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Inf(l)ecting Each Other: "A Moral Infection as a Physical One" in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House*

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I look at contagion, as a form of disease in two ways—one, contagion as a metaphor, as a 'moral' infection through the debates around the Poor Law represented in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, and two, contagion as physical disease, represented through the bodily and the behavioral, through *Bleak House* in the context of the emergence of 'public health' in the latter half of nineteenth century. My paper argues that central to "the ubiquity of contagion as a master narrative in Victorian culture" is the way contagion is appropriated both as a metaphor and as a physical reality, as that which is both "moral" and "physical"—as it morphs from being a noun "contagion" to an adjective "contagious". That for disease to attain its ubiquitous status in the cultural

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imagination of Victorian England especially as seen through the novels of Dickens, it was crucial that disease operated both in its real capacity as a historical phenomenon and as well as a literary metaphor.

KEYWORDS:

Victorian, Charles Dickens, Poor Law Commission, Nineteenth Century England, Cultural Imagination, Contagion, Disease, Oliver Twist, Charles Dickens, Edwin Chadwick

> "There have been at work among us three great social agencies: the London City Mission; the novels of Mr. Dickens; the cholera." [i]
>
> "That it is at least as difficult to stay a *moral infection as a physical one*; that such a disease will spread with the malignity and rapidity of the Plague; that the contagion, when it has once made head, will spare no pursuit or condition, but will lay hold on people in the soundest health, and become developed in the most unlikely constitutions: is a fact as firmly established by experience as that we human creatures breathe an atmosphere."[ii]

The reference to the plague made by Dickens (in the above passage) is in more ways than one, a reminder to the collective imagination of his audience that there was a tradition of disease writing that was both literary and political, that the project of reform appropriated this tradition; and that, before cholera became the great social leveller in the nineteenth century it was plague which was the most poignant as a point of reference as far as contagion was concerned.

Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) is deeply embedded in the "distinctly protestant English tradition and mindset, in which aesthetic goals were inseparable from religious and political ones…" [iii] Defoe's choice of form is not incidental to the topic of contagious epidemic—both news and disease spread through circulation, and both disease and news could interest the "national" imagination like nothing else.

My purpose in remembering Defoe is to show the close nexus between the political act of disease writing, contagious disease, and the "national" imagination. But also, Defoe in the *Journal* significantly introduces certain tropes of representation that closely follow at the heels of disease writing—especially the figure of the wandering, vagrant unsettled poor who was to become the embodiment of contagion—both moral and physical by the nineteenth century.

The figure of the idle, useless, non-productive vagrant resurfaces most prominently in the debates for relief, especially in the 1834 *Poor Law Commissioner's Report* (PLC). The centrality of the vagrant figure, reemerging as a pauper in the

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discursive strategy surrounding relief and reform was in the context of a changing economy in the nineteenth century—the need to do away with an older system of relief and the fact that in the newer context of a free market, outdoor relief destabilized the precarious balance between wages and labour, demand and supply. The pauper then embodied the pathology of idleness, this pathologisation predicated on a 'systematic grafting of morality on to economics'—this morality then representing discursive strategies intervened by a range of technologies which interprets the field of the social as hinged on 'behaviour'. [iv]

Pauperism yielded readily to the metaphor of contagion, as a set of behaviour that readily signified its marginalised status to any form of political legitimacy, definitely far from the prevalent tenor, which framed relief within the discourse of entitlement. The discourse of entitlement by 1832 had come to be seen as irrelevant and obsolete especially when government came to be seen as a kind of science that depended on social dynamics.[v] In Defoe, if charity disturbed the circulation of trade and caused distemper then relief as a right, in the context of an industrialised economy that is constantly balanced by the free market, destroyed its health by undermining productivity.

Contagion as defined by the New Poor Law (1834) was not so much about physical contagion, as moral—contagion was defined as a form of discontentment that was spread by non productive vagrant bodies, that threatened to turn the nation through its moral infectedness into a nation of paupers. The moral aspect of contagion

had important bearings on the political (especially with the outbreak of cholera in 1832 and Swing riots in1830), as a principle that like disease threatened the order and coherence of the body politic and subverted its order. The cholera riots in 1832 displayed the deep mistrust of the public towards medical practitioners—so that the moral contagion of class discontentment and suspicion preceded the chaos of the riots, even before the physical outbreak of cholera. Interestingly, Sandra Hempel notes that inherent in this metaphoric implications of an 'outbreak'—is the similarity between the way English ports watched out for revolution brought by Bonaparte and news of cholera that arrived through ports.[vi] The moral contagion in PLC report is transferred not by the vagabond's bodily contact, as much as through this moral contact, through the act of gathering and communicating this verbal discontentment— the way in which "the example becomes contagious" as the report states.[vii]

One of the main objects of the New Poor Law, one that evolves from Defoe's distinction between the vagrant poor and the settled poor in the *Journal,* was to distinguish between the poor and the pauper through the infamous eligibility test, to distinguish not just physically between those inside the workhouse and those outside, but more importantly to recognise this categorical distinction through the workhouse.[viii] Pauperism was that volatile, circulating agent of discontentment that threatened the social order from within like a disease and infected healthy, honest laborers with the germ of discontent.

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The amendment of the Poor Law in 1834 changed laws of bastardy and instead of the earlier practice of punishing the alleged father of the bastard shifted the focus entirely on the woman's disposition, her willingness to be tempted at the cost of the parish and instead of punishing the father placed "the mother of a chargeable bastard to the house of correction". It is no surprise then that in *Oliver Twist,* Oliver can only be reunited with his mother Agnes's decontaminated and decorporealised body, not even in the confines of the workhouse but in her grave.[ix] Steven Marcus has suggested that in their alienation from respectable society, Olive and Fagin are alike if not identical—however Oliver's threat from Fagin is the threat of contracting this moral contagion, in Fagin's hope that Oliver shall follow the example set by crime. The critique of the New Poor Law in this sense comes most strongly from Oliver's innocence—on one hand this innocence is a misfit in the workhouse that sees the bastard as an embodiment of moral contagion and as a burden on relief; and on the other hand, outside the workhouse he continually struggles to keep himself out of that category of poverty which bears a close resemblance to crime. As Sally Ledger notes, Oliver Twist as a novel has important antecedents in crime literature, in Newgate novels and street literature.[x]

While the PLC report portrays the moral contagion as one that can spread without resistance, in the novel Oliver's innocence is an antidote to the moral contagion of pauperism, the kind of pauperism that in the popular imagination was likened to criminality, "breeding vice". It is significant as Ledger says, that *The Times* published the scene where Oliver is brought before the Board of Guardians as a social document

rather than a piece of fiction.[xi] Even as the telos of the novel moves from the workhouse in an attempt to 'domesticate' Oliver, Oliver must prove himself to be immune from the moral contagion of the streets. The random logic of naming Oliver not only completes the process of depersonalization in the workhouse, the caricaturized figure of Mr. Bumble and his marriage Mrs. Corney only emphasize the inability of the "parochial" setup to uphold any personal, domestic relations.

In the novel it is not the heterotopic site of the workhouse that threatens to pauperise Oliver as much as the in-between space of the streets, the space for the uncharted where the poor runs the risk of being likened to a pauper or being confused as one—where the deserving poor is likened to an undeserving pauper.[xii] An enclosed space that awkwardly symbolized a site that is both opposed to the comforts of the Victorian home and at the same time moves away from the corrupt road—the workhouse then symbolizes a "nowhere place"—a heterotopic site, an uneasy negotiation that in many ways stands for the uncomfortable position that the workhouse occupied in the Victorian worldview.[xiii] What is significant in reading the politics of the New Poor Law is the fact that the condition of less eligibility was meant to act as a deterrent for the destitute who is looking for relief: "intended to produce rather negative than positive effects."[xiv] But this principle of deterrence which was contingent upon the laws of the market confused the categories of honest poor and the vice breeding pauper because under the principle of less eligibility, the poor are always on the dangerous brink of becoming paupers.

The problem of less eligibility highlighted the problems of this precarious location—so that Oliver embodies this precariousness while resisting the moral contagion of Fagin's example in a balancing act, that attempts to remain outside the workhouse, negotiating the corruption of the roads while the narrative telos of the novel moves towards the comforts of a home. Oliver's exemplarity as the eponymic hero lies in diametrical opposition to the moral contagion posed by Fagin's example, this moral victory gained through his unswerving honesty that although undercuts the ambiguous and harsh tenets of the New Poor Law, nonetheless, the novel's distinction between the categorical rigidity of the honest deserving poor versus the vagrant undeserving pauper is reasserted through Oliver's exemplary behavior and his ultimate movement towards the domestic.

If it is in the realm of the behavioural that Oliver displays his moral exemplarity resisting the metaphorical contagion of vice, Oliver's equally famous entreaty asking for "more" uses this innocence to subvert and question the dismal quality of life in the workhouse, as a result of the principle of less eligibility. While this innocent request unknowingly undermines the limits of relief imposed by the New Poor Law, one of the critiques that followed the amendment of the Poor Law Act was on account of dietary strictures so that starvation or malnutrition became a political moot point around which reform as a category was questioned.

Chadwick's *Sanitary Report* (1842) which in more ways than one was born out of the criticism generated as an aftermath of the New Poor Law, bypassed the political

discourse of relief, or the supposed connections between poverty, malnutrition and disease and used the discourse of social justice instead to launch the Public Health movement—using the domain of the behavioural to define sanitary. According to Mary Poovey, if the New Poor Law dispensed with the organic relationship of the workhouse to the English community, "where the state and its members…hold[ing] the relation of parent and children"[xv] and replaced that organicism with the workhouse test, the metaphor of cholera used by James Kay-Shuttleworth helped in conceptualising a 'harmonious body' of the nation state.[xvi]

If contagion in the earlier half of nineteenth century was a form of disease that could be moral and spread through discontented assemblies of paupers, the Public Health Act (1848) made disease an immediate physical reality, which could be prevented by cleanly habits and sanitary measures. The Public Health Act politicized disease, and made it available to the cultural imagination through the discourse of sanitary reform, where progress is predicated on healthy behavior. Also because etiologically mid nineteenth century was a period of medical amorphousness where the germ was open to interpretation, this amorphousness meant that disease could also be imaginatively appropriated across a variety of other discourses, including the novel.

> That no man can estimate the amount of mischief grown in dirt,— that no man can say the evil stops here or stops there, either in *its moral or physical effects*, or can deny that it begins in the cradle and is not at rest in the miserable grave, is as

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> certain as it is that the air from Gin Lane will be carried by an easterly wind into Mayfair, or that the furious pestilence raging in St. Giles's no mortal list of lady patronesses can keep out of Almack's.[xvii]

In a speech vindicating the public health movement in the face of suspicion and criticism following the New Poor Law, Dickens highlights the ubiquity of contagious disease through its confusing borderlines, through the inability of charting its growth, of confusing class distinctions by obscuring territorial boundaries—from Gin Lane to Mayfair, or St. Giles to Almack's. Apart from the amorphous nature of scientific knowledge at this time, what makes contagion appropriable as a potent metaphor is its mobility, its invisibility and its ability to penetrate erstwhile diametrically opposite spaces.

Bleak House begins with the famous fog of London—so that there is "fog everywhere", penetrating into the nooks and crannies even as this ubiquitous fog by the end of the novel is a "thick humidity [that] broke out like a disease", the metaphorical fog of mystery propelling the narrative. In a telling description of Tom-all-alone, Dickens' describes the confusion and chaos brought about by filth

> Mr. Snagsby passes along the middle of a villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corrupt water - though the roads are dry elsewhere - and reeking with such smells and sights that he, who has lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses. Branching from this street and

> its heaps of ruins, are other streets and courts so infamous that Mr. Snagsby sickens in body and mind, and feels as if he were going, every moment deeper down, into the infernal gulf. (*Bleak House*, Chapter 22)

The close contiguity between the fog and confusion of Chancery, or the far-fetched relationship between Tom all alone and Esther is made "communicable" by the germ of contagion as it travels via Jo. Carolyn Jacobson says that documents, be it legal or personal act like agents of infection, as Lady Dedlock becomes sick through her interaction with letters and Richard is represented as "morally" infected by the intricacies of legal documentation.[xviii] Jarndyce says,

> [I]t is in the subtle poison of such abuses to breed such diseases. His blood is infected, and objects lose their natural aspects in his sight. It is not *his* fault...It is a terrible misfortune, little woman, to be ever drawn within the influences of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. I know none greater. By little and little he has been induced to trust in that rotten reed, and it communicates some portion of its rottenness to everything around him. [xix]

However Sir Dedlock's inherited gout pain in contrast to contagion is not a disease viewed in the usual form of a scourge, it becomes a remnant of his aristocratic legacy, having inherited it as a part of that legacy.

Although Dickens upholds sanitation as a form of attaining social justice and in that echoes the *Sanitary Report's* ideal of progress achievable through sanitary reform,

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the novel does what Chadwick's report cannot or will not. Unlike the form of the Sanitary Report which ideologically cannot and will not uphold a vagrant like Jo, in Bleak House Jo is the vagrant, the embodiment of contagion who not only communicates the contagion to Esther, but also provides the "connexions" in the novel. If finding connexions propel the narrative telos of BH, contagion adds to the connectedness—so that even before Lady Dedlock discovers the connexions between Esther and herself, Jo acts as both the conduit of that contagion and connection to Esther. In more ways than one, finding the 'connexions' between apparently disparate characters is forged through communicating the contagion.

> What *connexion* can there be between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What *connexion* can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world who from opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless, been *very curiously brought together!*[xx]

Dickens deploys Jo's vagrancy as a literary technique, represented in his constant "moving on" to forge connexions and communicate contagion, the *Sanitary Report* at best can represent vagrancy through its opposite—through the parable of Philip Gray who progresses in life because of his exemplary habit of cleanliness.[xxi] However, the general tenor of the Report does not individuate the pauper, usually represented anonymously as a case where the particular case stands for a certain sociological

category of population. As Pamela Gilbert says, "These bodies, being too contiguous, become continuous."[xxii] Predicated on the idea of social justice, public health as a movement gained national resonance, by absorbing local identifications of class and its peculiar behaviours, through a shared code of civic conduct. Defining 'public' through this shared concern for health, one that potentially affects the entire population, it is post the Public Health movement that disease is politicized and made relevant to the nation as an issue of 'public' relevance that the metaphoric potency of contagion acquires currency. Unlike the literary that can use the figure of the vagrant to its advantage through the mode of the novelistic so that Dickens can on one hand treat him empathetically and yet vindicate the cause of sanitary reform, the project of political reform in Chadwick's Sanitary Report can claim no such ambiguity. Dickens then portrays Jo "in uncompromising colours" as both 'heathen' and as one who 'belongs to the English soil and climate' unlike the rhetoric of public health which successfully turns the individual into a governmental subject, who must be governed by a dominant norm of social behaviour. Unlike Chadwick who belonged to the anti contagionist group of reformers, Dickens' use of contagion as a connecting principle is not bound by the epistemic verities of contemporary etiological theory. In Dickens, it becomes a metaphor, an organizing principle propelling the narrative, as "moral or physical" and at times too ambiguous to be either subversive or ideological.

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> "And it is a remarkable example of the confusion into which the present age has fallen; of the obliteration of landmarks, the opening of floodgates, and the uprooting of distinctions"
>
> "…The floodgates of society are burst open, and the waters have—a—obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together!" [xxiii]

Contagion because of its rich ambiguity, on one hand could be appropriated as a principle that caused social chaos which was morally transmitted, as shown by the PLC in the PLC's report. On the other hand the pervasive nature of contagion, was used to define 'public health' as social justice—which imposed cohesion by enforcing an overarching framework of civil conduct. If anything this ambiguity only goes to show the prevalence of contagion as a cultural metaphor in the Victorian Imagination, or as Athena Vrettos puts it "the ubiquity of contagion as a master narrative in Victorian culture".[xxiv]

An anonymous obituary to Dickens suggests the enormous influence he had on the medical discourse of contemporary England—that perhaps the discursive tropes associated with what came to be known as "Dickensian" was contagious, ubiquitous and perhaps ambiguous, finding their way into other discourses, infecting perhaps the social, cultural and the medical imaginary:

How true to Nature, even to their most trivial details, almost every character and every incident in the works of the great novelist whose dust has just been laid to rest, really were, is best known to those whose tastes or whose duties led them to frequent the paths of life from which Dickens delighted to draw. But none, except medical men, can judge of the rare fidelity with which he followed the great Mother through the devious paths of disease and death. In reading *Oliver Twist* and *Dombey and Son*, or *The Chimes*, or even *No Thoroughfare*, the physician often felt tempted to say, 'What a gain it would have been to physic if one so keen to observe and so facile to describe had devoted his powers to the medical art.' It must not be forgotten that his description of hectic (in *Oliver Twist*) has found its way into more than one standard work, in both medicine and surgery...[xxv]

[i] James Baldwin Brown, quoted in John O. Jordan (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 64

[ii] Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit, Chapter 13

[iii] Margaret Healy, "Defoe's Journal and the English plague Writing Tradition", Project Muse, *Literature and Medicine*, p. 26

[iv] Giovanna Procacci, "The Mobilisation of Society" in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 156-160

[v] See Christopher Hamlin, in "The History of Methods of Social Epidemiology to 1965", in Michael J. Oakes and Jay. S Kaufman, *Methods in Social Epidemiology,* John Wiley and sons, 2006, pp. 21-45

[vi] At one point the report uses the popular and contemporary views on war between Greece and Turkey, and compares the prevalent attitude of sloth, and filthiness to that of "Turkish fatalists"

[vii] "…[W]hen one pauper has been accustomed to receive it, another thinks himself ill used if it be not allowed to him also. The example becomes contagious…" *Report from His Majesty's Commissioners Inquiring Into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws*, 1834, Vol. 1, p.18

[viii] The attempt to discourage relief by making sure that the pauper's life inside the workhouse would be clearly less desirable or worse than that of the person who remained independent outside the workhouse.

[ix] I am grateful to Dr. Sambudha Sen for pointing this out. Also see Ruth Richardson, *Dickens and the Workhouse: Oliver Twist and the London Poor*, Oxford University Press, 2012

[x] Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination,* Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 66

[xi] Ibid., p. 103

[xii] Michel Foucuault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", October 1984, *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*

[xiii] By the mid 19th century, one sees this kind of tension and resistance with regard to hospitals as well—as a space that stood for fear and death, where one's body might be dissected, especially if one belonged to the section of population that was destitute. The hospital was not as dystopic as the work-house, it replicated the utopia of the family, and became what Foucault calls 'heterotopia'. But the uneasy relationship of the poor with spaces like the workhouse and the hospital often reveal the problematic position of the destitute in the Victorian imaginary—often conflating the disease itself with the diseased.

[xiv] Lauren Goodlad,*Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* John Hopkins University press, 2004, p.33

[xv] Harriet Martineau, *Cousin Marshall*. Mr. Burke later qualifies this relationship, as a 'false analogy' because the problem of subsistence post-Malthus makes that analogy untenable, for Martineau and according to her, for the state as well.

[xvi] Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 58-60

[xvii] Charles Dickens, Speech delivered at the Metropolitan Sanitary Association on May 10, 1851

[xviii] Carolyn Jacobson, "Contagious transmissions and charged atmospheres: Disease theories and narrative in early Victorian novels", (January 1, 2008), accessed at : http://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI3328587

[xix] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Chapter 35

[xx] Ibid., Chapter 16 [italics mine]

[xxi] Report to Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department , 1842, Clowes and Sons, p. 101

[xxii] Pamela Gilbert, *The Citizen's Body: Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England,* Ohio State University press, 2007, p 38

[xxiii] *Bleak House,* Chapter 28; 40

[xxiv] Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture*, Stanford University Press 1995, p. 178

[xxv] Unsigned notice, 'Charles Dickens', *British Medical Journal,* 18 June 1870, p. 636