

Pancks: Mechanical Conditioning and Fortune-Telling in *Little Dorrit*

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In his later novels, Dickens frequently treats the themes of business ethics and the relationship between private convictions and professional persona. Dickens's treatment of this tension in modern life is often embodied in characters who seem created specifically to illustrate the extreme of separating private and business life. Characters like Jarvis Lorry in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Mr. Pancks in *Little Dorrit*, Wemmick in *Great Expectations*, and Mr. Riah in *Our Mutual Friend* all hold kindly intentions behind cold or even ruthless business personas. While the similarity between many of these characters is undeniable and testifies to Dickens's enduring concern for whether kindness and individualism can thrive in a competitive business environment, these characters are not merely humorous, flat types. Pancks in particular has not received much critical attention, despite the complex way in which the narrative reveals his capacity for kindness behind an eccentric and relentlessly capitalistic front. Furthermore, even after we learn of Pancks's benevolent service to *Little Dorrit*, he does not, like Lorry or Riah, become an unquestionable

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force for good in the novel. Pancks is simultaneously symbolic of Dickens's hope for the mechanical working-man and a testament to how constant training and repetition in enacting impersonal business ethics can unavoidably alter one's identity and outlook on the world. Despite his good intentions, Pancks is trapped and hindered by his constant association with money and "squeezing" from others. Thus, his final dramatic exposure of Casby is symbolically necessary for his moral redemption.

Dickens employs an unusual narrative technique in the case of Pancks by filtering Pancks and Casby's relationship through the lens of Arthur's perspective. While disguise is a frequent theme in Dickens, he does not always intentionally deceive the reader and wrap a character in such mystery as he does with Pancks. For instance, there is a clear similarity between Pancks and Riah in *Our Mutual Friend*, as both men stand in the same position—as fronts to disreputable business practices. Pancks takes the brunt of scorn in Bleeding Heart Yard for mercilessly squeezing money from its inhabitants, while Riah, as a Jew and reputed to be a harsh loan-shark, is the perfect cover for Fledgeby, the true villain. However, Dickens immediately reveals Fledgeby's game in *Our Mutual Friend*, and assures us of Riah's saintly character. With Pancks, Dickens casts his character in a shadow as dark as the soot and grime that literally coats him.

Dickens is known for using memorable physical descriptions to indicate character; however, in Pancks's case, his initial description matches only what Arthur wants to believe of his personality since he seems predisposed to think the best of the clean and patriarchal Casby. The narrator calls Pancks "quick and eager," as he shoots a stream of questions at Clennam, without any sense of decorum.¹ Then there are Pancks's clothes of "black and rusty iron grey" and his "jet black beads of eyes; scrubby little black chin; wiry black hair striking out from his head in prongs, like forks or hairpins" (148). George Yeats interprets this dark and dirty imagery as indicative that we are to see Pancks as "the personification of . . . a man-machine" and later "a human metonym for that startlingly powerful 'steam engine.'"² While the steam-tug imagery becomes an important metaphor in understanding Pancks's true

¹ Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, 148.

² Yeats, "'Dirty Air': *Little Dorrit's* Atmosphere," 345.

situation, his initial description also sounds rather devilish. His “iron grey” clothes and speed indicate his machine-like nature, but there appears mystery and deviousness in his “beads of eyes” and his “forks” for hair. His complexion also makes Clennam wonder whether it is “dingy by nature, or very dirt by art, or a compound of nature and art” (Dickens, 148), anticipating what we will later wonder about Pancks’s character behind the mask. Does the complexion of Pancks’s soul have a natural affinity for the work he does, or is it all an elaborate façade demanded for survival? The answer does not come until the end of the novel when we learn that Pancks has been in the business since childhood and conditioned for the work he does, but his split nature is already being implied in this physical description. His “dirty hands and broken nails” (Ibid.) also have dual implications. They show his determined work ethic, but the “dirty” nature of his work has defined his character.

Pancks’s introductory physical description paves the way for the narrator’s description of the rumors that Clennam recalls from his youth that Casby, Pancks’s employer, carries only a facade of benevolence. After the descriptions of Pancks’s unsightly broken fingernails and the Patriarch’s smooth polished head, this theory does not appear to accord with reality, setting the audience up for the narrator’s second, more plausible scenario that Pancks is the real brains behind the scheme and Casby merely the figurehead. Along with Clennam, the audience is lured into accepting this second option as the more likely, especially since so little of Pancks is known beyond his unappealing introduction. The reader and Clennam are being tricked by Casby’s scheme to keep his hands clean, as Pancks will complain at the end: “He is as sweet as honey, and I am as dull as ditch-water. He provides the pitch, and I handle it” (802). The narrator reinforces Pancks as the mastermind with the metaphor of Casby as a ship and the Pancks as a steam-tug; however, even the steam-tug seems invested with malignant purpose as it “bears down upon” (150) the larger boat. Casby, with his habit of repeating every phrase he says in an almost senile way, seems the least likely villain but merely a fool who is being used by the wily Pancks.

It could be argued that Pancks is playing a part as a ruthless squeezer; the first scene where he converses alone with Clennam seems to indicate that Pancks’s identity is more complex and determined by

what he does. He no longer has to be acting since he is not on duty with Casby. However, his conversation with Clennam indicates that perhaps Pancks's private life is practically nonexistent, for he can talk of nothing except money and his work. He makes one reply to Clennam's remark on the weather, but immediately shifts to the busy life he leads:

"I like business," said Pancks. "What's a man made for?"

"For nothing else?" said Clennam.

Pancks put the counter question, "What else? . . . That's what I ask our weekly tenants. . . . Some of 'em will pull long faces to me, and say, "Poor as you see us, master, we're always grinding, drudging, toiling, every minute we're awake. I say to them, What else are you made for? It shuts them up. They haven't a word to answer. What are you made for? That clinches it." (158)

If Pancks is still consciously acting at this point, it must be an act so well-rehearsed that it is difficult to tell where the real Pancks begins and ends in his own mind. He has internalized his business persona to such a degree that he cannot separate himself from his employer's economic philosophy. Riah in *Our Mutual Friend* is a kind and generous friend, never even discussing his business when in private; however, Pancks's employment consumes him. Pancks's repetition of the question "What else are you made for?" indicates his need to reinforce his own tireless work ethic, at the expense of being scorned and demonized by the people he torments. His dialogue with the imaginary tenant erects a wall of indifference and practicality between himself and others. If he can convince himself that his job is merely part of a natural and logical order, he can carry on.

The turning point where Pancks's humanity begins to shine through still retains his language of business. Pancks's unusual sentence structure and choppy rhythm add energy and humor to the scene, while also suggesting the naturally mechanical flow of his thought. F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis call his "abrupt factual dryness . . . creative life imprisoned in the tyrannical mechanisms of a business civilization."³ He opens by asking for information, which Arthur assumes must relate to his new business venture with Doyce, since Pancks seems unequivocally a man of business. Throughout their conversation, Arthur has to draw

³ Leavis and Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, 243.

Pancks out with clarifying questions to learn exactly what Pancks wants, and even by the end Pancks escapes with vague answers. When Clennam remarks that it is out of the ordinary for Pancks to come to him about the Dorrits, Pancks responds, "It may be all extraordinary together. . . . It may be out of the ordinary course, and yet be business. I am a man of business. What business have I in this present world except to stick to business? No business" (275). This rhetoric reveals Pancks's need to justify whatever he does by calling it business, also explaining his secretive and evasive manner. He tells Arthur later in the novel that he was acting on a "speculation"—an important word for Pancks in the Merdle enterprise—"as to what a surprising change would be made in the condition of a little seamstress, if she could be shown to have any interest in so large a property. . . . [T]here was something uncommon in the quiet little seamstress, which pleased him and provoked his curiosity" (410). While the only action Pancks knows, and is equipped to take, involves money, his interest in Little Dorrit does not stem from anything related to business. He cannot define her uncommon qualities, but a buried goodness in his soul reacts to what he sees in her actions: a tireless work ethic that is not fueled by self-interest but by love for others. Pancks tells Clennam that the business is "not my proprietor's" (Ibid.). This separation from Casby puts Pancks in a potentially new light and represents the first step that he is taking on a business venture outside his grubbing and squeezing. Even though this business is still carried out with the prospect of personal gain, Pancks is doing something other than following orders. He is using a financial venture to help both himself and someone else, and, as he tells Clennam later, no one but himself will suffer the consequences if it falls through (411). When Clennam asks for Pancks's motive, he says, "Good. Nothing to do with my proprietor; not stateable at present, ridiculous to state at present; but good" (276). Pancks perhaps calls it ridiculous since this kind of personal venture is so foreign to his way of life. Clennam, not understanding, still distrusts Pancks at this point, thinking the steam-tug is watching him and "seeking an opportunity of running in and rifling him of all it wanted" (Ibid.). However, Clennam does not realize that the little bit of trust he places in Pancks plants the seed of reinforcement Pancks needs in order to remove himself a little from Casby's machine of business.

Pancks's motivations for helping Little Dorrit are complex, as they are not clearly defined, and they partially stem from his own expected reward for his services. At the end of his interview with Clennam, he reiterates, "Take all you can get, and keep back all you can't be forced to give up. That's business" (278). However, Pancks's determination and sacrifice on such a risky scheme hints at both personal desperation to do something of his own volition and an affection for Little Dorrit. However, in his dealings with her, as the self-proclaimed gypsy fortune-teller, he also exposes another aspect of his self-image: "I belong body and soul to my proprietor. . . . But I do a little in the other way, sometimes; privately, very privately" (288). He claims to have no identity outside his employer's demands, yet the fact that he is taking action apart from those demands shows a private corner of his soul. This statement also illuminates his request that she never look surprised at seeing him: "No matter when, no matter where. I am nobody" (289). Pancks has grown used to this negative self-image, as he has seen every day, in the tenants faces, the anger that should be directed at Casby and only carried out work for another. He sees himself as merely a tool, and perhaps he cannot define for himself why he is taking on this private business. When he reads Little Dorrit's fortune, he hints at the similarity he sees between them: "Years of toil, eh? But what else are we made for? Nothing" (Ibid.). This reiteration of his motto is immediately contradicted by the next thing he pretends to notice on her palm: her family and "what's this thinking for 'em all? Why, this is you, Miss Dorrit!" (288). Pancks notices the care Amy takes for others in addition to her hard work. Perhaps Pancks does not believe he is capable of selflessly helping others, but by helping Amy, he, though still a tool, can further something good.

Pancks's self-proclaimed role as a fortune-teller attests to two aspects of his new mode of acting outside his proprietor's stipulations. For one, he is still interested mainly in "fortune," as in making money, but this time only for his own profit. He has not thought to move outside the sphere of money and think how he could help someone by other means. Perhaps, though, this is what Pancks is best equipped to do: he has a mathematical and practical mind, a good memory and an energetic enthusiasm for his task. He also, however, is a fortune-teller by relying on chance and risk in his venture. It seems odd at first that Pancks, who

has led a life of drudgery and thankless toil to avoid his employer's displeasure, would turn to the opposite way of making money, but this might be what Pancks, in his desperation to break out of his mold, prefers. If he loses, he will only be hurting himself, rather than the tenants of Bleeding Heart Yard. For once, he can feel the power of gaining money outside of Casby's control. In the Dorrit enterprise, success to Pancks is like intoxication, making his once dingy hair "sparkle" (341).

After enjoying his first success on behalf of the Dorrit family, Pancks turns to the Merdle scheme, confident now in his business experience, insisting on calling it an "investment" instead of a venture or speculation as Arthur calls them. Pancks assures him, "I've gone into it. I've made the calculations. I've worked it. They're safe and genuine" (582). Seeing business as a science, Pancks seems to have the same motives he had in helping the Dorrit family, yet now he lets slip his bitterness toward Casby: "Why should you leave all the gains to the gluttons, knaves, and impostors? Why should you leave all the gains that are to be got, to my proprietor, and the like of him? Why, I see it every day of my life. . . . Therefore I say . . . Go in and win" (585). There is an appealing yet naïve call for justice in these lines. In his eagerness to be free of Casby, Pancks is putting all his wealth in the hands of Merdle, who is also an impostor, like Casby. He puts his faith in "immense resources—enormous capital—great position—high connection—government influence" (*Ibid.*), not realizing that corruption can lie behind any business venture. Even when the scheme falls through, he holds to the fact that the numbers did not lie: "I have gone over it since it failed, every day of my life, and it comes out—regarded as a question of figures—triumphant!" (765). However, what lies behind his stubborn praise of the numbers is the truth that Pancks did not understand that numbers can always be manipulated by those in power. He still believes in a pure way of making money.

The final confrontation with Casby builds to a crescendo that dramatically punctuates the end of the novel in what Barbara Lecker calls a "comic apocalypse."⁴ In the scene leading up to the standoff in Bleeding Heart Yard, the audience, who has only received hints of Casby unmasked up to this point, finally get to see him to full effect, as Dickens

⁴ Lecker, "The Split Characters of Charles Dickens," 697.

combines diabolism with humor when Casby says, “You are made to do your duty, but you don’t do your duty. You are paid to squeeze, and you must squeeze to pay.” (797). We also hear echoes of Pancks’s motto but this time with bitter sarcasm: “Don’t I squeeze ‘em?” retorted Mr. Pancks. “What else am I made for?” (Ibid.). Casby then pushes Pancks to the edge when he says, “I recommend you, Mr. Pancks, to dismiss from your attention both your losses and other people’s losses, and to mind your business” (798). It is practical advice, but Pancks no longer wants only practicality in his life, as he has shown by accepting responsibility for Clennam’s ruin. After trying and failing to assert his independence through financial means, Pancks now realizes he must be free of Casby at any cost. However, leaving quietly does not satisfy Pancks; he must exact retribution by exposing Casby to ridicule and cutting his long, flowing hair. Pancks and those who have been deceived by Casby perhaps need this fleeting moment of triumph and justice before returning to reality. Pancks is no longer a tool but everyman. He echoes all the tenants’ sentiments when he says, “What has my life been? Fag and grind, fag and grind, turn the wheel, turn the wheel! . . . [I]f as useful a man could be got at sixpence cheaper, he would be taken in my place at sixpence cheaper. Bargain and sale, bless you! Fixed principles!” (802). Pancks seems to have finally realized the emptiness of relying on the numbers and mechanisms of business at the expense of what is morally right. He is declaring himself free from a business where the proprietor employs another to mask his own greedy nature.

The impracticality of Pancks living with the consequences of this outrageous demonstration is happily avoided by his future with Doyce and Clennam alluded to in the last chapter. Doyce, Clennam, and Little Dorrit serve as the new model for Pancks, along with steady and honest work. Just as Little Dorrit no longer has her high position as a means of salvation, Pancks has lost all his money, and has to live on quietly like the rest, without any expectation of riches. If Daniel Doyce is the model of ethical business practices—exhibiting steady ingenuity but disapproving of speculation—then Pancks finds the perfect place for his natural talents to grow and be redeemed from their sordid beginnings. He has moved from the mechanical grubber, to the unpredictable fortune-teller, to finally the industrious businessman. Far from simply a flat minor character, Pancks represents the dynamic potential of those in

Dickens's industrialized and capitalistic society—where “nobody” yet everybody is at fault—to discover a more human way of conducting business without renouncing it completely.

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