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“We Vagabonds”: Humanitarianism and Migrancy in Dickens’s “Uncommercial Traveller” Papers

The opening scenes of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) are replete with metaphors of travel. When Scrooge’s nephew arrives at his uncle’s counting-house to invite him to Christmas dinner, he praises the charitable season as “the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys” (Dickens 1988, 9). Later that evening, Marley’s ghost explains his eternal penance to Scrooge in similar terms: “It is required of every man . . . that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world—oh, woe is me!—and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!” (20). The specter continues his complaint: “I cannot rest, I cannot linger anywhere. My spirit never walked beyond our counting-house—mark me!—in my life my spirit never roved beyond the narrow limits of our money-changing hole; and weary journeys lie before me!” (21). Journeying in these encounters that initiate the tale of Scrooge’s “reclamation” (28) is both a duty in life and punishment after death: acts of benevolence to “fellow-men” are figured as “walking abroad,” acting on a mandate to “travel far and wide,” while the moral failure in life to care for those less fortunate is repaid after death by the bereft and impotent spirit’s endless, fruitless, and lonely “wandering.”

Dickens's famous Christmas allegory figures travel and engagement with the wider world beyond the self as sources of a humane life, creating hope for a more general human happiness. It also makes reference to a larger preoccupation of Dickens's writings with two major kinds of mobility affecting the restricted life "choices" of Britain's poor in the nineteenth century, that is, the legal status of vagrancy and the economic and social pressures spurring internal migration from the country to the cities and emigration to the settler colonies and the United States. The Vagrancy Act of 1824 criminalized certain forms of conduct associated with displacement, poverty, and the attempt to gain a living on the roads of England, stating in its third article

That every Person being able wholly or in part to maintain himself or herself, or his or her Family, by Work or by other Means, and wilfully refusing or neglecting so to do, by which Refusal or Neglect he or she, or any of his or her Family whom he or she may be legally bound to maintain, shall have become chargeable to any Parish, Township, or Place ; every Person returning to and becoming chargeable in any Parish, Township, or Place from whence he or she shall have been legally removed by Order of Two Justices of the Peace, unless he or she shall produce a Certificate of the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor of some other Parish, Township, or Place, thereby acknowledging him or her to be settled in such other Parish, Township, or Place ; every Petty Chapman or Pedlar wandering abroad, and trading without being duly duly licensed, or otherwise authorized by Law; every Common Prostitute wandering in the public Streets or public Highways, or in any Place of public Resort, and behaving in a riotous or indecent Manner; and every Person wandering abroad, or placing himself or herself in any public Place, Street, Highway, Court, or Passage, to beg or gather Alms, or causing or procuring or encouraging any Child or Children so to do, shall be deemed an idle and disorderly

Person within the true Intent and Meaning of this Act ; and it shall be lawful for any Justice of the Peace to commit such Offender (being thereof convicted before him by his own View, or by the Confession of such Offender, or by the Evidence on Oath of One or more credible Witness or Witnesses) to the House of Correction, there to be kept to hard Labour for any Time not exceeding One Calendar Month. (“Vagrancy Act 1824”)

The Act’s technical terms for the criminal vagrant are “rogue” and “vagabond” (“Vagrancy Act 1824”). This law remained substantially in effect through the nineteenth century until it was replaced by the Vagrancy Act of 1935.

The criminalization of vagrancy was an ancient aspect of English law, but its further formalization in 1824 also manifested the practices of state formation that historians Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer have traced to Parliament’s role as “the means of organizing consensus within a restricted political nation” in the nineteenth century (30). This consensus emerged through a very specific theory of “virtual representation” where “MPs represent all because they speak for all, not because they are chosen by all” (29). As a result of the political establishment’s resistance to universal adult suffrage throughout the nineteenth century (29), the legal system, as evidenced in the 1824 Vagrancy Act, takes on a punitive stance toward those excluded from “official politics”: “If this form of rule represents consensus, then justice represents coercion. And it is precisely that mythic entity ‘the law’—as discourse, practice and institution—which unifies both. . . . Those ‘outside the law’ form potential or actual ‘enemies of the state,’ whether most women, lay preachers, gypsies, Catholics, aliens, trades unionists, and . . . ‘the Irish’ Those outside the political nation suffer ‘justice’” (Corrigan and Sayer 31). Migration had a more positive connotation than vagrancy in the nineteenth century, but the vast waves of emigration from Britain to the settler colonies of the British Empire and the United

States were frequently spurred by dire conditions of economic dislocation and even famine, including the million Irish who emigrated to escape the horrendous starvation of the Potato Famine of 1846-47 (Belich 61).

How did Dickens's travel writings expand, adapt, or even tendentiously twist the idea of travel as a form of mobility involving choice and human agency by bringing it into contact with the situations of social and political exclusion and harsh economic exigency associated with vagrancy, migration, and emigration due to poverty? How could Dickens's travel writing become a means of creating a new sort of cultural memory that would build a different sort of non-political consensus among readers around common experiences of dislocation and displacement that were associated in British history with legal and social exclusion? I want to explore these questions by focusing on Dickens's series of "Uncommercial Traveller" papers published in the 1860s in *All the Year Round*. Although less often investigated by scholars than his travelogues *American Notes* (1842) and *Pictures of Italy* (1846), the series of thirty-five "Uncommercial Traveller" papers (twenty-seven appearing from January 1860 to October 1863, and a further seven from December 1868 to June 1869) elaborate a detailed and wide-ranging set of itineraries through a national and international terrain that could seem increasingly separated from an organizing consciousness or dominant geographical center. Despite his professional, literary, and imaginative connections to the metropole of London, Dickens's "Uncommercial Traveller" persona seems to stray away from the city center to explore its margins, external peripheries, and points of departure. This practice of wandering, seemingly at random or "purely vagabond" (Dickens 2000, 119) as his interests and inclinations take him, enables Dickens in this guise to run across repeatedly, as if by accident, various persons who are equally on the move. While his serial fiction positions Dickens's authorial persona and his characters as relay points through

which the Victorian reading audience may constitute itself as a participatory collective via their shared memories of reading (see Winter 2011), Dickens's "Uncommercial Traveller" articles seem to pursue a different, though related, project by conveying a humanitarian perspective on precarious lives linked together by the common experiences of mobility, stigmatization, and displacement. I want to explore in this paper the ways Dickens's "Uncommercial Traveller" essays materialize the forms of cultural memory gained through common reading, not as the transmission of the quasi-ethnographic vantage on cultural diversity acquired by the experienced traveler, but rather as the product of "vagabonding" encounters on the road that seem to generalize a human condition of migrancy.

Translated into social realities of mid-Victorian Britain in Dickens's travel writings, this preoccupation with the subjective experiences and social effects of vagrancy and migration, I will argue, also chart a transition linked to what Michael Barnett has analyzed as the first stage of the formation of modern humanitarianism in the nineteenth century, or the period of "imperial humanitarianism": "Migrating from the backstreets of London to colonial outposts in northern India and West Africa because of colonialism, capitalism, and Christianity, these humanitarians began preaching a unity of mankind, encouraging individuals to identify with the suffering of others and demonstrating compassion to all living creatures" (Barnett 55). The history of humanitarianism, according to Barnett, is centrally concerned with the question "how humanitarianism comes to define the universal for a particular age" (11). Dickens's journalistic travel writings create a form of cultural memory that universalizes certain experiences of mobility, both forced and chosen, into a generalized modern experience of migrancy in respect to which Dickens's narrator both performs a humanitarian ethic and extends this ethic of care to form a social duty of his reading audience. In conclusion, then, I consider briefly how this sort of

humanitarianism substitutes a model of social inclusion for the law's criminalization of those "vagabonding" persons who are out of place or on the move.

The linkage, evident in *A Christmas Carol*, of travel with the ethical life of activity in human affairs also corresponds to the well-known Victorian biographical narrative concerning Dickens's peripatetic compulsion to investigate the hidden passageways of London's poor neighborhoods. Walter Bagehot in 1858 described Dickens's "genius" as the product of his mental recording of his urban explorations, transformed into his writing: "Each [London] scene, to his mind, is a separate alertness of observation that is observable in those who live by it. He describes London like a special correspondent for Posterity" (qtd. in Tambling 2). Dickens's close friend, John Forster, recounted in his biography of Dickens testimony on the part of his friends to their chance encounters with the author in the "backstreets" of London, where he obsessively walked in all weathers and often through the night (quoted in Tambling 1). Building on this biographical narrative but also complicating it, Jeremy Tambling argues that Dickens's writings map historical "traces" within London as he "tracks" the way the city is itself a form of inscription: "the city is textual throughout, not accidental, not just there, but culturally produced, and to read the streets is the aim of [Dickens's] urban analysis. . . . [H]is novels show the trace, invisible markers of how the city has been culturally constructed, the memory of history, much of it repressed" (Tambling 5).

In his journalism and travel writings Dickens reported repeatedly on organized investigative visits to hospitals, prisons, workhouses, ragged schools and other institutions associated with poverty and disability in London and abroad. In his "Uncommercial Traveller" papers of the 1860s, Dickens embraces the authorial influence over readers that he has established in the course of his career and amplifies the representational strategies of his fictional

depictions of city scenes and journalistic reporting in relation to cultural memory. He does this by developing a persona which much more explicitly enlists readers to accompany him on his travels in order to transact their own reactions to the people he encounters, not through his explicitly fictional characters but rather through his own idiosyncratic, encompassing and connecting vision. Dickens introduces his “Uncommercial Traveller” first-person narrative persona in the first paper (*All the Year Round*, 28 January 1860) by denying that he is the familiar “commercial” travelling salesman. Instead, he explains,

I am both a town traveler and a country traveler, and am always on the road. Figuratively speaking, I travel for the great house of Human Interest Brothers, and have a rather large connexion in the fancy goods way. Literally speaking, I am always wandering here and there from my rooms in Covent-garden—now about the City streets: now about the country bye-roads—seeing many little things, and some great things, which, because they interest me, I think may interest others. (Dickens 2000, 28).

The “fancy goods” on offer, then, seem to be those of the imagination, purveyed in print and enlivened by the reader. To be “always on the road” already connotes travel as a perpetual condition, suggesting a more general state of migrancy defined as the propensity to relocate or to experience displacement or mobility as a way of life, including but not requiring a decision to emigrate. With a base of operations in Covent-garden, however, this traveler persona also shows a tendency to return home before journeying again, in contrast with the dislocated state of the vagrant or the emigrant’s exile.

John M. L. Drew has studied the “Uncommercial Traveller” papers in the context of Dickens’s extensive collection and reading of travel narratives (“Voyages Extraordinaires Part I” 76-77) and his lifelong interest in the art of the essay (77-79). Observing that the “Uncommercial

Traveller” papers “resist reduction to popular literary patterns,” Drew argues that they nevertheless open up to interpretation specifically through historically inflected theories about travel, particularly “correlations between the act of travel, the reading of signs, and the act of interpretation to the reading public, performed through the medium of the periodical paper” (“Voyages Extraordinaires Part II” 127-28). The dimensions of cultural memory involved in such acts of interpretation of public events and the making significant of unknown places both appear in the first paper. After his self-introduction, the “Uncommercial” recounts his trip to the site of a shipwreck on the coast of Wales in December 1859 that had resulted in the deaths of over 400 passengers. The wrecked iron liner *Royal Charter* had been bound from Liverpool to Melbourne and was carrying £800,000 in gold (Dickens 2000, 26). The “Uncommercial” expresses his profound admiration for the “most sweet and patient diligence for weeks and weeks” (31) of two local clergymen of the Church of Wales and their families, who had presided over the burials in their churchyards of 145 victims (27), and offered support to bereaved relatives both in person and by writing more than a thousand letters in response to their inquiries (34), some of which Dickens excerpted for his own readers (35-39). Describing his reflections upon the visit during his return to London, the “Uncommercial” writes, “I thought of the many people, inhabitants of this mother country, who would make pilgrimages to the little churchyard in the years to come; I thought of the many people in Australia, who would have an interest in such a shipwreck, and would find their way here when they visit the Old World; I thought of the writers of all the wreck of letters I had left upon the [clergyman’s] table; and I resolved to place this little record where it stands” (40).

Drew comments in respect to the “iterology,” or the historical dimensions of travel writing, exhibited in this passage (the term inspired by the work of Michel Butor), that “the

record stands as an ornamental sepulcher to the dead, a monument to the clergyman's devotion, and comes to represent a traveler's signature . . . to show who had passed that way" ("Voyages Extraordinaires Part II" 127-28). This inaugural paper of Dickens's series therefore launches its work setting up new signposts for an expansive notion of cultural memory by making the "Uncommercial's" record of his travels into a relay point of shared meanings among metropolitan, "Old World" and "Anglo-World" readers.¹ This sort of travel writing constitutes through such commemoration an inclusive reading audience for whom this perilous journey of migration and shipwreck becomes emblematic of a precarious general condition. This record provides not only a reminder of mortality, familiar from *A Christmas Carol* as the idea that readers are "fellow-passengers to the grave" (Dickens 1988, 9), but also certain touchstones of a transnational cultural identity linked to the history of British commerce, imperial expansion, and emigration to settler colonies.

If death and commemoration remain important motifs in this set of travel writings, the "Uncommercial's" immersion in the precariousness of life on the road emerges as perhaps an even more resonant strategy for conveying to readers the connectedness arising from migrancy. In one of the most exhilarating accounts of his travels (published 6 June 1860), the "Uncommercial" recounts a long walk summer walk through the countryside of Kent. The narrative also conveys the impression of many such repeated rambles through the countryside. Titled "Tramps," the paper starts by cataloguing (in similar fashion to Mayhew's journalism on London street life and occupations) and ventriloquizing the speech of the various sorts of "idle tramps" encountered by the "Uncommercial," many of whom are out for a score by begging from passers-by. These include the tramp lounging in a ditch beside his wife (127-28), the "slinking tramp" who harasses cottagers in their gardens (128), and the "remarkably well-

behaved . . . and well-spoken young man” loitering along the way who has fallen on hard times and who rehearses his sad lot in detail as they proceed until the “Uncommercial” walks on too quickly for him to keep pace, and leaves the disappointed begging youth behind (130-31).

But this annoying and shiftless bunch is soon replaced by a much more interesting group, the “tramp handicraft men,” with whom, suddenly, the narrator invites the reader to identify in imagination by adopting and recounting their livelihoods:

Where does the lark sing, the corn grow, the mill turn, the river run, and they are not among the lights and shadows, tinkering, chair-mending, umbrella-mending, clock-mending, knife-grinding? Surely, a pleasant thing, if we were in that condition of life, to grind our way through Kent, Sussex, and Surrey. For the first six weeks or so, we should see the sparks we ground off, fiery bright against a background of wheat and green leaves. A little later, and the ripe harvest would pale our sparks from red to yellow, until we got the dark newly-turned land for a background again, and they were red once more. By that time, we should have ground our way to the sea cliffs, and the whirr of our wheel would be lost in the breaking of the waves. (133)

From imaginatively partaking in the “tramp handicraft men’s” work, the “Uncommercial” offers the reader a new itinerary aligning “tramping” with the rural picturesque. Such tramping, exemplifying the dignity of labor, gains beauty and appeal as a way of life involving incessant variety and travel out in the open air. The narrator extends this vignette to “our” imagined “chair-mending tour,” in which idleness becomes a valid part of the occupation: “What judges we should be of rushes, and how knowingly . . . we should lounge on bridges, looking over at osier beds” (133). He then recounts “our” visit in the guise of a “clock-mending” handicraft man to an

aristocratic estate to repair an old clock in a stable turret. The repair is interrupted when nightfall brings the fear of ghosts and a mock-gothic escape to a local inn for the night (135).

The essay then takes a brief turn to describe encounters with tramping bricklayers, whose work becomes a fascinating spectacle for many onlookers (135), as well as pedlars who “speculate” in selling cheap items on the road such as shrimp, Spanish nuts, and brandy balls (135-6), and a tramping soldier on his way home (136), until finally the “Uncommercial” turns rapturous in relating his passage by “a piece of Kentish road, bordered on either side by a wood, and having on one hand, between the road-dust and the trees, a skirting patch of grass” (136). This stopping place, at the top of a “steep hill” provides an enchanting vista: “Wild flowers grow in abundance on this spot, and it lies light and airy, with the distant river stealing steadily away to the ocean, like a man’s life” (136). Due to these attractions, the spot is occupied by many groups of seasoned tramps, who become a lively company: “So all the tramps with carts or caravans—the Gipsy-tramp, the Show-tramp, the Cheap Jack—find it impossible to resist the temptations of the place, and all turn the horse loose when they come to it, and boil the pot. Bless the place, I love the ashes of the vagabond fires that have scorched its grass! What tramp children do I see here, attired in a handful of rages, making a gymnasium of the shafts of the cart, making a feather-bed of the flints and brambles, making a toy of the hobbled old horse who is not much more like a horse than any cheap toy would be!” (136). This is a place frequented by the “Uncommercial” too, who has himself become a tramp “vagabonding” among the caravans, and who reveals that “On this hallowed ground has it been my happy privilege (let me whisper it), to behold the White-haired Lady, with the pink eyes eating a meat-pie with the Giant: while, by the hedge-side, on the box of blankets which I knew contained the snakes, were set forth the cups and saucers and the teapot” (137). There is a surreptitious witnessing here, not so much

because the “Uncommercial” is, strictly speaking, a social interloper, but rather because he is intruding on a private moment when the performers are at their ease: “It was on an evening in August, that I chanced upon this ravishing spectacle, and I noticed that, whereas the Giant reclined half concealed beneath the overhanging boughs and seemed indifferent to Nature, the white hair of the gracious Lady streamed free in the breath of evening, and her pink eyes found pleasure in the landscape” (137). The “Uncommercial” does not so much approve the White-haired Lady’s aesthetic feelings for nature as share them. The sort of cultural memory purveyed through the “Uncommercial’s” narration of a specific experience of partaking in the beauty of nature on the verge of a public road transforms persons who could be deemed outcasts in the eyes of the law—those defined by the parliamentary theory of political consensus as persons represented but not included, people without residence, mere “vagabonds,” giants, Gipsies, and circus people—into temporary inhabitants, along with Dickens’s readers, of a “magic ground” (137) that emerges while stopping awhile on the road, and is thereafter conjured up for readers by the periodical essay’s record of travel.

In pursuit of this goal of including the marginal, Dickens’s paper offers a further concluding scene, and this one is, perhaps, the most exuberant. The “Uncommercial” explains that near this inviting place is a “little hostelry” where one can stay for a penny, find water from a “cool well,” and drink a “mug of beer” (137). This inn is “a house of great resort for haymaking tramps and harvest tramps” in summer (137). Thus on this particular tramp through Kent, the Uncommercial also encounters the “hopping tramps,” or those families of migrating workers who harvest the fields of hops, some of whom “are Irish, but many come from London” (137). When the hop harvest is finished,

there is a vast exodus of tramps out of the county; and if you ride or drive round any turn of any road at more than a foot pace, you will be bewildered to find that you have charged into the bosom of fifty families, and that there are splashing up all around you, in the utmost prodigality of confusion, bundles of bedding, babies, iron pots, and a good-humored multitude of both sexes and all ages, equally divided between perspiration and intoxication. (137)

The “Uncommercial” finds himself, without any protest, in close physical proximity with the “prodigality” and “perspiration” of these migrant families, who “crowd all the roads, and camp under all the hedges and on all the scraps of common-land” (137). Dickens’s “tramping” traveler persona thus transforms these so-called tramps and vagabonds, placed by political and social history outside the pale of the constitution, into a “good-humored multitude” of families, and leaves the reader immersed among them on the road, seemingly traveling in company with them. The version of cultural memory resulting from this representation of migrancy seems to be an egalitarian one, this time marked on the landscape not so much by the churchyard as the public highway and its temporary resting places.

I have been showing how, through the “iterological” tendency of Dickens’s writings to shape the metaphor of travel into cultural memory, migrancy is generalized into a new humanitarian universal, a figure for the forms of solidarity within precariousness characterizing the modern human condition. Nevertheless, the “Uncommercial Traveler” paper “Night Walks” (21 July 1860) reminds the reader that many social outcasts still remain in the streets of London. This paper also more explicitly tests the humanitarian ethics of Dickens’s traveler persona, while demonstrating some of the vicissitudes of urban philanthropy and nineteenth-century “imperial humanitarianism.” The “Uncommercial” begins by explaining that the incidents he records

occurred while walking the streets of London over several nights as the result of a bout of insomnia: “In the course of those nights, I finished my education in a fair amateur experience of houselessness. My principal object being to get through the night, the pursuit of it brought me into sympathetic relations with people who have no other object every night of the year” (150). In extending this sympathetic relation, based on the analogy of a shared necessity (one psychosomataical and the other socio-economic) to his readers, the “Uncommercial” again adopts the third-person plural as in the “tramping” paper, referring to himself and others he encounters on the streets at night as “we houseless people” (50). In this collective guise personified as “Houselessness” (151), the narrator wanders through the rainy and almost deserted streets in the heart of London, visiting the major public institutions, banks, bridges, churches, prisons, hospitals, and theaters, but always looking out for the police and someplace unoccupied to stand for awhile out of the wet (151). Once again enlisting the reader’s thoughts to entertain another consciousness (like the pink-eyed Lady’s) seemingly different from the norm, but in truth not so different, the “Uncommercial” speculates as he walks by the walls about the inmates of Bethlehem Hospital, “Are not the sane and insane equal at night as the sane lie a dreaming? Are not all of us outside this hospital, who dream, more or less in the condition of those inside it, every night of our lives?” (153).

Throughout the narration, however, the newly “Houseless” narrator refers to his walking as motivated by his choices of where to go next, indicating the agency of the wandering houseless street dwellers as well, but also maintaining the reader’s awareness of a difference between the “Uncommercial’s” temporary “amateur education” in “Houselessness” and the perpetual insecurity of the actual houseless population. This difference is dramatized suddenly, much like the scene of the unexpected merging with the crowd of migrant hopping trampers,

when the “Uncommercial” almost stumbles over a shape “on the great steps of Saint Martin’s church as the clock was striking Three” (134):

Suddenly, a thing that in a moment more I should have trodden upon without seeing, rose up at my feet with a cry of loneliness and houselessness, struck out of it by the bell, the like of which I never heard. We then stood face to face looking at one another, frightened by one another. The creature was like a beetle-browed hare-lipped youth of twenty, and it had a loose bundle of rags on, which it held together with one of its hands. It shivered from head to foot, and its teeth chattered, and as it stared at me—persecutor, devil, ghost, whatever it thought me—it made with its whining mouth as if it were snapping at me, like a worried dog. Intending to give this ugly object, money, I put out my hand to stay it—for it recoiled as it whined and snapped—and laid my hand upon its shoulder.

Instantly, it twisted out of its garment, like the young man in the New Testament, and left me standing alone with its rags in my hand. (154-55).

This mutual fright is quite unlike the almost joyful embrace of the country “tramping” traveler in the “bosom” of the crowd of Irish migrant families (137). The humanitarian narrator, traveling through the streets in temporary solidarity with the “houseless,” reverts to the philanthropic stranger come face-to-face with the object of his care, an object so dehumanized and degraded that it has become inarticulate and dog-like. Yet the “Uncommercial” does not recoil and retreat in disgust or fear—how can he, for this creature is Dickens’s own Dante-esque creation for the reader’s benefit, and the scene is part of their shared humanitarian pilgrimage through London. This solitary encounter therefore still provokes the “Uncommercial’s” desire to reach out and touch the victim, to repair the harm and suffering through a gift of care and money. The syntax leaves unclear whether the “ugly object” of society’s neglect and the famous author’s gaze is the

young man or the money that the “Uncommercial,” reverting to his economic position of privilege and donor status, offers him. But the humanitarian touch evaporates the object of the charitable gesture, leaving the “Uncommercial” haunted and unfulfilled in his intentions to deliver care. No merely sympathetic relation can abide this encounter, and this representation of houselessness remains purposely unresolved, persisting like a nightmare of unfulfilled social duties, despite the curiosity and participation prevalent in the rest of the narrative. This is a knowing representation of the limited capacity of humanitarian care and solidarity transacted between authors and readers to correct glaring social injustices.

According to Barnett, transnational nineteenth-century humanitarian movements such as abolitionism and Christian missionary activities frequently exhibited “ideologies of paternalism . . . that deemed the ‘civilized’ peoples superior to the backward populations. This superiority, in turn, gave them a moral obligation to assuage their suffering and help them improve their lot by ridding them of the traditions that condemned them to a life of misery. Intervention, in other words, was intended to produce emancipation and liberation as defined by the civilized” (55). Barnett regards such paternalism as an intrinsic part of humanitarianism’s “emancipatory ethics,” involving an “aspir[ation] to keep people alive, to expand their opportunities, and to give them greater control over their fates” (11). Involved in the ways this “ethic of care has become internationalized and institutionalized, shaping the very nature and purpose of global governance” over the past two centuries (12), paternalism defined in contemporary settings as “the belief that some people can and should act in ways that are intended to improve the welfare of those who might not be in a position to help themselves” is, for Barnett, “not simply an unsavory legacy of the nineteenth century—it represents both the best and the worst of humanitarianism” (12).

Dickens's writings are not immune to the hierarchical, civilizational thinking common in nineteenth-century "imperial humanitarianism" across borders. The "Uncommercial Traveller" paper "The Boiled Beef of New England" (15 August 1863), however, directly addresses the problem of paternalism in charitable efforts aimed at the working classes in England, referring to and criticizing this attitude as "patronage." In this paper, the "Uncommercial" recounts a visit to a Self-Supporting Cooking Dépôt located in the Whitechapel neighborhood of London, where a dinner of boiled cold beef or ham or minced hot beef, potatoes, a bowl of soup, bread and cheese, and pudding could be purchased for fourpence-halfpenny (284-85). Following a model established first in Glasgow and Manchester and funded by "certain gentlemen who felt an interest in its diffusion" (282), this dining hall is nevertheless managed and run by members of the working classes, exemplifying Dickens's recommendation that "Whatever is done for the comfort and advancement of the working man must be so far done by himself as that it is maintained by himself" (262). For only such schemes can counteract the waves of "patronage" (that is, of paternalism) to which working people are ordinarily submitted by their self-appointed improvers:

For how often have I heard the unfortunate working man lectured as if he were a little charity-child . . . What popguns of jokes have these ears tingled to hear let off at him, what asinine sentiments, what impotent conclusions, what spelling-book moralities, what adaptations of the orator's insufferable tediousness to the assumed level of his understanding! . . . Consequently, not being a fool or a fawner, he has come to acknowledge his patronage by virtually saying: "Let me alone. If you understand me no better than *that*, sir and madam, let me alone. You mean very well, I dare say, but I don't like it, and I won't come here again to have any more of it." (281-82)

As the “Uncommercial” reports on the very good fourpence-halfpenny meal he consumed while seated together with other purchasers of the Public Dinner in the upstairs general dining-room, he voices a few criticisms of the fare on offer that point to the persistence of paternalism at this Dépôt. In addition to the absence of lamb or mutton, a desirable addition to the fare, “Another drawback on the Whitechapel establishment, is the absence of beer. . . . It expresses distrust of the working man. It is a fragment of that old mantle of patronage in which so many estimable Thugs, so darkly wandering up and down the moral world, are sworn to muffle him” (286). Once again, Dickens adapts a metaphor of travel, this time of wandering as losing one’s way (sometimes perniciously), to expose the denial of truth and illumination—and of social and political emancipation—by those with the wherewithal to change things for the better to those persons who, they assume, are not ready or fit for a moral perception of the world’s ways. But such adult moral awareness, the “Uncommercial” implies, is in fact a universal human capacity, forming the basis for a widely shared representative relation afforded by many kinds of journeying, including his own stories of travel.

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¹Belich defines the Anglo-world as the result of a historically distinctive movement of colonization and settlement originating in the British Isles (49-78).

