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Reading Victorian Rags: Recycling, Redemption, and Dickens's Ragged Children

Deborah Wynne

Rags had many associations in Victorian culture. In the form of the tattered clothing of the poor they were considered a sign of social failure and a source of embarrassment for a nation whose wealth was based on textile manufacture. Yet rags were also a sought-after commodity, scavenged from the streets and collected directly from households for recycling into paper. British paper manufacturers were often hard pressed to source sufficient cloth and in the 1850s an acute rags shortage prompted Harriet Martineau to describe cast-off cloth as 'precious tatters'.¹ Rags were also valuable in other ways: at 'Rag Hall', the popular name for the mill in Hampshire where paper was made for the Bank of England's notes, filthy rags were converted into 'filthy lucre'.² This mill was referred to by Charles Dickens and Mark Lemon in their *Household Words* article of 1850 'A Paper-Mill'; however, they represented rags as valuable largely because they formed the raw material of reading matter. The authors celebrated the recycling process whereby dirty, tattered, rejected cloth was transformed by industrial processes into 'white, pure, spick and span new paper' ready to take the imprint of texts.³

Stories of the transformation of rags into paper have much in common with the redemption narratives created by social reformers and novelists, particularly in relation to rescued children. Like the rags transformed into 'spick and span new paper' ready for print, rescued street children were represented as capable of transformation, education enabling them to take the imprint of new, more hopeful life stories. This analogy can be traced back to John Locke's concept of the *tabula rasa*, whereby children at birth resemble 'white Paper'.⁴ The link between rags and redemption was implicit in the popular name for the free schools for destitute children, 'Ragged Schools', where street children were taught to read texts conveying Christian messages of redemption. By calling these schools 'ragged', the torn clothing of the pupils was emphasized as much as the institution's educational purpose. Connections between children in rags and redemption narratives

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1. [Harriet Martineau], 'How to Get Paper', *Household Words*, 10 (28 October 1854), 241–45 (p. 243).
 2. See E.J. Labarre, *Dictionary and Encyclopaedia of Paper and Paper-Making* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 220.
 3. [Charles Dickens and Mark Lemon], 'A Paper-Mill', *Household Words*, 1 (31 August 1850), 529–31 (p. 529). Dickens represented a similar paper mill in *Our Mutual Friend*. See Michael Cotsell, *The Companion to 'Our Mutual Friend'* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).
 4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter H Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 2.

were evident to Victorian readers immersed in a culture where rags were gathered, cleansed, and processed to become paper. This essay examines the meanings and uses of rags in Victorian Britain before going on to analyse Dickens's representations of ragged children. An understanding of Victorian practices of cloth recycling as a socially responsible activity helps to foreground Dickens's idea of rags recycling as a paradigm for society's duties towards destitute children. His frequent juxtaposition of ragged children and rag-dealing in his novels suggests analogies between the two: cast-off children, like rags, were capable of being purified and made socially useful.

I. Rag-wealth: recycling and the paper industry

Victorian periodicals regularly published lively accounts of the 'rags to paper' story in order to persuade readers that the recycling of cloth was a social duty.⁵ Henry Mayhew, for example, in *London Labour and the London Poor*, originally published serially between 1849 and 1850 in the *Morning Chronicle*, described how rag-and-bone dealers offered incentives to thrifty working-class people to recycle cloth, producing advertisements depicting

a large plum-pudding, as a representation of what may be a Christmas result, merely from the thrifty preservation of rags [and] a man and woman, very florid and full-faced, . . . on the point of enjoying a huge plum-pudding, the man flourishing a large knife, and looking very hospitable. On a scroll which issued from his mouth were the words: 'From our rags! The best prices given by —, of London.'⁶

Dickens's reference in *Bleak House* to the window of Krook's rag-and-bottle shop displaying 'a picture of a red paper mill, at which a cart was unloading a quantity of sacks of old rags,' may seem strange and 'improbable' to readers today, but as a poster calling people to recycle waste it would have been a readily recognizable image for the novel's first readers.⁷ Urban rag-dealers bought massive quantities of cast-off cloth that they sent to rural mills; as Barrie Trinder explains, 'paper mills had a symbiotic relationship with cities, which were the sources of the rags they used as raw materials as well as being the principal markets for their products,' nicely completing the circle of the recycling process.⁸ There was a campaign to encourage the recycling of cloth in the

5. Leah Price uses the term 'rags to paper' in *How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 256.

6. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols (London: Griffin, Bohn, 1861–62), II, 105–06. For a discussion of the importance of rag recycling in Victorian working-class life see Carolyn Steedman, 'What a Rag Rug Means', in *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 136.

7. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* [1853], ed. by Nicola Bradbury (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 67. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson see the picture of the red paper mill as an 'improbable' detail in 'Green Dickens', in *Contemporary Dickens*, ed. by Eileen Gillooly and Deidre David (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009), pp. 131–151 (p. 145).

8. Barrie Trinder, *Britain's Industrial Revolution: The Making of a Manufacturing People, 1700–1870* (Lancaster, PA: Carnegie Publishing, 2013), p. 471.

mid-Victorian period because paper manufacturers could not source enough for their needs. The shortage only abated in the 1870s, when rag paper was gradually replaced by paper made from wood pulp.⁹ Before then, as Leah Price has suggested, the association ‘between clothes and pages’ was an obvious one to make.¹⁰

Huge quantities of rags were needed in Victorian Britain to produce the necessary volumes of paper for the publishing industry. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson have identified Britain at this period as ‘a documentary society, intent to record the smallest transactions’, which coincided with the development of ‘an avid newspaper-reading society’.¹¹ Indeed, papermaking was ‘central to economic growth’ in the nineteenth century; as Trinder points out, not only did the industry employ many people directly and indirectly, it also provided the basic material on which the culture wrote and disseminated itself.¹² Additionally, paper was needed for the vast communication network created by letter writing following the advent of the penny post.¹³ If the nation wanted newspapers, novels, and notepaper it also needed people prepared to deal with ‘filthy’, sometimes verminous, cast-off textiles; traders like Krook and the multitude of urban scavengers who supplied ‘dead’ textiles to the phoenix-like paper industry were necessary for the creation of mass-produced texts.¹⁴

The shortage of rags became critical in the 1850s, exacerbated by the excise duties imposed on rags that Dickens and Lemon derided in ‘A Paper-Mill’ when they complained of the ‘nonsensical defences of Excise duty, in the House of Commons’, which had a ‘depressing’ effect upon trade. This levy also acted as a tax on knowledge, for the authors insisted that ‘paper has a mighty Duty’ as the medium for carrying texts, messages of ‘love, forbearance, mercy, [and] progress’.¹⁵ By 1854 the shortage was acute, as Harriet Martineau highlighted in her *Household Words* article ‘How to Get Paper’. Here she pleaded with middle-class householders to recycle cloth: ‘Let the maids know that rags now fetch a pretty penny; and let them have a rag-bag as a regular part of the kitchen establishment’.¹⁶ Inevitably there were blockages in the recycling process in addition to those caused by the excise duties: the poverty-stricken were unable to pass on their tattered clothing to rag dealers, while most women recycled rags for use as sanitary protection during menstruation. Nevertheless, despite the seemingly endless quantities of cloth produced by the nation’s textile mills in the

9. Patrick Chappell, ‘Paper Routes: *Bleak House*, Rubbish Theory and the Character Economy of Realism’, *English Literary History*, 80 (2013), 783–810 (p. 790).

10. Price, *How to Do Things With Books*, p. 248. For the history of paper manufacturing see Sven A. Anderson, ‘Trends in the Pulp and Paper Industry’, *Economic Geography*, 18.2 (1942), 195–202.

11. Chase and Levenson, ‘Green Dickens’, p. 145.

12. Trinder, *Britain’s Industrial Revolution*, p. 480. See also Chappell, ‘Paper Routes’, pp. 783–84.

13. See Kate Thomas, *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 10–25.

14. See Price, *How to do Things with Books*, pp. 235–36 for a discussion of the ‘filthy’ qualities of rags.

15. [Dickens and Lemon], ‘A Paper-Mill’, p. 531.

16. [Martineau], ‘How to Get Paper’, p. 244.

1850s, there was not enough surplus fabric to ease impediments to the traffic in rags. The shortage was exacerbated, as Martineau explained, by the fact that overseas manufacturers were free to import British rags, buying up ‘our precious tatters before our eyes.’¹⁷

The paradox of rags as a despised and ubiquitous, yet valuable and scarce, commodity was seized upon by some commentators as they marvelled at the vast trading circuits involved in rag collecting and papermaking: circuits that depended on illiterate people clothed in rags collecting rag-litter from the streets to be converted into paper carrying texts that they could not read.¹⁸ The ragpicker was celebrated by some writers as a key worker in the building of modern civilization. One anonymous pamphleteer advocating free trade in 1860 urged Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, to repeal the taxes on paper, arguing that a complex network of paper manufacturers, cloth dealers, traders and ragpickers would gain mutual benefits from the stimulus attendant on reform. Attempting to shift the focus away from the boost to mill owners’ profits, the writer argued that the very poor would also benefit for, ‘by a wise economy the collection of rags is in most cases undertaken by a class of persons moving in the humbler walks of life, . . . and thus a chain of mutual dependence is riveted between the poor rag picker . . . and the opulent manufacturer.’¹⁹ The author argued that ‘rags can aptly only be compared to manure. Both exist every where [*sic*] and under similar circumstances.’²⁰

The work of gathering both types of refuse was vital to the Victorian economy, although it was unpleasant and unremunerative (a point the pamphleteer glosses over); in London rags and manure were ‘everywhere’, but only the desperately poor were reduced to collecting them. Few British writers romanticized the work of collecting the detritus of the modern city; however, in France in the 1850s Baudelaire saw the Parisian ragpicker as a fascinating figure resembling a ‘miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry.’²¹ In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens also refers to the miracles wrought by Parisian scavengers, those ‘wonderful human ants [who] creep out of holes and pick up every scrap’ from the streets.²² Walter Benjamin in the early twentieth century, by contrast, focused on the hardships endured by the Parisian ragpicker, for him ‘the most provocative figure of human misery’, a worker who was

17. [Martineau], ‘How to Get Paper’, p. 243.

18. See Leah Price, ‘Getting the Reading Out of It: Paper Recycling in Mayhew’s London’, in *Bookish Histories: Books, Literature, and Commercial Modernity, 1700–1900*, ed. by Ina Ferris and Paul Keen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 148–66 (p. 150).

19. A Free Trader, *The Paper and Rag Duties Considered in a Letter Addressed to the Right Hon. W.E. Gladstone, M.P.* (London: Reynolds, 1860), p. 5.

20. A Free Trader, *The Paper and Rag Duties Considered*, p. 9.

21. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. by M.W. Jennings, trans. by Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 108.

22. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* [1865], ed. by Deborah Wynne (London: Wordsworth, 2002), p. 136.

not rewarded for his or her crucial role in the transformation of matter enabled by modern industrial processes.²³ Indeed, the street scavenger's work was seen as particularly degrading.²⁴

II. 'Clothed in rags and occupied with rags': rags and the poor

Ragpickers were considered among the most abject of the poor throughout the first decades of Victoria's reign: as Benjamin noted, they were 'clothed in rags and occupied with rags'.²⁵ One of the most striking features of the Victorian city was the appearance of people in rags in prosperous regions such as the West End. From the 1830s onwards foreign visitors to London remarked on the sight of the destitute in tattered clothing.²⁶ The prevalence of rags was paradoxical given that a considerable proportion of Britain's wealth was generated by its textile industries. Job Legh in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* is amazed that Manchester's cotton mills were 'turning out miles o' calico every day', while the city's poor are inadequately clothed.²⁷ The Frenchman Francis Wey, who visited Britain in the 1850s, described the poor of London as 'a seething mass of misery'. The destitute were

mere skeletons, covered with rags of such incredible dirt that it makes one retch to approach them. Unless you have seen rags in London you can have no conception of the meaning of the word. A man pushes his head through a patchwork of tatters, his arms and legs stick out through the largest holes and he is clothed.²⁸

Such extreme states of abjection were to Wey 'incredible' and he was astonished to find beggars thronging the pavements in the prosperous West End: 'wretched creatures' and 'filthy beyond description. Their clothes are positively caked with a layer of shining grime so thick that it is solid.'²⁹ Another Frenchman, Hippolyte Taine, on a visit to London in the 1860s found at the entrance to St James's Park a notice stating

23. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 349.

24. See Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* [1850] (London: Cassell, 1969), p. 103 for a fictional reference to the lowly status of ragpickers.

25. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 349.

26. Foreign visitors to Britain who remarked on the visibility of rags include Alexis de Tocqueville, *Memoir on Pauperism* [1835], trans. by Seymour Drescher (London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1997); Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* [1844], trans. by W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958); Francis Wey, *A Frenchman sees the English in the Fifties* [1861], trans. by Valerie Pirie (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1935); and Hippolyte Taine, *Notes on England* [1872], trans. by Edward Hyams (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957).

27. Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* [1848], ed. by Macdonald Daly (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 88. See also Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), [1st pub. 1974], p. 8, for a discussion of the 'billions of yards of cloth' Britain produced each year.

28. Wey, *A Frenchman Sees the English*, p. 106.

29. Wey, *A Frenchman Sees the English*, p. 116.

that ‘park keepers have orders to refuse admittance to the park to all beggars, any person in rags, or whose clothes are very dirty, or who are not of decent appearance and bearing’.³⁰ Wey, Taine and other visitors to Britain who witnessed the emaciated bodies of the poor and their dilapidated garments noted the irony of such raggedness in a country that boasted of its wealth and industrial supremacy.

British readers had access to similar accounts of urban poverty in the work of social investigators and novelists. From the 1840s onwards, journalists and other investigators, including clergymen, published accounts of the lives of the poor and their vivid descriptions of ragged clothing foregrounded the extent of urban destitution. Mayhew’s four-volume *London Labour and the London Poor* lingers on ragged clothing that barely conceals emaciated bodies and the heaps of rags that form makeshift beds. On first sight Mayhew occasionally mistook human occupants for bundles of rags in the dark slum interiors. For example, on seeking out an elderly ‘pure finder’, a collector of dog excrement for the tanning industry, Mayhew eventually found her in a room so dark that she was indistinguishable from waste matter:

When I opened the door the little light that struggled through the small window, the many broken panes of which were stuffed with old rags, was not sufficient to enable me to perceive who or what was in the room. After a short time, however, I began to make out an old chair standing near to the fire-place, and then to discover a poor old woman resembling a bundle of rags and filth stretched on some dirty straw in the corner of the apartment.³¹

Mayhew often expressed amazement when the ‘bundles of rags and filth’ he encountered in London’s worst slums sat up and spoke to him intelligently of their social decline, detailing their former lives before they fell into absolute destitution. The prevalence of adults in rags was clearly framed by Mayhew and other social investigators as a disturbing sight to everyone with a social conscience, but for many this was tempered by additional anxieties about distinguishing between the ‘genuine’ or ‘deserving’ pauper and the idle beggar.

Ragged children were a different matter, however, for destitute children were increasingly considered to be legitimate objects of charity. As one report of the Poor Law Commission stated, ‘A child cannot be a pauper’ because he or she is ‘dependent not as a consequence of their errors, but their misfortunes’.³² By the late-Victorian period publications such as George Sims’s *How the Poor Live* (1883) and the well-known treatise that appeared in the same year, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Enquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor* (anonymously published, but thought to be the work of the Rev Andrew Mearns, Secretary of the London Congregational Union), employed the image of children in rags to elicit humanitarian impulses in their readers. The latter book presents ragged slum children as victims of their culpable parents:

30. Taine, *Notes on England*, p. 13.

31. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, II, 143–45.

32. Quoted in Jadviga M. Da Costa Nunes, ‘O.G. Rejlander’s Photographs of Ragged Children: Reflections on the Idea of Urban Poverty in Mid-Victorian Society’, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 4 (1990), 105–36 (p. 114).

On a dirty sack in the centre of the room sits a neglected, ragged, bare-legged little baby girl of four. . . . The child-misery that one beholds is the most heart-rending and appalling element in these discoveries; and of this not the least is the misery inherited from the vice of drunken and dissolute parents, and manifest in the stunted, misshapen, and often loathsome objects that we constantly meet in these localities. From the beginning of their lives they are utterly neglected; their bodies and rags are alive with vermin; they are subjected to the most cruel treatment.³³

Fears of wasting one's emotions on the 'undeserving' poor ran through many Victorian narratives of poverty, but these were allayed when the sufferer was a child.³⁴ An interest in relieving child poverty informed a literary culture increasingly keen to represent childhood experiences. Laura C. Berry has referred to 'the intense nineteenth-century fascination with victimized children' where 'novels and reform writings authoritatively reorganize[d] ideas of self and society as narratives of childhood distress'.³⁵ Mayhew's reportage and the work of the Ragged School Union in the 1840s and 1850s, along with the establishment of charities such as Barnardos later in the century, foregrounded the child in poverty by disseminating images of pitiable small figures in rags.

The ragged child also became inextricably linked to concepts of sentimentality. Until recently critics tended to dismiss sentimental nineteenth-century 'narratives of childhood distress' as either wholly or partially factitious, tasteless tear-provoking depictions, rather than attempts to confront and express the reality experienced by neglected children. Gertrude Himmelfarb, for example, writing in 1985 dismisses Dickens's 'maudlin recollections' of childhood as empty sentiment.³⁶ The role of sentimentality in Victorian culture has been recently revised, however. Nicola Bown, in her discussion of visual depictions of Victorian children in rags, has argued that while 'sentimentality is often used as a synonym for falsification', its potential cannot be dismissed lightly, for understanding 'the affective power such [sentimental] images had for their original historic viewers' helpfully complicates Victorian emotional responses to children.³⁷ Judith Stoddart has also argued for the importance of historicizing affect, adding that far from being 'instinctive', sentimentality was actually a 'highly cultivated' response in readers and viewers.³⁸ In the light of these reassessments the abandoned child in rags should be read as a significant (rather than a false or excessive) figure in shifting perceptions of childhood in the nineteenth century.

33. [Andrew Mearns], *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, ed. by Anthony S. Wohl (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1970), p. 67.

34. See Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780–1930* (London: Virago, 1995), p. 5.

35. Laura C. Berry, *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 3.

36. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 458.

37. Nicola Bown, 'Tender Beauty: Victorian Painting and the Problem of Sentimentality', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 16.2 (2011), 214–25 (pp. 224–25).

38. Judith Stoddart, 'Tracking the Sentimental Eye', in *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 192–211 (p. 196).

At this period, to quote Berry again, ‘the endangered child . . . can be imagined as a liberal subject.’³⁹ Dickens’s narratives of child reclamation, often criticized as sentimental for much of the twentieth century, were particularly influential in shaping popular conceptions of children as redeemable. His subtle analogy between rags and destitute children suggests similarities between recycling and social redemption: if filthy tatters could be subjected every day to a magical transformation into clean paper, so too could dirty ragged children be transformed by education into liberal subjects and useful citizens.

III. ‘I am Rags’: Dickens and the ragged child

A supporter of Ragged Schools from the 1840s, Dickens insisted that their pupils could be ‘purified’ and redeemed by education. In 1843 he visited a Ragged School established at Saffron Hill in London, writing a long account of what he saw in a letter to Angela Burdett Coutts, the philanthropist. Referring to *Oliver Twist*’s depictions of Saffron Hill, an area the novel presents as dominated by rag-merchants’ shops with their accumulated ‘heaps of mildewed fragments of woollen-stuff and linen’, Dickens confirmed that this ‘dismal’ district had not changed.⁴⁰ Ragged Schools were well named in his opinion, for ‘there is no such thing as dress among the seventy pupils; certainly not the elements of a whole suit of clothes, among them all.’⁴¹ He describes one boy who is ‘clad in a bit of sack – really a clever child, and handsome too, who gave some excellent replies’ to Dickens’s questions.⁴² The dandified Dickens appearing before them prompts a burst of laughter from the boys.⁴³ He admits that he ‘afforded great amusement at first – in particular by having a pair of white trousers on, and very bright boots. The latter articles of dress, gave immense satisfaction, and were loudly laughed at.’⁴⁴ Dickens’s shining boots and white trousers, the latter an alien sign of well-laundered clothing, appear as a startling, if amusing, vision to the pupils. Dickens characteristically turns to the metonymic potential of clothing when he explains to Burdett Coutts that if Ragged Schools are not supported financially then the ‘Ragged Scholars’ would turn to crime, causing ‘Woe to whole garments.’⁴⁵ In a letter written a few days later to the School’s treasurer, Dickens urges him to consider ‘the immense importance’ of providing washing facilities for the pupils.⁴⁶ Ragged children, he

39. Berry, *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel*, p. 4.

40. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* [1838], ed. by K. Tillotson and S. Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 197. Subsequent page references will be cited in the main body of the text. Charles Dickens, Letter to Angela Burdett Coutts, 16 September 1843, in *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by M. House, G. Storey and K. Tillotson, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), III, 562–64.

41. Dickens, *Pilgrim Edition of the Letters*, III, 563.

42. Dickens, *Pilgrim Edition of the Letters*, III, 563.

43. Dickens, *Pilgrim Edition of the Letters*, III, 562.

44. Dickens, *Pilgrim Edition of the Letters*, III, 563.

45. Dickens, *Pilgrim Edition of the Letters*, III, 564.

46. Dickens, Letter to S.R. Starey, 24 September 1843, *Pilgrim Edition of the Letters*, III, 574.

implies, resemble the rags they wear, for both need to be cleansed and made socially useful.

The link between cleanliness and social transformation is emphasized in Dickens and Lemon's 'A Paper-Mill', with its resemblance to the redemption narratives associated with the rescue of ragged children. The narrator of the article makes an unexpected plunge half-way through the discussion into a first-person object-narrative when he suddenly states, 'I *am* rags'.⁴⁷ Imagining himself a bale of rags, he describes how he is boiled in a cauldron 'for a long, long time' before being rinsed in a steam-powered machine and subjected to manganese, vitriol and salt to make him white. Finally he is pressed into paper in the last stage of this miraculous transformation.⁴⁸ As Elaine Freedgood has suggested, Victorian object-narratives turned readers' attention to 'everyday things' in order to offer 'object lessons in how to understand themselves as subjects'.⁴⁹ Returning to human form the narrator expresses his delight in the 'beautiful order' that converted him from dirty rags into white paper.⁵⁰ A similar language of redemption is at work in Dickens's earlier letters written in response to the visit to the Saffron Hill School, when he recommends that the pupils should undergo the purifying processes of washing and learning in order to make a transformation from raggedness into citizenship.

Dickens himself had already made a transformation from poorly-clad child to well-dressed adult. The thirty-one year-old author who visited the ragged boys wearing his dazzling white trousers had once lived through a 'ragged' period of his own when he was ten years old and made to work in the shoe-blackening warehouse at Hungerford Stairs. Dickens depicted this two-year period of deprivation and degrading manual labour in what has since come to be known as the 'Autobiographical Fragment', written in secret in 1847 and shared only with his friend John Forster, who incorporated it into his *Life of Charles Dickens*.⁵¹ This ragged interregnum is described in terms of a painful fall from promising schoolboy to a 'poor little drudge' earning his own living, and he later described himself as a 'shabby child', 'an ill-clad, ill-fed child', cast off like the thousands of ragged slum children and homeless orphans who wandered the streets of London.⁵² Describing the many hours he spent 'loung[ing] about the streets', Dickens reflected on the danger he had faced of becoming 'a little robber or a little vagabond'.⁵³ By the time he was twelve years old Dickens had returned to school, outwardly regaining his lost status as the cared-for child of middle-class parents. This experience haunted his writing long after he was a wealthy and acclaimed author. Indeed, there had only been a gradual rags-to-riches trajectory for the young Dickens: he remained

47. [Dickens and Lemon], 'A Paper-Mill', p. 350.

48. [Dickens and Lemon], 'A Paper-Mill', p. 350.

49. Elaine Freedgood, 'What Objects Know: Circulation, Omniscience and the Comedy of Dispossession in Victorian It-Narratives', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15.1 (2010), 83–100 (p. 83).

50. [Dickens and Lemon], 'A Paper-Mill', p. 351.

51. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, vol. 1. (London: J.M. Dent, 1966).

52. Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, I, 25.

53. Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, I, 25.

threadbare even after his reinstatement as a schoolboy and as late as the ‘Boz’ period of his career retained traces of poverty in his appearance. Nat Willis, an American journalist, remembered Dickens during these years as

dressed very much as he described Dick Swiveller, minus the swell look. His hair was cropped close to his head, his clothes scant, though jauntily cut, and after changing a ragged office-coat for a shabby blue, he stood by the door, collarless and buttoned up, the very personification, I thought, of a close sailer to the wind.⁵⁴

Perhaps to expunge all traces of an ‘ill-clad’ childhood, Dickens went on to become ‘something of a dandy’, renowned for wearing vivid and expensive clothes, such as the white trousers and shiny boots that amused the ragged boys at Saffron Hill.⁵⁵

Dickens invested considerable energy in charitable ventures and worked to help the street children brought into London’s Ragged Schools, as well as raising awareness of the plight of abandoned children in his fiction. The rags in which Dickens clothes vulnerable child characters such as Oliver Twist, Florence Dombey and David Copperfield are often described in the context of rags recycling, with its associations with purification and material transformation. Oliver, Florence and David each experience in childhood a ragged interregnum, albeit of different durations, before they are rescued, cleansed, and set on a better course. His novels emphasize the dangers of reading the ragged clothing worn by children as a permanent social mark of degradation; his frequent references to rag-dealing remind readers that even the dirtiest and most verminous of rags could be valued highly and purified into clean paper.

The problem of misreading the ragged child is central to *Oliver Twist*, for throughout the novel Dickens accentuates the dangers of presuming that social worth is readily legible through clothing. The opening chapter, depicting Oliver’s birth in the workhouse, reinforces this warning:

What an excellent example of the power of dress, young Oliver Twist was! Wrapped in the blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been the child of a nobleman or a beggar; it would have been hard for the haughtiest stranger to have assigned him his proper station in society. But now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes which had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once – the orphan of a workhouse – the humble half-starved drudge – to be cuffed and buffeted through the world – despised by all, and pitied by none. (p. 3)

Because clothing ‘badged and ticketed’ children who were too young to shape their own destinies, Dickens suggests that adults should pause before ‘assigning’ a social identity to a child in tattered garments. He was swift to recognize that the boy in the Ragged School wearing only ‘a bit of sack’ was ‘a clever child, and handsome too’, and urges readers to be equally alert. Oliver, Florence and David were created at a period

54. Quoted in Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and ‘Boz’: The Birth of an Industrial Age Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 82.

55. Patten, *Charles Dickens and ‘Boz’*, p. 219.

when, according to Carolyn Steedman, a 'massive transmission of information about child destitution' was disseminated to stir the nation's conscience; however, most reports of ragged children presented them as 'deeply unattractive' figures.⁵⁶ The ragged child's capacity for redemption is central to the narratives of Oliver, Florence and David, each of whom is positioned in an environment associated with the recycling of rags, Dickens thus emphasizing the possibility of social and physical transformation.

When Oliver is rescued by Mr Brownlow and dressed in a new suit, garments that Charley Bates later explains are made from 'superfine cloth' (p. 123), he is 'told that he might do what he liked with [his] old clothes'. Oliver chooses to bestow the rags on 'a servant who had been very kind to him':

and asked her to sell them to a Jew: and keep the money for herself. This she very readily did; and, as Oliver looked out of the parlour-window, and saw the Jew roll them up in his bag and walk away, he felt quite delighted to think that they were safely gone, and that there was now no possible danger of his ever being able to wear them again. They were sad rags, to tell the truth. (p. 102)

At this point, Oliver believes he is rescued and safe, but his discarded 'sad rags' and his sad childhood of neglect and abuse are mysteriously reconnected through the shadowy figure of the Jewish rag-dealer. As most Victorians were aware, rag-dealers helped to initiate the process of purification that transformed 'sad rags' into useful clean paper, yet this dealer, referred to as 'the Jew' like Fagin, does not immediately pass on Oliver's 'sad rags' for recycling into paper. This interruption in the recycling process, caused by the 'accidental display' of the ragged clothes, offers Fagin 'the first clue' of Oliver's whereabouts (p. 128). Just as Oliver's 'sad rags' are prevented from being purified into paper, so too the Parish Boy's progress towards education and domesticity, initiated by Brownlow, is deferred.

Similar connections between the child in rags and rags recycling are also made in *Dombey and Son* when Florence Dombey experiences a brief state of raggedness following her abduction by Mrs Brown, the rag collector. Taken to a room 'where there was a great heap of rags of different colours lying on the floor', Florence is forced to remove her clothes while Mrs Brown's trained eye assesses 'their quality and value'.⁵⁷ Dressing in 'some wretched substitutes from the bottom of the heap of rags' (p. 60), Florence is transformed into her tormentor's 'changed and ragged little friend' (pp. 60–61) before being set adrift on the London streets, where 'few people noticed her . . . in the garb that she wore; or if they did, believed that she was tutored to excite compassion' (p. 62). Observers presume that the ragged girl is a 'fake', not in the sense that they can see beyond the rags to recognize her as the daughter of a prosperous man, but because the small children of pauper parents were taught to beg by faking

56. Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, pp. 113, 115.

57. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* [1848], ed. by A. Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 59. Subsequent page references will be cited in the main body of the text.

tears.⁵⁸ As in *Oliver Twist*, *Dombey and Son* emphasizes the importance of discounting ragged clothes when assessing a child's moral worth; similarly, Mrs Brown the ragpicker, like the Jewish rag-dealer in the earlier novel, reinforces Dickens's link between ragged children and rag recycling.

David Copperfield also makes key references to rag-dealers and textile trade networks in its depiction of a child in rags. Like Dickens himself, the young David is removed from school to labour in degrading conditions. His escape from London to seek his aunt in Dover involves a journey punctuated by the sale of clothing along the way, to ward off starvation. The image of rags recycling also haunts this narrative, with its references to Mr Dolloby's rag-and-bone shop in London and the sinister slop-shop in Chatham. David's journey on foot involves the loss of all his decent clothes and the increasing raggedness of those that remain on him. Arriving at his Aunt Betsy's house, like a child-actor pretending to be ragged in a stage melodrama, David does not speak of his condition but mimes it, making 'a movement of my hands, intended to show her my ragged state, and call to witness that I had suffered something.'⁵⁹ It is worthy of note that while David is being bathed, the servant Janet took his ragged clothes to 'mak[e] tinder down in the kitchen' (p. 254), an act of wasteful extravagance in the context of the widely publicized rags shortage. While David's rescue depends on the intervention of rag-and-bone and old-clothes dealers to help him survive on his long journey, Janet's wasteful action thwarts their trade: a protest perhaps against their willingness to cheat a small, helpless boy.

Not all of Dickens's ragged children are rescued, cleansed and educated, however, and it is interesting to ask why Jo the crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House*, for example, is not represented through the discourses and imagery of rags recycling. Jonathan Loesberg has interpreted Jo as a 'grotesque', rather than a sentimental figure, and is critical of the narrator's 'cruel insistence on his malformed consciousness', 'deform[ing]' him 'by eradicating almost all traces of human inwardness.'⁶⁰ Certainly, if we compare Jo's narrative with the pathos of the ragged periods experienced by Oliver, Florence and David it seems as though Dickens's later novels temper sympathy for ragged children with fear of their power to initiate a contagion of disease. The narrator states that Jo 'is not of the same order of things' as other people: 'He is of no order and no place; neither of the beasts, nor of humanity' (p. 724). Yet as John O. Jordan has noted, Jo is not just a ragged orphan but a representative of 'England in 1853' in a novel that 'look[s] deeply into the bleakness of England's darkest decade.'⁶¹ The vision is bleak indeed, for Jo is described at one point as though both he and his

58. See Murray Baumgarten, 'London, Dickens, and the Theatre of Homelessness', in *Dickens and the City*, ed. by Jeremy Tambling (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), p. 283, and Steedman's *Strange Dislocations* for various accounts of poor children performing on the streets.

59. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* [1850], ed. by T. Blount (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 247. Subsequent page references will be cited in the text.

60. Jonathan Loesberg, 'Dickensian Deformed Children and the Hegelian Sublime', in L. Peters (ed.), *Dickens and Childhood*, pp. 580 and 592.

61. John O. Jordan, *Supposing Bleak House* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 139.

rags are putrefying into something resembling the effluvia from the graveyard in which Nemo is buried. When he emerges from Tom-all-Alone's, Jo is 'a ragged figure' wearing 'shapeless clothes hanging in shreds. . . . They look in colour and substance, like a bundle of rank leaves of swampy growth, that rotted long ago' (p. 713). He has become indistinguishable from his decaying clothes and later appears 'like a growth of fungus or any unwholesome excrescence' (p. 714). Interestingly, the fungus *Coprinus comatus*, commonly known as the 'shaggy ink cap' and sometimes (appropriately for *Bleak House*) as 'lawyer's wig', was once used as ink, for when it disintegrates a black liquid is produced.⁶² If Jo 'bears traces of ink in his speech', as Jordan claims, his accent incorporating the word 'ink' into unlikely words, such as 'inkwhich' for 'inquest', then Dickens's fungus reference is highly suggestive.⁶³ The liquefaction of Jo and his rags results in the dark stain of ink that is text. Although Oliver and his rags are cleansed, both carrying associations with 'spick and span new paper', his story implies that the social problems of child destitution are easily remedied by benevolent rescuers like Brownlow. *Bleak House* however does not offer the simple solution to the problem of child poverty presented in *Oliver Twist*. If Jo and his rags become ink, then Dickens takes his ragged child/rags recycling analogy to its logical conclusion, for clean white paper is a blank without the black ink of text. Jo is the social text that is set to work to stir the nation's conscience.

IV. Conclusion

The long afterlife of Jo in the theatre indicates the enduring power of his inky presence in Victorian culture. In 1876 a popular stage production called *Poor Jo*, starring the actress Jennie Lee in the title role, emphasized the continuing interest in *Bleak House* and its ragged orphan. Indeed, the interest in Jo lingered into the new medium of film, for in 1901 the first film adaptation of Dickens's work to be produced was a short representation of the death of Jo, in which the leading role was played by Laura Bayley, her costume including a shirt carefully torn into rags.⁶⁴ The afterlife of Jo took a particularly bizarre turn in the 1870s, however, when one destitute child, because of his stammer known as 'Stuttering Bob', modelled himself on Jo the crossing-sweeper in order to elicit more sympathy as a street beggar. Aware of the current popularity of the play *Poor Jo*, Stuttering Bob successfully masqueraded on the streets outside the theatre as Jo. The boy, according to his rescuer J.W.C. Fegan:

dressed himself up so as to exactly represent 'Poor Jo', and standing near the theatre as the audience came out with their feelings worked upon by 'Poor Jo' on the stage, confronted

62. See Andreas Gminder and Tanja Böhning, *Mushrooms and Toadstools of Britain and Europe* (London: A.C. Black, 2008), p. 145. The spores of this fungus can be detected on ancient scrolls, indicating its long use as an ink.

63. Jordan, *Supposing Bleak House*, p. 84.

64. Directed by G.A. Smith for the Warwick Trading Company, it is thought to be the earliest film adaptation of Dickens's work. See the BFI website: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1422278/index.html> [accessed 28 March 2014].

them with a counterpart of the character, crouching down, shivering all over, and beseechingly whining, “Pl-pl-please to re-re-remember poo-poo-poor Jo”. Bob reaped a silver and copper harvest for a while.⁶⁵

Bob was one of Barnardo’s ‘rescued’ street children and Seth Koven, in an important discussion of Barnardo’s work, suggests that here ‘representation and reality are intertwined in an amusing but confusing circle of mutual imitation’.⁶⁶ The circle was complicated further by the fact that Jo in *Bleak House* was based on an actual crossing-sweeper, an orphan called George Ruby whom Dickens encountered at an inquest.⁶⁷ This confusion between ‘genuine’ street children and stage performers of Dickens’s ragged boy characters (most of whom were played by women) was echoed in the controversy surrounding Barnardo’s visual representations of rescued children, particularly his ‘before’ and ‘after’ photographs of street children in rags. Barnardo’s detractors exposed the fact that the rescued children were dressed in costumes that had been torn to resemble ragged clothes and carefully arranged for the camera, while the children were posed to look as though they were in distress. The ‘before’ photographs taken of these apparently dejected ragged children were accompanied by ‘after’ photographs of the same child, dressed in neat, respectable clothing after being rescued by Barnardo. In 1877 Barnardo was reprimanded by a court of arbitration for disseminating these ‘fake’ images as genuine, the Rev. George Reynolds having accused him of dishonesty, stating:

The system of taking, and making capital of, the children’s photographs is not only dishonest, but has a tendency to destroy the better feelings of the children He is not satisfied with taking them as they really are, but he tears their clothes, so as to make them appear worse than they really are. They are also taken in purely fictitious positions.⁶⁸

The tearing of the children’s clothes signifies Barnardo’s awareness of the power of rags to convey ideas about childhood and poverty; he was tapping into the tradition of redemption stories of ragged children that had been resonating in the cultural imaginary for decades. Koven argues that

Barnardo’s ‘artistic fictions’ are ambivalent monuments both to the ubiquity of ragged children in the urban landscape and their centrality in the Victorian moral imagination. . . . The Barnardo boy or girl became fixed in the British cultural imagination as a synonym for the ragged child, trapped forever in the spectacular and iconic poverty of torn clothes, bare feet, and unkempt hair.⁶⁹

65. Quoted in Seth Koven, *Slumming Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 115.

66. Koven, *Slumming*, p. 116.

67. See John Suddaby, ‘The Crossing Sweeper in *Bleak House*: Dickens and the Original Jo’, *Dickensian*, (1912), 246–50, cited in P.A.W. Collins, ‘*Bleak House* and Dickens’s *Household Narrative*’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 14.4 (1960), 345–349 (p. 345).

68. Quoted in Valerie Lloyd and Gillian Wagner, *The Camera and Dr Barnardo* (Hertford: [n.p.], 1974), p. 12.

69. Koven, *Slumming*, p. 133. See also John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 83.

Rags, with all their associations with vulnerability, nakedness, poverty and disease, acted as a visible sign of parental and social neglect. Dickens's narratives avoided the simplification of child poverty that characterize Barnardo's 'artistic fictions' by emphasizing the *process* of children transformed through his analogies of rags becoming paper.

By the time that Stuttering Bob enacted 'Poor Jo' on the streets for theatre audiences, the cultural meanings of rags were changing. Historians have tended to agree that there were improvements in the clothing worn by the working class as the Victorian period progressed, Beverly Lemire, for example, arguing that 'raggedness declined among the working poor'.⁷⁰ Later in the century better quality clothes were increasingly affordable and rags no longer in high demand for recycling. Nevertheless, we can plot a course between Dickens's representations of ragged children, their presence in later adaptations of his work, and the evocative images produced by painters and photographers from the 1850s onwards. Ford Madox Brown foregrounded a group of small ragged children in his vast multi-narrative painting *Work* (1852–63), and wrote an accompanying poem that included the line, 'Are ragged wayside babes not lovesome too?', a statement that helps us to read his painting as another Victorian redemption narrative raising awareness of the plight of street children. *Work* depicts the laying of water-pipes in London, and thus the painting implies that London's dirty ragged children will soon benefit from the civilizing promises of clean water and a more wholesome future.⁷¹

However, despite the enduring power of the image of the child in rags, the association of rags with child poverty gradually attenuated as the century progressed. Often rags became merely a costume in which photographers dressed middle-class child subjects. As the adult Beatrice Heath said of being photographed in the late-Victorian period by Lewis Carroll, who dressed her in a costume of rags, 'what child would not thoroughly enjoy personating a Japanese, or a beggar child, or a gypsy or an Indian?'⁷² Carroll set a trend for dressing up children in rags and posing them as beggars with his portrait of Alice Liddell as a beggar-maid in 1859. Inevitably, the links between rags recycling and redemption weakened in the 1870s when paper was made from wood-pulp, and as Beatrice Heath's comment suggests, the ragged child became increasingly just one figure in a repertoire of theatrical displays of otherness and exoticism through which concepts of childhood could be visualized in the late-Victorian period. Earlier in the century, however, Dickens had focused on the ragged child's need for compassion and rescue by positioning ragged child characters in relation to the gathering and recycling of 'precious tatters' for the paper industry;

70. Beverly Lemire, 'The Secondhand Clothing Trade in Europe and Beyond: Stages of Development and Enterprise in a Changing Material World, c. 1600–1850', *Textile*, 10.2 (2012), 144–63 (p. 158).

71. Quoted in Gerard Curtis, 'Ford Madox Brown's *Work*: An Iconographic Analysis', *The Art Bulletin*, 74.4 (1992), 623–36 (p. 633).

72. Quoted in Lindsay Smith, *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children and Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 102.

by doing this he encouraged readers to see such children as 'precious' and socially valuable.

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