully depicted in the Donothingism and parasitic nature of the Circumlocution Office, the sinecure for those with connections, whose dictum "How not to do it" summarises the "great political science" of the period (735).

Another set of objects which appears in the novel and which is a standard set in the British aesthetic, and thus cultural, cooption of foreign cultures during the nineteenth century (Bezrucka, 55-56, 137-44) passes through the classification and appropriation of foreign anthropological specimens. We find the telling collection in Mr Meagles's country mansion. Dickens is, again, well ahead of his time in providing his readers with the perspective with which these objects are to be analysed. He defines Mr Meagle as an "amiable Corsair", and does not hesitate to call his objects "spoils" (236) thus evoking buccaneers and pirates. These "spoils" are the fruit of his "various expeditions", and he is therefore clearly set amongst the predatory tourists and archaeologists of his time, and of whom Lord Elgin can be seen as the epitome. These "buyers" are implicitly utilitarianistically oriented, they get their specimens "dirt-cheap", but what is being stressed is their supposedly superior cultural 'taste', the capacity to appraise the 'aesthetic' value of these objects that have been de-regionalised and eradicated in order to be reconfigured according to the, in itself regional, 'British', standard of taste. The collection constitutes a remarkable inventory of fin de siècle attitudes and assumptions (Bezrucka, 147-61), which is not far removed from the ideology of aestheticism proper:

There were antiquities from Central Italy, made by the best modern houses in that department of industry; bits of mummy from Egypt (and perhaps Birmingham); model gondolas from Venice; model villages from Switzerland; morsels of tessellated pavement from Herculaneum and Pompeii, like petrified minced veal; ashes out of tombs, and lava out of Vesuvius; Spanish fans, Spezzian straw hats, Moorish slippers, Tuscan hairpins, Carrara sculpture, Trastaverini scarves, Genoese velvets and filigree, Neapolitan coral, Roma cameos, Geneva jewellery, Arab lanterns, rosaries blest all round by the Pope himself, and an infinite variety of lumber. There were views, like and unlike, of a multitude of places; and there was one little picture-room devoted to a few of the regular sticky old Saints, with sinews like whipcord, hair like Neptune's, wrinkles like tattooing, and such coats of varnish that every holy personage served for a fly-trap, and became what is now called in the vulgar tongue a Catch-em-alive O. Of these pictorial acquisitions Mr Meagles spoke in the usual manner. He was no judge, he said, except of what pleased himself; he had picked them up, dirt-cheap, and people had considered them rather fine. One man, who at any rate ought to know something of the subject, had declared that 'Sage, Reading' (a specially oily old gentleman in a blanket, with a swan's-down tippet for a beard, and a web of cracks all over him like rich pie-crust), to be a fine Guercino. As for Sebastian del Piombo there, you would judge for yourself; if it were not his later manner, the question was, Who was it? Titian, that might or might not be — perhaps he had only touched it. Daniel Doyce said perhaps he hadn't touched it, but Mr Meagles rather declined to overhear the remark. [*Little Dorrit*: 236-37]

The list is an excellent example of the object-mania which beset the new wealthy English bourgeoisie who wanted through these items to acquire a higher cultural and social standing. The whole taxonomy of display appears here: souvenirs from foreign travels testifying to one's knowledge of the world; paintings that function as emblematic of taste; and also the reference to mummies which will become a standard testimonial for an implied Whig, time-arrow evolutionary reading of history, but also of a colonial bad conscience (Daly, 84-116; Bezrucka, 137-63). The collection thus testifies to the object hunger and object display which will be typical of the conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure which Veblen ascribes to those pecuniary and emulative cultures oriented towards a regime of status, of which *Little Dorrit* is an early instance: the struggle of "the bosom . . . displaying precious stones in rivalry with many similar superb jewel-stands" (300).

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