

## A matter of identification: Dickens meets the detectives

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In 1850, policemen from Scotland Yard's recently established Detective Force were invited to the office of *Household Words*, to be interviewed by its editor, the celebrated novelist and social reformer, Charles Dickens. The meetings were written up in the magazine as "A Detective Police Party" and "Three 'Detective' Anecdotes." In the following year, "On Duty with Inspector Field" gave an account of a guided tour of London's criminal haunts, and other articles also testified to Dickens's intense interest in police matters.

The reports and the fame of their author helped to reinforce the newly acquired image of police respectability. Dickens celebrates the professionalism, the conscientiousness and the integrity of the detectives, contrasting them with their ineffective forebears, the Bow Street Runners, "men of very indifferent character, and far too much in the habit of consorting with thieves and the like, . . . [who] never lost a public occasion of jobbing and trading in mystery and making the most of themselves" (71).<sup>1</sup> The Detective Force, on the other hand, "is so well chosen and trained, proceeds so systematically and quietly, and is always so calmly and steadily engaged in the service of the public, that the public really do not know enough of it" (73). Dickens sets out to show the worth of these men by laying bare the operations of their trade and by cutting out the false mysteries previously associated with their work.

At the heart of police work is identification, the securing of knowledge of another person that can lead to his or her arrest. In the contest between the police and the criminals, success goes to whoever can identify the other first, or to whoever can evade identification. Accordingly, pretence takes centre stage, and detection as presented by Dickens turns on the art of lying. Dickens himself is a skilled practitioner of that same art, and his meetings with a group of professional dissemblers produce some warily fascinated reporting.

Despite telling us that he and the detectives discussed "the most celebrated and horrible of the great crimes that have been committed within the last fifteen or twenty years" (76), Dickens

shows no inclination to indulge any taste his public might have for blood. Rather, he teases and then piques any such appetite by informing us that “the men engaged in the discovery of almost all of [the great crimes] or in the pursuit or apprehension of the murderers” are actually in the room with him, that “one of our guests gave chase to and boarded the Emigrant Ship, in which the murderess last hanged in London was supposed to have embarked,” but that the police identification of the criminal was found to be mistaken. The point of interest for Dickens, emphasised by all his examples, is identification: its importance and difficulty for both sides in the game played between the police and the criminals.

Instead of thrilling chases and dangerous exploits, we get Sergeant Dornton hiding under a sofa for hours, waiting to catch a thief in the act of stealing from students' coats in a cloakroom. Pursuit turns inert, and Dickens seems impervious to bathos, so intent is he on the instant when the thief's eyes catch the policeman's. In the detective's account, the significance of the arrest lies in its double triumph, since in the very act of apprehending the thief the policeman is himself rendered unidentifiable: the sight of the figure crawling out from under the sofa, his face pale from illness, with a handkerchief tied round his head because of the draught coming from the door, is so strange – “What I looked like, altogether, I don't know,” says Dornton (100) – that the thief “‘turned blue – literally blue.’”

The prosaic strangeness of that moment has a coda: awaiting sentence, with his guilt proven beyond doubt by the Sergeant's identification, the thief commits suicide. Likewise, there is a coda to the prosaic knowingness that allows Sergeant Witchem to touch the back of a thief's hand – a secret sign among the criminal fraternity – and thereby retrieve a stolen diamond pin: through the policeman's deliberate misidentification the thief is transported to Australia.

Freedom, transportation, imprisonment, or death are the consequences of these men's acts of identification, mentioned drily, almost as an afterthought. No wonder, then, that wariness tempers Dickens's celebration of their prowess. From the beginning he observes them very carefully, noting particularly their characteristic knack of avoiding recognition, even in a situation where it shouldn't matter. “Inspector Wield one might have known, perhaps, for what he is – Inspector Stalker, never” (74). Dornton “has the air of one who has been a Sergeant in the army.” Sergeant Witchem “has something of a reserved and thoughtful air, as if he were engaged in deep arithmetical calculations.” Sergeant Mith has “a strange air of simplicity,” while Sergeant Straw can assume “any mild character you chose to prescribe to him.”

All the detectives are remarkable for their “keen observation and quick perception.” Dickens notes that just as he observes them, so they do the same to him: “Every man of them, in a glance, immediately takes an inventory of the furniture and an accurate sketch of the editorial presence. The Editor feels that any gentleman in company could take him up, if need should be, without the smallest hesitation, twenty years hence.” In the stories they tell, it becomes evident that besides demanding sharpness of perception, common sense and great persistence, their work turns on an ability to project themselves as someone other than a policeman. That is, they are able to re-create themselves fictionally, which partly accounts for their fascination for the novelist, since an important aspect of his own work is the creation of characters.

Wield turns himself into a prospective seller of a horse and carriage (81), and lures an alleged forger away from the protection of his fellows. Upon his subsequent arrest because of his misidentification of the police, the wanted man’s vigorously demotic response (“ ‘Then burn my body,’ says Fikey, ‘if this ain’t *too* bad!’”) overshadows both the failure of a witness to identify him as the forger, and the issue of his guilt or innocence, left in abeyance since the verdict is still pending at the time of the narration. Wield, whose idea of relaxation is, tellingly, to watch a play, withholds his identity from a man he meets by chance at a theatre and from whom he accidentally gains a lead in a murder case he is investigating. Even before he learns that the young man can be of use, Wield lets him believe he is a stranger to the theatre, “ ‘which I thought it just as well to appear to be’ ” (92). Why would he do this? One possible answer is caution, since the police are well aware of their tenuous grip on power in a city where they are heavily outnumbered by their enemies. There is the allied belief that one can learn more from others by pretending not to be a policeman, even when off-duty. However, if playing a role becomes one’s life, eventually play may well become its own reward. In this instance, Wield’s seeming ignorance opens new avenues of gratuitous identification by encouraging the young man to tell him the names of the actors on the stage, which he duly does. Since Wield presumably already knows those names, we may infer that he enjoys the drama of identification, in which the other man is an unwitting participant while Wield himself remains unknown. Watching a play on the stage, the young man is himself an actor in someone else’s drama.

In conversation with the young man afterwards, Wield gains new knowledge about the murder case. To make use of this, he slips into another role, that of a man who has made a strange bet and needs to have a certain point confirmed. The person who can do this is the young man’s father, and they go together to see him. The father, however, disapproves of the theatre, so the son, now acting as his accomplice, asks Wield to lie by omission. The information gained from the father

leads to a further contact, a Mr. Phibbs, who at last identifies the suspect for Wield. Having passed from casual playgoer to betting man, and having made the vital identification, the Inspector asserts his authority as a policeman before going ahead with the arrest. The assertion makes a dramatic point: “ ‘Well, Mr Phibbs, this an unpleasant affair; but the fact is, I am Inspector Wield of the Detective Police, and I found these gloves under the pillow of the young woman that was murdered the other day, over in the Waterloo Road’ ” (94). Unforthcoming previously, the Inspector doesn't need to say this to Phibbs, who is really only a bystander but finds himself pressed into service as witness to the policeman in his official capacity. For these policemen, an audience is necessary to validate the performance.

The fact that the suspect is later shown to be innocent is of no consequence to Inspector Wield. Rather, he has chosen to recount this episode that led nowhere in order to illustrate both police doggedness and the importance of chance in any investigation. The form of his narration also reveals an habitual playing of parts that draws others into the policeman's pretence, both as actors and as audience.

The most accomplished detective is the one who most successfully resists identification whilst identifying his prey. Dickens has given pseudonyms to all the men in his office, and he bestows the most resonant on the innocuous man with the strongest claim to that success. It is Sergeant Mith who adopts and lives the role of simple journeyman butcher up from the country. So good is he at this impersonation that the gang of thieves based in the public-house where he is staying come to accept him as their slow-witted friend. Their misprision allows him to “ ‘set'em to rights’ ” (86), that is, to identify them and gain full knowledge of their activities.

Mith performs so convincingly that the landlord of the public-house first asserts the Butcher's innocence when the gang are taken, and then denounces him as a thief when an old violin is found in his room. Such inversions of guilt and innocence testify to the power of Mith's acting, and so does his ability to exploit the friendship shown by the criminals. There is a relish in recounting this exploitation. Mr. Shepherdson has complete faith in his supposed friend and willingly accepts the Butcher's misidentification of another officer who has come to help arrest him: “ ‘Any friend of the Butcher's is as welcome as the Butcher!’ ” (87) The offhand dryness of the next sentence conveys Mith's pleasure in winning this game of abuse and disabuse: “ ‘So I made my friend acquainted with him, and we took him into custody.’ ”

In his account of the subsequent court proceedings, Mith celebrates his creation of a persona that

can generate misprision from recognition. He dramatically reveals himself for the first time to the thieves in open court: “And when I stepped into the box in full police uniform, and the whole party saw how they had been done, actually a groan of horror and dismay proceeded from ‘em in the dock!” This, however, is not the end. Later, at the Old Bailey, the defence lawyer confuses the acting with reality, denying the presence of Mith as police officer and demanding the fiction instead: “I don’t want the Police. We have had a great deal too much of the Police. I want the Butcher!” So, the original misidentification of the policeman is cleared up when he appears in court as himself, but as himself he then causes further misidentification. The pleasure in this recollection derives from the police consciousness that the consummation of their art is the achievement of both clarity and confusion.

The pleasure and the art, however, are not harmless, for the Sergeant goes on to tell us of the thieves’ conviction and transportation. No doubt the confusion of their lawyer did little to help their case. Mith concludes his narration by turning back into the Butcher in the *Household Words* office, re-enacting his supposedly naive reaction when the thieves once showed him the place of public execution. The enjoyment expected from the re-enactment turns on a shared awareness that such acting could well lead to the actual execution of the very dupes whose friendship is being exploited.

For the detective, being a policeman is both real and artful. As we saw with Mith, the true professional may achieve both power and pleasure in the combination of identification and misidentification. Sergeant Witchem’s complex pursuit, identification and arrest of Tally-ho Thompson turns the tables on the criminal, with the hunter (hence the nickname) becoming the prey. The chase ends at a public-house in the country, miles from anywhere, with Witchem both alone and outnumbered. At the moment of the arrest, “the difficulty of it was, that I wasn’t sure it *was* Thompson” (80), while on his side Thompson mistakes Witchem for another officer who is after him. Witchem’s power depends on the confidence with which he names the other man and with which he identifies himself when making the arrest: “I’m an officer from London, and I take you into custody for felony!” He cows the other toughs in the bar by claiming to know them, such is the power of identification, and in his role of police officer and servant to the Queen he presses an ostler into service as a kind of deputy. Thompson bridles at being manacled, and Witchem makes a gentleman’s agreement with him to forego the handcuffs in return for his cooperation. The agreement is sealed by brandy all round, so Witchem’s courageous acting has carried the day and earns the applause of the company in the *Household Words* office. The honourableness that both evokes and exploits friendliness is a key part of an act that draws on

others' belief in Witchem and in his power. Crucially, the belief follows from identification and misidentification. Chance certainly plays its part, but the detective earns and has the courage to ride his luck. If Thompson had denied Witchem's naming of him, the arrest would have been foiled. It was only successful because Thompson confused him with someone else.

If the detectives create and manipulatively play to an audience within their stories, are they doing the same to the editor in the magazine office? His own comments suggest he is aware of this possibility. When Dornton offers one of his anecdotes, Dickens writes that "We welcomed [the story of] the Carpet Bag, as cordially as Mr. Shepherdson welcomed this false Butcher at the Setting Moon" (88). His initial observation of the detectives certainly indicates his awareness that they trade in not being known. When Witchem starts to tell about the gang called the Swell Mob, "the whole of his brother officers are closely interested in attending to what he says, and observing its effect" (75). So, they're watching Dickens watching Witchem, and he's watching them doing that. Dickens, however, does something the police don't. Signing off with the Butcher's trademark snigger, Mith reminds his audience of his performance as performance (87), but he does not mean to make Dickens or his readers conscious of their being cast in this drama as the audience. Dickens's own reflections on the police reflections do encourage such an awareness.

If we think of the detectives in the *Household Words* office from the perspective of Dickens's novels, we may see them, in Mikhail Bakhtin's terminology, as "self-consummating" characters. I have explored this approach to character and personality in detail elsewhere (2004, and 2008). Here, it may be enough to say that they create themselves as public personalities through their performances, which include their narratives, and which seek to shape and manipulate their audience, whether it be the criminals, innocent bystanders, Dickens, or us. In short, they use those around them to make themselves into characters. The drive to complete their own characterisation is what Bakhtin means when he speaks of self-consummation.

The police performances are to a certain extent admirable. They express and legitimate the detectives' courage, persistence, and devotion to duty. Dickens himself makes no excuses for being so taken by being granted access to insider information which he can pass on to his readers. There is a delight in recording police speech - its fetching mixture of street argot and professional jargon. Yet the admiration should not blind us to the limitations of these policemen, revealed to us by Dickens through the very performances that constitute their power and their attraction.

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Nowhere in all the police conversation is there any consideration of right and wrong, especially in relation to the policemen's own actions. Professional duty eclipses morality, and to an undefined extent the end justifies the means. Since the police are by definition on the right side, and the criminals are on the wrong side, whatever the police do in their anecdotes is tacitly assumed to be good. This all works as long as the world is contained within the narrow bounds of the detectives' *Household Words* performances. However, once Dickens goes out into the streets with the police in "On Duty with Inspector Field," the limitations become apparent. Inspector Field in the magazine office is now given his real-life name, which may suggest that we are a few steps (or at least a letter) closer to the real world. Field's emphasis in his guided tour of London's criminal haunts is on the completeness of his organisation and control. Everyone waits upon him. Or for him, since the Inspector is late to arrive. Crowds follow their progress through the rookeries. Everywhere they go, Field picks out individuals from the mob and lets them know he knows about them. Doors open before him as he displays the workings of this world, *his* world. Supported by a relay system of uniformed constables, he is a man who, above all else, *knows*.

Inside one thieves' den, Field's mastery is expressed as a one-sided chattiness. "All seek to propitiate him," for he has arrested many of them in the past, and has exiled many of their friends and relatives to the other side of the world. Wherever they go, "Inspector Field is received with warmth," with one old lady grotesquely pressing her attentions from the mud into which she has slipped and from which "her very form has ceased to be distinguishable." If humanity is lost, what is the worth of the police power of identification? The question has been quietly posed.

Violence, whether threatened or actual, can limit as well as enforce Field's performance. The climax of the tour, presumably chosen by the Inspector, is the worst place of all, Bark's lodging house. Field asserts himself against Bark, who in turn incites the thieves downstairs to come up and attack the busybodies. They don't, because "they know the weight of the law, and they know Inspector Field and Co. too well." That is, criminal violence is held in check by the threat of state retribution. Before long, says Dickens, Bark will no doubt be "inconveniently reminded of this little brush." Police revenge will follow, but in consequence there may be further trouble. Field holds that "it's all one whether Bark likes the visit or don't like it," but the policemen who work daily in this area will be left to deal with the aftermath of Field's actions: "Black and Green (uniformed constables) do ordinary duty here, and look serious."

Dickens does not simply set a real world of poverty and violence against police performance. Rather, he finds his way into that real world and defines it through the deliberate use of

imagination. We should take care, however, not to see imagination as solely the intuitive creative power emanating from the individual. In Dickens's case it is better understood in a Bakhtinian sense as the consciousness of the extra-individual that makes true individuality possible. In opposition to the self-consummating performances that would subordinate others to the singular self of the detective, imagination invokes the sense that the individual can only be seen by and through others.

Even before Field appears, Dickens jovially but pointedly uses the excuse for the policeman's late arrival, doing guard duty in the British Museum, to create a satirical fantasy about the Inspector's singular view of the world: "Suspicious of the Elgin marbles, and not to be done by cat-face Egyptian giants with their hands upon their knees, Inspector Field, sagacious, vigilant, lamp in hand, throwing monstrous shadows on the walls and ceilings, passes through the spacious rooms" (123). The Inspector is efficient precisely because he is so single-minded, suspicious of everyone and everything. Except himself. His alertness applies solely to lawbreakers: "If a mummy trembled in an atom of its dusty covering, Inspector Field would say, 'Come out of that, Tom Green, I know you!'" Again, in the policeman's book identification means power. But what if it weren't Tom Green? Or what if the mummy trembled out of fear of the detective himself? After all, his shadows - and, most unnaturally, there are more than one - are said to be monstrous. It is not just his shadows, for in the very next sentence we are told that Field would smell out a thief "with a finer scent than the ogre's, when adventurous Jack lay trembling in his kitchen copper" (123-24). Back-handed praise indeed, since Field is the ogre rather than adventurous Jack. The tone is joking, it is all a pleasant fantasy that passes the time while Dickens is waiting, and yet the imaginative invocation of others' perspectives on one's self has tellingly shown the limits of the policeman's singularity. "Just recognising the Ichthyosaurus as a familiar acquaintance" (124) finally marks the boundaries of Field's self-knowledge, suggesting as it does that while he may know what a dinosaur is, he still doesn't know that as far as monsters are concerned it takes one to know one.

The alternative views of the self afforded by the imagination are explored further as they continue through the rookeries. The literal tour of criminal London is also a metaphorical tour of the police. Not that the literal and the metaphorical are separate, since the horrors of the former are shown to be shaped by the blindness to the latter. The policeman who leads the party out from the Station House has a bulls-eye lamp strapped to his belt, "a flaming eye in the middle of his waist, like a deformed Cyclops" (124). A monster again, and not the hero.



Once the foulness of the labyrinth hits them within fifty paces of the police station, Dickens wonders what could have led respectable humanity to remain in ignorance of such poverty, such degradation in their very midst. He also wonders who in government could look upon the crowd attracted to their light - "the lowering foreheads, the sallow cheeks, the brutal eyes, the matted hair, the infected, vermin-haunted heaps of rags - and say, 'I have thought of this. I have not dismissed the thing.'" Fantasy defines the terms of realism by suggesting that seeing the poor as sub-human is in part a consequence of a police perspective on society, and at a deeper level of the self-consummating performance of individuality. The police are the respectable guardians of respectable society, but in part their job is to perpetuate ignorance. They are the government's representatives, and we see the poor through the one-eyed light of a deformed Cyclops.

Dickens tells us that the policeman with the bulls-eye lamp has no time for such issues: "This is not what Rogers wants to know, however. What Rogers wants to know is, whether you *will* clear the way here, some of you, or whether you won't, because if you don't do it right on end, he'll lock you up! 'What! *You* are there, are you, Bob Miles?'" As ever, power operates through naming. Lack of power goes with lack of identification, and loss of identity. Hence, in one lodging house, "Men, women, children, for the most part naked, [are] heaped upon the floor like maggots in a cheese!" And all the time the police go from place to place, the "glaring eye" of the lamp asserting their power through identification in the darkness:

In these confined, intolerable rooms, burrowed out like the holes of rats or the nests of insect-vermin, but fuller of intolerable smells, are crowds of sleepers. . . . Come! Let us see you! Show your face! Pilot Parker [another policeman] goes from bed to bed and turns their slumbering heads towards us, as a salesman might turn sheep. (131)

Fantasy suggests how such dehumanisation takes place. Dickens responds by pursuing a different kind of identification. Instead of using it to factually name the criminals, to criminalise the poor by naming them, thereby sealing their difference from the law-abiding who don't need to give their names in return, he identifies *with* the sleepers, imaginatively pursuing what it means to go to sleep each night with "STOP THIEF" printed on the sheets. "A precaution against loss of linen," the inscription leads Dickens to fantasise that I (we and the criminal poor) "lie at night wrapped in the legend of my slinking life," dreaming about and waking each and every day to the words of the hue and cry. In short, even the most peaceful time affords no peace, and the knowledge is enforced that the police must inevitably catch me.

The fantasy of being hunted by the police even in one's sleep conveys a frightening sense of their

power, and it would seem to bring no relief. Indeed, it heightens the desperation. However, it prepares for and later opens onto realistic reportage which brings that power up short. At Bark's lodging house, an alternative to "STOP THIEF!" is printed on the bed linen: his sheets read "STOLEN FROM Bark's!" (136) For all Dickens's apparent condemnation of his bluster, Bark's "ferocious individuality" commands a measure of respect. Metaphorically, his sleepers won't be haunted by dreams of official pursuit (whatever their nightmares about Bark); literally, the police don't get to the bedrooms in his lodging house. So they won't be able to shine their glaring eye of identification upon his lodgers, turning their heads towards them like sheep. Proud of his name, Bark has secured and defended identity on his own terms, not those of the police.

Another kind of identity also takes shape in "On Duty with Inspector Field," namely Dickens himself as a character in his own reporting. Imaginative openness enables him to question the simple division between good police and bad criminals through presenting himself as faulted. His incompleteness acts as a foil to the confidence of the police. Early over-enthusiasm ("Lead on, Rogers, to Rats' Castle") is quickly dispelled by the sight and smell of the stinking rookeries, but the very naivety, when allied to honest observation and a capacity for fantasy, pushes Dickens to assert that he and the verminous poor share the same humanity. Police work and self-definition depend upon not making that connection: "This is not what Rogers wants to know." Hence, also, Field's response to Dickens's wish for the possible redemption of one young woman they meet,

a young, modest, gentle-looking creature, with a beautiful child in her lap. . . . She has such a pretty, quiet face and voice. . . . Is she as bad as the rest, I wonder? Inspectorial experience does not engender a belief contrariwise, but prompts the answer, Not a ha' porth of difference!

(132)

The combination of official jargon and unofficial argot that worked so effectively in the *Household Words* office now becomes a double exposure of the detective's shortcomings. The mocking pedantry of "Inspectorial experience does not engender a belief contrariwise" is matched by the glibness of "Not a ha' porth of difference!" The Inspector may well be right, but Dickens's wish for the girl's redemption, and his recording of that wish in all its possible sentimentality, makes it clear that he appreciates the conditional quality of life. He leaves himself open to contradiction. Field doesn't, and in the difference between the policeman and the novelist we see two opposing views of human character.

At last, Dickens speaks explicitly about the Inspector:

*He* does not trouble his head as I do, about the river at night. *He* does not care for its creeping, black and silent on our right there, rushing through sluice-gates, lapping at piles

and posts and iron rings, hiding strange things in the mud, running away with suicides and accidentally drowned bodies faster than midnight funeral should and acquiring such various experience between its cradle and its grave. It has no mystery for *him*. Is there not the Thames Police! (133)

Imagination invokes a sense that the individual can be defined by and through others. Here, however, Field is set against an animistic nature, and this man who has been praised previously for “being equally at home wherever we go” shows himself to be closed to the world around him. He can be at home anywhere, because once identification has been made it is all the same to him. This is what the self-consummating personality would make of the world. Meanwhile, the world, in the living form of the river, carries humanity to their deaths.

In “Down with the Tide,” Dickens follows Field’s imagined advice and visits the Thames Police. In reply to Field’s demystification of the world, he demystifies the Thames policeman instead. Dickens first offers imaginative foolishness to the other man, going on at length about the various rivers he has seen. This is a kind of mockery that invites humour in return. Not getting it, Dickens risks ridicule by speaking seriously to the policeman of the river as “an image of death in the midst of the great city’s life”(138). But the policeman won’t respond - “He *could not* stand my holding forth” - and for this Dickens denies him identification, referring to him as “the worthy Pea,” or simply “Peacoat,” mockingly summing him up as little more than the official coat he is wearing.

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What are we to make of these policemen? It’s tempting to conclude that Dickens is intent on subverting their authority, seeing them as part of the problem, not the cure. The problem, that is, of the poor, whom their own methods and attitudes may criminalise. The degree of subversion, however, is open to doubt since there is so much real respect for the detectives in the *Household Words* office.<sup>ii</sup> Even “the worthy Pea,” out on the river to which he is oblivious, remains worthy. He does his job, and in Dickens’s books that always counts for something.

There are two distinct attitudes towards the police in the articles, and they are incompatible.<sup>iii</sup> On the one hand, dedicated professionals work without recognition or thanks, protecting society from its enemies. The criminals do indeed often come from the poor, but the responsibility for this does not lie with the police. Rather, society at large and the government in particular have created the conditions for mass poverty. The police are not moral arbiters, and the legal system is

there to decide deeper issues of right and wrong. Those who criticise should first look in the mirror. If detectives dissemble, it is because it is the only way to beat their enemies: “For ever on the watch, with their wits stretched to the utmost, these officers have, from day to day and year to year, to set themselves against every novelty of trickery and dexterity that the combined imaginations of all the lawless rascals in England can devise” (90). Implicitly, the state has the right to use force against wrongdoers. Violence, though, is a last resort, and the detectives prefer to use their own wits, along with their ability to harness criminals’ better instincts.

On the other hand, Dickens’s reporting also shows that policemen habitually divide society into two groups, the law-abiding and the criminals. Since the defining characteristic of the law-abiding is their respectability, and since respectability depends upon money, appearance and manners, the masses of urban poor are automatically identified as actual or potential criminals. In enforcing the law, the police also enforce the rule of respectability. They are society’s means of perpetuating class division, their very efficiency allowing the well-off to ignore the poverty that surrounds them. In protecting the ignorance of those who have the power and money to change the social system, they are complicit in promoting injustice. Furthermore, the detectives’ self-dramatisations may well represent and promote a self-consummating individuality that corrodes civil society.

Dickens sees both sides with equal clarity. Largely omitted from the police articles but of vital importance in his novels is his firm belief in the prior existence of goodness and evil. Given the latter, police are always necessary, and the more efficient they are the better. Equally important in Dickens’s writing, however, is his certainty that social conditions breed injustice and crime. At root, of course, this is the “nature versus nurture” conundrum. Here, it underpins the argument, often glibly advanced but true nonetheless, that the police do an impossible job. They really do.

This incompatibility is still very much in Dickens’s thoughts in 1852, when he starts writing *Bleak House*, and it informs his characterisation of one of the first and greatest of fictional detectives, the stodgily transparent enigma that is Inspector Bucket. The riddle of Bucket’s character has fascinated and sometimes annoyed readers since his first appearance. He is enigmatic because he embodies the incompatibility inherent in police work. There is no harmonising synthesis in his characterisation, and the best we can say is that the good he achieves comes out of the bad he works. It is as though Dickens takes the insolubility of the conundrum first brought into awareness in the police articles, and gives himself to finding what a character might make of it.

In many ways Bucket is an extension of Inspector Field.<sup>16</sup> He draws out the implications of Field's enforcement of respectability, coupled with his criminalisation of the poor. Enforcing respectability means working for the eminent lawyer, Tulkinghorn. Followed to its conclusion, this work would destroy Lady Dedlock's reputation and marriage through identifying her as the mother of a bastard child. The murder of Tulkinghorn prevents us from knowing how far Bucket would have aided the lawyer. The criminalisation of the poor, again at Tulkinghorn's instigation, means the harassment of Jo the crossing-sweeper. Bucket terrorises the seriously sick boy, and uses bribery to get him away from those who are trying to help him. At the very least, he hastens the child's death.

Like the detectives in the *Household Words* office, Bucket's methods are based on performance. He closely resembles Mith in his ability to change shape, and to blend identification with misidentification. As we make the comparison, however, the suspicion arises that Mith's acting, in its very dedication, could be selfless. Self-dramatisation may not be self-serving by definition, and perhaps Dickens learns something from his meeting with the real-life policemen that he puts to good use in his creation of the fictional detective. Self-dramatisation could itself be a cover. That is, the detectives might adopt the self-consummating style of the society in which they operate in order to do their work more efficiently.

That the detectives don't completely identify with the self-consummating predators dominating the England of Dickens's novels is suggested by their appreciation of friendship over and above their exploitation of sociability in the line of duty. Hence, Sergeant Witchem's pleasure in recalling that Tally-ho Thompson "always praises me up to the skies, and says I'm one of the best of men" (81). Wield not only goes out for a friendly drink with the young man he meets at the play, but after he has got the unexpected lead from the grandfather "I took the old gentleman out, and had a little more talk with him and his son, over a glass, and we parted excellent friends" (93-94). Hence also, perhaps, the return visit by some of the police to the *Household Words* office for more affable conversation with Dickens. The nub of the matter may be that those who most completely pretend to such virtues as friendship may eventually conjure them for real.

The second point about the real-life performances, which Dickens emphasises and which informs his characterisation of Bucket, is the detectives' recognition of *chance* as a crucial element in their work. The failed shipboard identification by a detective of a murderess is recounted in a tone of acceptance: "Satisfied that she was not the object of his search, he quietly re-embarked in the Government steamer alongside" (76). Witchem, as we saw earlier, only has his identification of

Tally-ho Thompson confirmed by chance. If Thompson hadn't confused Witchem with another officer, he might have successfully denied the identification. Here, the role of luck is emphasised all the more starkly by the contrast between the moment of arrest and the preceding series of calculating moves and counter-moves made by the criminal and the policeman. Later, a defect in the evidence, which doesn't seem to bother Witchem, results in Thompson's acquittal: the decisive part sometimes played by luck in legal affairs is taken for granted. Chance protects Mith from accidentally meeting with the City Police when in his disguise as the Butcher, and therefore from being identified by the thieves: "If any of 'em had happened to know me, and had spoke to me, it would have been all up in a minute. However, by good luck such a thing never happened" (85). His detective work leads Dornton to the United States and the arrest of a Doctor Dundey, but while he is in New York good fortune enables him to identify another felon he had been pursuing in England a year before. Dickens himself celebrates the perversity of chance at the end of "A Detective Police Party," gleefully informing his readers that Witchem, the officer "best acquainted with the Swell Mob," and therefore the most experienced at identifying pickpockets, "had his pocket picked, going home" from the *Household Words* office (90).

The work of the detectives, as described by Dickens, sometimes has an air of inhuman calculation: "These games of chess, played with live pieces, are played before small audiences, and are chronicled nowhere." The calculation, however, may be modified or creatively translated by the policeman's openness to the "curious coincidences" of uncalculated life and by "their peculiar ability," which I take to mean their skill in playing the game of performance against the criminals even as they accept the role played by chance. "The interest of the game supports the player," writes Dickens, and we may add that to achieve the winning identification the most dedicated players are willing to make the most extreme sacrifices, both of themselves and even of those who employ them. They do this out of love for the game itself, and these agents of blind justice can be dangerous to the very authorities they are thought to represent. Inspector Bucket is just such a man.

Bucket's staging of the identification of Lady Dedlock's maid Hortense as Tulkinghorn's killer has the seemingly inadvertent effect of revealing Sir Leicester Dedlock to himself (667-74; ch.54). Losing the woman he could never admit he loved, and recognising his part in causing her to flee, breaks the baronet. Yet it makes him human at the same time. Bucket's peculiar ability ensures identification at the deepest levels, whatever the cost to those he is working for. <sup>v</sup>

The timing and method of the Inspector's identification of Hortense has the accidental effect of making Lady Dedlock certain that the truth about her past is soon to be made public. Her shame at the pain she is bringing upon her husband causes her to flee to her death outside the paupers' graveyard where the man she once loved is buried. Bucket's peculiar ability to achieve identification entails a provocation of chance. Bad luck stirred up by the Inspector makes Lady Dedlock run away, but in pursuit of her he leads her daughter Esther towards a knowledge of her parents' love that eclipses her lifelong self-negation (736-37; ch.59). Once again, he affords another person profound self-recognition.<sup>vi</sup>

Inspector Bucket is an artist who has as much in common with Dickens himself as with the detectives in the *Household Words* office, but those meetings with the policemen, along with the tour of the rookeries, provide the ideas and knowledge for his characterisation. Dickens learns that police work has to be done, even though it is impossible. And the detectives, by chance, it would seem, make Inspector Bucket possible.

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> All police article references are to *Hunted Down: the Detective Stories of Charles Dickens*, edited by Peter Haining. The book's worth as a scholarly project is open to question (Whitworth), but it is currently the most accessible text.

<sup>ii</sup> For an argument that Dickens is subverting the detectives' mythical status, see Worthington (164-67).

<sup>iii</sup> Philip Collins takes a different line (196-219, especially 215-19), arguing that Dickens's attitude towards the police is all of a piece in its unquestioning admiration. Humphry House goes further, seeing "an almost fanatical devotion to the Metropolitan Police. In all his stories and articles about the police there is scarcely a breath of criticism" (201-02). House's determination to explain Dickens away as an authoritarian "anal type" (203) dulls his reading sense at this point.

<sup>iv</sup> See Collins (206-12) for a discussion of the similarities between Bucket and Field. See also John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson (127-29).

<sup>v</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Bucket, see Easley 2004 (198-201, and 206-10).

<sup>vi</sup> Nicola Bradbury believes that the unforeseen consequences expose the limitations of Bucket's knowing professionalism and make the reader more open to experience (161). In my view, Bucket's dangerous courting of unforeseen consequences affords Sir Leicester Dedlock and Esther Summerson self-knowledge. This would also qualify D.A. Miller's argument that "the game function of detection thoroughly dominates whatever ethical ends it presumably serves," and that Bucket exhibits a "species of moral indifference" (94-95). You may have to take part in the game and live with the unforeseen consequences to find out the ethical end.

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