

‘This fiction of an occupation’: Mr Boffin’s Encounter with Blight

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I would like to begin this afternoon by reading you the passage in question, one which goes like this:

“Morning, morning, morning!” said Mr. Boffin, with a wave of his hand, as the office door was opened by the dismal boy, whose appropriate name was Blight. “Governor in?”

“Mr. Lightwood gave you an appointment, sir, I think?”

“I don’t want him to give it, you know,” returned Mr. Boffin; “I’ll pay my way, my boy.”

“No doubt, sir. Would you walk in? Mr. Lightwood ain’t in at the present moment, but I expect him back very shortly. Would you take a seat in Mr. Lightwood’s room, sir, while I look over our Appointment Book?” Young Blight made a great show of fetching from his desk a long thin manuscript volume with a brown paper cover, and running his finger down the day’s appointments, murmuring, “Mr. Aggs, Mr. Baggs, Mr. Caggs, Mr. Daggs, Mr. Faggs, Mr. Gaggs, Mr. Boffin. Yes, sir; quite right. You are a little before your time, sir. Mr. Lightwood will be in directly.”

“I’m not in a hurry,” said Mr. Boffin.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll take the opportunity, if you please, of entering your name in our Callers’ Book for the day.” Young Blight made another great show of changing the volume, taking up a pen, sucking it, dipping it, and running over previous entries before he wrote. As, “Mr. Alley, Mr. Balley, Mr. Calley, Mr. Dalley, Mr. Falley, Mr. Galley, Mr. Halley, Mr. Lalley, Mr. Malley. And Mr. Boffin.”

“Strict system here; eh, my lad?” said Mr. Boffin, as he was booked.

“Yes, sir,” returned the boy. “I couldn’t get on without it.”

By which he probably meant that his mind would have been shattered to pieces without this fiction of an occupation. Wearing in his solitary confinement no fetters that he could polish, and being provided with no drinking-cup that he could carve, he had fallen on the device of ringing

alphabetical changes into the two volumes in question, or of entering vast numbers of persons out of the Directory as transacting business with Mr. Lightwood. It was the more necessary for his spirits, because, being of a sensitive temperament, he was apt to consider it personally disgraceful to himself that his master had no clients.

"How long have you been in the law, now?" asked Mr. Boffin, with a pounce, in his usual inquisitive way.

"I've been in the law, now, sir, about three years."

"Must have been as good as born in it!" said Mr. Boffin, with admiration. "Do you like it?"

"I don't mind it much," returned Young Blight, heaving a sigh, as if its bitterness were past.

"What wages do you get?"

"Half what I could wish," replied young Blight.

"What's the whole that you could wish?"

"Fifteen shillings a week," said the boy.

"About how long might it take you now, at a average rate of going, to be a judge?" asked Mr. Boffin, after surveying his small stature in silence.

The boy answered that he had not yet quite worked out that little calculation.

"I suppose there's nothing to prevent your going in for it?" said Mr. Boffin.

The boy virtually replied that as he had the honour to be a Briton who never never never, there was nothing to prevent his going in for it. Yet he seemed inclined to suspect that there might be something to prevent his coming out with it.

"Would a couple of pound help you up at all?" asked Mr. Boffin.

On this head, young Blight had no doubt whatever, so Mr. Boffin made him a present of that sum of money, and thanked him for his attention to his (Mr. Boffin's) affairs; which, he added, were now, he believed, as good as settled.

from Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend, Book the First, Chapter VIII.

Almost a quarter of a century ago I was working as a temporary lecturer in the English Department of the University of Wales at Aberystwyth. The job was only to last eighteen months. My office was someone else's — with his books still on the shelves. I lived in one rented room of a seaside boarding house that had seen better days. In my spare time, of which there was plenty, I was trying to complete a second publishable collection of poems. The manuscript would go through a number of metamorphoses before reaching print in 1988 as *This Other Life*. Those six or so years earlier it was called *Temporary Poems*. I still have a manuscript page containing two

epigraphs, one of them showing where I found the title. Samuel Johnson's dictionary definition of Grub Street reads: 'Originally the name of a street near Moorfields in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems; whence any mean production is called *grubstreet*.' *This Other Life* contains a series of three lyrics from those days entitled, exactly, 'Temporary Poems'.

Below that quotation from Johnson's *Dictionary* is the other one, lifted from the passage which I've just read to you: "'Strict system here; eh, my lad?'" said Mr. Boffin, as he was booked. "Yes, sir," returned the boy. "I couldn't get on without it." By which he probably meant that his mind would have been shattered to pieces without this fiction of an occupation.' It was, I hope you agree, wise of me to drop the falsely modest title and self-denigrating epigraphs for the finally published book. That manuscript page preserves as if in aspic the situation of the young poet and teacher trying to 'get on' and feeling that his mind might be 'shattered to pieces' if he didn't keep up one or other fiction of an occupation.

What drew me to the passage from *Our Mutual Friend* will have been the gratuitously equivocal nature of the narrated incident that I would like to spend a little time exploring this afternoon. It seems gratuitous because these two pages, aside from giving incidental details about lawyer Lightwood and further exemplifying Mr. Boffin's shining character, have barely any structural purpose in the novel. 'Young Blight' is named on the Number Plan: he is not a stop-gap improvisation. His cameo reappearance at the very end of Book the Third does, however, seem opportunistic. There, the 'dismal boy' of our first meeting has happily evolved into the discreet and efficient 'sharp boy', as Eugene Wrayburn repeatedly calls him.

That first encounter in Lightwood's chambers opens with Mr Boffin's repeated 'morning!' and his cockney 'Governor in?' — as if attempting to bring a Pickwickian joviality to whatever he meets. We might be inclined to think these are the results of his natural good will and high spirits, but as the scene progresses we're brought to see them as part of a performance with a purpose. Blight seems at first to turn the tables on Boffin by adopting a coolly professional manner. This is a lawyer's office, and you can't just chat your way into seeing his employer. The pretence of formality is then punctured by the Golden Dustman with that little joke on Blight's word 'gave': 'I don't want him to give' an appointment, he says, 'I'll pay my way'. Such geniality doesn't suit the pretended seriousness of the situation, and Blight refuses it with his 'No doubt, sir'. But then Dickens allows the professional mask to slip slightly with his clerk's colloquial 'ain't' in the would-be officious 'Mr Lightwood ain't in at the present moment'. The crack in his idiom is Dickens's

overture to the more elaborate pretence — and therefore absurd comedy — of the Appointment Book, the Callers' Book, and young Blight's 'great show'.

Mr Boffin's play on the word 'gave' has also sidestepped the question of whether he does or does not have an appointment. With the fictional alphabetic variants on a name, punctured once again by the comic reality of 'Mr. Boffin', Blight not only pretends that his employer has a full diary, but also that Boffin is, after all, expected. The Golden Dustman plays along with, but deflects, the clerk's self-important fiction by saying that he's 'not in a hurry'. What rescues the passage's jokes from mere slapstick is a vein of authorial identification. We don't have difficulty assuming that the narrator sides with Boffin; but now the Dickens voice takes on the colouring of his minor character too.

He has already prepared us for such an implicit level of reading by introducing 'the dismal boy, whose appropriate name was Blight.' When he is thus first introduced, we can't be sure if what makes Blight's name appropriate is that it's because he spreads blight, or because he is the victim of blight. He could even be both. In being 'appropriate' the name does, however, tell us that the author-narrator knows perfectly well what kind of book we are reading. *Our Mutual Friend* is a novel in the English comic tradition where characters' names will likely match their attributes and vice-versa. There is art, too, in the writer's settling on a name. Mortimer Lightwood, whose name began perhaps over-appropriately as 'Lightword', has a clerk who also writes imaginary variants on names in a *Book of Memoranda* so as to populate his world and give his work a purpose. Blight too is the author of a fiction.

Nor can Dickens have failed to notice that the phrase 'this fiction of an occupation' might be an adjusted inversion of 'this occupation of fiction'. Recalling the author's early life and journalistic beginnings, an early life which — he 'being of a sensitive temperament' — is reported to have permanently scarred him, I see that his first employment after the blacking warehouse episode was as a solicitor's clerk. For Dickens too invented 'vast numbers of persons' and put them into the 'volumes in question' with a 'great show'; and this allowed him to effect a definitive escape from a life of menial and humiliating jobs. Yet it also issued him into another struggle — in the form of thirty-two pages of printed matter per month. The author-narrator's description of how his writing activity saves Blight is also a displaced reflection on this other life. It's as if a reworking of Mr Pickwick were here to help change the life of a disguised young Dickens. Yet the author's rendering of Blight at work on his book of imaginary clients shows him behaving in a mad fashion so as to protect himself from the madness of having his mind 'shat-

tered to pieces'. The author might seem to be underlining the pathetic pointlessness of Blight's literary activity by comparing it with a prisoner in solitary confinement who is lucky enough to have 'fettters to polish' or a 'drinking-cup to carve'. The transposition of such a reflection to the novelist's art would cast an oblique light on the usual assumptions about why we celebrate Dickens and his writings.

The passage draws to a close with a collaborative effort on the part of Boffin and the author-narrator to cheer Blight up and give a semblance of purpose to his vacant situation. The Golden Dustman not only continues but also elaborates the fiction of Blight's occupation by allowing his job to be graced with the phrase 'in the law'. He then alludes to young Blight's youth by suggesting that he must be 'as good as born in it!' However, this phrase can't fail to include the implication that Blight might have come from a family of lawyers — something that his word 'ain't' and his being Lightwood's clerk makes clear is not the case. Boffin doesn't let that reflection worry him, though, but presses on with the fiction that Blight is in a career with an upward curve and that, given time, he may eventually reach the very top. Here the self-help theory that people can improve themselves by their own efforts meets the more coldly realistic thought that if you are not born in the law or have magically inherited a vast sum of money, then you won't be able to compete with those who were or have.

The fragmentary citation from 'Rule Britannia' by James Thomson is a signature trace of equivocation in the scene. 'Britons never will be slaves' is the last line of Thomson's chorus, but the sung version from Act II Scene V of *Alfred: A Masque* (1740) famously repeats the 'never' to furnish Dickens's narrator with his allusion. In a post-imperial era, and to a practically post-national ear, the problem with this piece of cultural heritage is that the poem proclaims Britons as called by God to conquer the entire globe: 'All thine shall be the subject main, / And every shore it circles thine. / "Rule," &c.' — as the printed text renders, with unintended irony, the poem's refrain. To Dickens and his audience, though, the problem will have been the contrast between Thomson's ideal and 'Thy cities' (especially Dickens's London) which don't, as the same verse has it, 'with commerce shine'. They as good as enslave people with the 'appropriate name of Blight.'

However, Dickens's allusion is not sourly ironic in a contemporary sense. The passage believes in the chorus of Thomson's ode. Yet it has noticed, within a context of national self-belief, the human price paid for its local betrayals. This form of equivocation is fundamentally loyal to the terms of the national identity and projected destiny. It simply wants them more fairly

applied at home. Thus, in his piece of generosity to the dismay boy, Mr. Boffin is enacting an aspect of Thomson's patriotic fiction too. However much the clerk doubts the likelihood that, in his situation, he could ever 'come out with' a seat on the bench, the Golden Dustman will give Blight a hand up to becoming a Judge.

As the encounter draws to a close, the narrator renders Blight's responses in indirect speech. One purpose of this switch is to fade Blight out of the scene, while keeping the novel's main character at centre stage. It also serves to confirm the identification between the narrative voice and Blight. Dickens can thus attribute ironic turns of thought to the dismal boy, turns that seem inappropriate to the clerk's character as so far defined by his behaviour and direct speech. 'The boy virtually replied that as he had the honour to be a Briton who never never never, there was nothing to prevent his going in for it.' How would Blight have 'virtually replied'? It sounds as if he didn't actually say it. By now the dismal boy is a fictional convenience too.

Then Mr. Boffin 'made him a present of the sum of money, and thanked him for his attention to his (Mr. Boffin's) affairs; which, he added, were now, he believed, as good as settled.' Has Boffin bribed Blight? No, but he has pretended to bribe him. Dickens's final paragraph is a further instance of Mr. Boffin's playing along with the fiction. It would be demeaning for Blight to receive 'a present of that sum of money', demeaning for him to be the subject of a mere act of charity on Boffin's part — though that's what is happening. So, to conceal such an implicitly humiliating interpretation, Mr. Boffin makes out that the money is a lubricant given to the clerk to ensure that his appointment will take place, and that Blight will help to facilitate the successful outcome of his, Mr. Boffin's, affairs. The fiction of Blight's occupation is maintained by Boffin (and by Dickens) to the very end. It has been revealed to us as a most ludicrous fiction, and in the equivocation between those levels of game playing, more pointed reflections on the nature and purpose of the novelistic art than Dickens might have cared openly to acknowledge are allowed to proliferate.

That's why Blight's strict system and the narrator's comment could be adopted by another dismal boy to cast a cold eye on his first job, and to worry about the function of his desire to write and publish poetry. Nor am I the only one to have adopted an allusion to *Our Mutual Friend*. *The Waste Land* manuscript, published in 1971, revealed how the Lloyds Bank clerk T. S. Eliot might have called his poem *He Do the Police in Different Voices*. Betty Higden's comment on her adopted foundling Sloppy's skills as a performer of newspaper reports would have signaled the height of avant-garde art circa

1922. Similarly, in his 1995 book *Catching up with History*, the Liverpool poet Matt Simpson takes a snatch of dialogue between Silas Wegg — that, I hope you'll grant, less savoury public reader — and Mr. Boffin. Simpson's epigraph starts with the Golden Dustman remarking that 'if you don't read ... many a book in summer, ay, and as a friend, drop into poetry too, it shan't be my fault.' These three borrowed passages each comment on written texts and social performances, on how fictions can be convenient deceptions or psychological necessities. They deploy the comic to disarm the dismal and the sinister. Little wonder, then, that struggling poets, whether their works prove temporary or not, should be so drawn to Charles Dickens's great swan song.