

The Possibility of Postcolonial Sympathy in *Little Dorrit* : Reading Dickens for a Reconciliation between Richard Rorty and Homi Bhabha

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1. The Affective Turn and Dickens Studies

Dickens is perceived to be an outstanding novelist who developed a language of sentiments in English literature. In his analysis of obituaries for Dickens circulating in 1870, Philip Collins points out that Dickens's contemporaries discussed "the quality of his pathos" as the central question in the critical assessment of his works, while also acknowledging "[t]he moral decency of his sentiments" (503). In this respect, the relation of sentimentalism to morality has been one of the essential issues in Dickens studies ever since his death. In *Dickens and the Sentimental Tradition* (2012), however, Valerie Purton claims that, after the twentieth century, a new intellectual current outside Dickens studies prompts a different focus on his language of sentiments:

Interest in "affect" has increased in recent years, with the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in philosophy and of Patricia Ticineto Clough and others in the social sciences and in cultural theory. This has led to a new interest in affective theories of the body, in the physical manifestations of emotion. In 2010, a one-day conference at the University of London was entirely devoted to "Mr. Popular Sentiment: Dickens and Feeling" and included recent work by Isobel Armstrong, Nicola Bown and Catherine Waters, among others, on Dickens and affect. (xvii)

The new critical approach to the language of sentiments aims to reshape our understanding of affect and related concepts such as sentiments, sympathy, and sensitivity through readings of Dickens. According to Purton, the affective turn in Dickens studies intends to overcome anti-sentimentalism in the twentieth century through a dialogue with

contemporary philosophy (154–59). At the same time, this intellectual ambition seems to remain compatible with traditional appreciation of the uniqueness of Dickens’s language of sentiments.

Purton notes that although there are earlier pioneering philosophical writings about sentimentality, the affective turn is usually identified as a dominant intellectual trend in the twenty-first century (155–56). In this respect, it is worth noting that two philosophers in the late twentieth-century, Martha C. Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, have come to discuss Dickens as part of the development of their moral theories of sympathy. Purton, however, refers to neither Nussbaum nor Rorty in *Dickens and the Sentimental Tradition*, despite their direct and explicit engagement with questions of literature.

In “Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory” (1989), Nussbaum criticizes the neglect of moral philosophy in current literary theory despite an increase in conversations on ethics among philosophers, psychologists, cultural anthropologists, and economists, including an interdisciplinary inquiry into emotion (59–60). Therefore, her discussion aims to present “a literary theory that works in conversation with ethical theory” (81). Nussbaum becomes interested in reading of Dickens’s novels as an actual practice of the dialogue between these two. In *Poetic Justice* (1995), Nussbaum focuses on Dickens’s *Hard Times* to clarify the presence of “rational emotions,” particular emotions that help our moral judgment (72). Following Adam Smith’s theory of moral sentiments, Nussbaum explains why ideal rationality in public life is impossible without cooperation with sympathy (72–73). As a result, her philosophical reading of *Hard Times* emphasizes the continuity between the intellectual legacy of the eighteenth century and Dickens.¹

Richard Rorty is another philosopher whose writings can be seen as a prelude to the affective turn in Dickens studies. Rorty was highly influential in the intellectual landscape of the 1980s following the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979; hereafter *PMN*), in which he presents his radical anti-foundationalist critique of modern philosophy. This book aims to “undermine the reader’s confidence in ‘the mind’ as something about which one should have a ‘philosophical’ view, in ‘knowledge’ as something about which there ought to be a ‘theory’ and which has ‘foundations,’ and in ‘philosophy’ as it has been conceived since Kant” (*PMN* 7). As a result of a complete renunciation of the traditional way of philosophical thinking, Rorty needs to propose a viable alternative method. This is the main reason both sympathy and literary criticism, particularly in the case of Dickens, become his main concern.

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989; hereafter *CIS*), Rorty suggests that our

faculty of sympathy, “the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers,” is a significant catalyst for achieving solidarity (xvi). He then envisions a philosophy of moral sentiments without foundation. As part of this scheme, he intends to facilitate cooperation between philosophy and literary criticism because literary works are capable of expanding the scope of sympathy by “detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like” (xvi). Since Rorty describes this process of expansion as a “liberal” struggle, his approach to literature and sympathy can be called “liberal” criticism (xv–xvi). In this manner, the pursuit of anti-foundational philosophy leads him to conceptualize sympathy in relation to literature and literary criticism.

His reference to Dickens in *CIS* chiefly appears in Part III, entitled “Cruelty and Solidarity,” where Rorty examines the possibility, and also the limit, of the expansion of sympathy through the literary form. He recognizes Dickens’s novels as a distinctive form of narrative “about the ways in which particular sorts of people are cruel to other particular sorts of people” (141). For instance, *Bleak House* “dramatize[s] the conflict between duties to self and duties to others” (141). In addition, Rorty’s introduction of Dickens to the discussion intends to challenge the common understanding of the relation between Vladimir Nabokov and George Orwell, which is sometimes presented as a conflict between the aesthetic and the social (144–46):

So as a first stage in reconciling Orwell and Nabokov I would urge that Orwell shares some important purposes with Dickens (producing shudders of indignation, arousing revulsion and shame), and Nabokov shares others (producing tingles, aesthetic bliss). (148)

Rorty aims to indicate that Nabokov and Orwell potentially share the same concern about cruelty. Nabokov presents “the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty,” while Orwell depicts the social victim of cruelty (146). For Rorty, their seeming difference is due to their focus on different aspects of cruelty. Rorty uses Dickens’s novels to illustrate how Nabokov’s narrative of cruelty is compatible with Orwell’s. This inquiry into the representation of cruelty in Dickens’s novels discloses the possible limit of sympathy through the imaginary encounter with the character Harold Skimpole, who is incapable of expanding his sensitivity towards people in agony, in *Bleak House* (157). For Rorty, therefore, Dickens is an eminent novelist who reveals the crux of sympathy with his critical insight into cruelty. With this perception of the possible limit

of sympathy, he proceeds to consider how further expansion of sympathy and the achievement of a liberal society are still possible.

The work of Nussbaum and Rorty indicates the usefulness of critical interaction between the moral theory of sympathy and literary interpretation of Dickens's novels in the late twentieth century. In this paper, I would like to provide one further example of the exchange between these two by focusing on the theoretical conflict between Richard Rorty and Homi K. Bhabha, whose critique of *CIS* will introduce the postcolonial perspective into our understanding of sympathy. This confrontation between Rorty's liberalism and Bhabha's postcolonialism corresponds to the encounter between the liberal interpretation of Dickens and the postcolonial one. I will argue that *Little Dorrit*, a novel by Dickens that has both liberal and postcolonial elements, presents a feasible reconciliation between these two by depicting the possibility of postcolonial sympathy.

2. Rorty's Liberalism and Bhabha's Postcolonialism

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha points out that Rorty unconsciously excludes the postcolonial subject from the liberal realm of sympathy (275-76). The following passage from *CIS* is examined by Bhabha to elucidate Rorty's blindness to the postcolonial subject:

This [The statement that contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement] is, of course, not to say that the world has had the last *political* revolution it needs. It is hard to imagine a diminution of cruelty in countries like South Africa, Paraguay, and Albania without violent revolution. But in such countries, raw courage (like that of the leaders of COSATU or the signers of Charta 77) is the relevant virtue, not the sort of reflective acumen which makes contributions to social theory. In such places the sort of "unmasking" which Foucault is so good at is irrelevant. For there power swaggers naked, and nobody is under any illusions. (*CIS* 63 n. 21)

Bhabha suggests that Rorty divides our world into two separate spaces (275-76). The first social space is Europe and America, where liberal politics matters. The second social space is non-Western countries where liberalism does not work, and where other political principles should be introduced. Therefore, the postcolonial subject is located outside of the liberal vision. Bhabha assumes that Rorty's liberal sympathy is only valid inside

Europe and America.

This potential absence of the postcolonial subject from liberal sympathy also matters in the possible tension between the liberal and postcolonial interpretation of Dickens. On one hand, Rorty highly appreciates the works of Dickens as those of a liberal icon. In “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” Rorty recognizes the voices of Dickens’s novels as engaged in the liberal struggle against “concrete cases of particular people ignoring the suffering of other particular people” (79). Whereas Rorty establishes the basic framework of this liberalist approach to Dickens, Amanda Anderson puts this into practice in the field of English literary studies. In “The Liberal Aesthetic,” Anderson devotes her attention to the historical correspondence between “the formal characteristic of realist works and structuring challenges of liberalism” (259). This becomes the central issue of Victorian literature in particular, because Dickens refines realism into a sophisticated form with which to present social issues. Therefore, she proposes that this liberalist approach “can provide fresh angles of interpretation on writers such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope” (259). The liberal interpretation of Dickens positively describes his novels as showing critical sensitivity towards the pains of the unfamiliar subject.

The postcolonial approach to Dickens, on the other hand, negatively emphasizes his blindness to imperial violence. While Bhabha does not conduct any detailed examination into his novels, Edward Said notes the continuity between the voice of Dickens and that of imperialism. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said considers the narcissistic sensitivity in *Dombey and Son* with reference to British imperial expansion in the 1840s (13–14). For Said, the form of literature, the novels of Dickens in particular, “consolidate[s] the practice of empire” rather than illustrating the violence in the imperial periphery (14). While the novels of Dickens describe the pains within his own society, this postcolonial approach aims to reveal their possible insensitivity to the pains of colonial subjects, the limit of the liberal imagination.

3. The Possibility of Postcolonial Sympathy in Rorty

The crucial question is whether it is really impossible to reconcile Rorty’s liberal sensitivity with Bhabha’s postcolonial critique. There lingers the possibility that Rorty’s liberal sympathy transforms into postcolonial sympathy. Uday Singh Mehta, in fact, affirms that Rorty’s presentation of sympathy confirms him as a postcolonial thinker. In his introduction to *Liberalism and Empire*, Mehta classifies liberalism into two categories.

The first one is nineteenth-century British liberalism, which cooperates with the imperial project to assimilate the unfamiliar subject outside Europe (17–20). The second one is Rorty’s liberalism, which is potentially against the violence of abstraction in imperialism (41–44).

Mehta locates the distinction between these two in their different attitudes towards the unfamiliar subject and culture. On one hand, nineteenth-century liberalism assumes that “the strange is just a variation on what is already familiar, because both the familiar and the strange are deemed to be merely specific instances of a familiar structure of generality” (20). This “familiar structure of generality” works as the ideological foundation of the imperial project to assimilate the cultural other based on “notions of superiority and inferiority, backward and progressive, and higher and lower” (20). The singularity of the unfamiliar subject and culture is ignored by this process of generalization. In this respect, this violence of abstraction is the crux of imperialism.

On the other hand, Rorty’s liberalism rejects this “familiar structure of the generality” due to his anti-foundationalism (21–22). Mehta translates this attitude into a postcolonial acknowledgement of cultural singularity. In addition, he describes the enlargement of sympathy as the crucial moment of the encounter with the unfamiliar (22). This intercultural encounter entails “the possibility of being confronted with utter opacity — an intransigent strangeness, an unfamiliarity that remains so, an experience that cannot be shared, prejudice that do not readily fuse with a cosmopolitan horizon, a difference that cannot be assimilated” (22). Therefore, Rorty’s liberal sympathy, through its identification with the suffering victim, is distinguished from imperial assimilation.

Although Mehta says nothing about the intellectual exchange between Rorty and Bhabha, Rorty’s division of the world, the crux of Bhabha’s attack, can be recognized as a part of the struggle against the familiar structure from this perspective. The separation of these two spaces in Rorty does not necessarily mean the lack of mutual interaction between them. Mehta implies the possibility of the validity of Rorty’s liberal confidence that “wider bonds of sympathy can be forged” based on this exchange of sentiments between Western and non-Western subjects (22).

4. Arthur Clennam and the Practice of Liberal Sympathy

Mehta’s postcolonial reading of Rorty implies that it is possible for liberal sympathy to be transformed into postcolonial sympathy. This theoretical reconciliation between Rorty and Bhabha might reshape our understanding of the clash between liberal Dickens

and postcolonial Dickens.² The central question is whether we can find the very moment of this transformation in Dickens's novels, which Rorty greatly appreciates as an embodiment of the liberal ideal.

Out of all of Dickens's novels, *Little Dorrit*, which portrays Arthur Clennam, a man who was forced to sacrifice his youth for oriental trade, is an interesting example through which to approach the question of liberalism and postcoloniality. The story of this unfortunate protagonist cannot be separated, after all, from the shadow of the British Empire. In addition, Clennam is depicted as a man of great sympathy. His passionate support to the injured foreigner is thereby a clue in the examination of liberal sympathy in *Little Dorrit*.

My reading of *Little Dorrit* suggests that the possibility of postcolonial sympathy is embodied in Clennam. First, I will explicate his liberal aspect, of which his sensitivity towards suffering could be considered to be what Rorty conceptualizes as liberal sympathy. Then, I will proceed to discuss how Clennam confronts the imperial issue as a part of his sentimental life, his past career as an international trader in China having shaped the basic structure of his sensitivity. This connection between the development of his sensitivity and the imperial experience will clarify the possibility of postcolonial sympathy in *Little Dorrit*.

Arthur Clennam has been haunted by the anxiety that "some one may have been grievously deceived, injured, ruined" by his parents as international traders (63). This keen sensitivity towards suffering will connect *Little Dorrit* with Rorty's philosophical vision of sympathy. The important point is that Clennam's concern about the pain of other people is not limited to domestic affairs. His active support of John Baptist Cavalletto is an interesting example of how Clennam's sensitivity extends to people who are foreign to his family guilt.

The encounter between Clennam and Cavalletto is a chance event. After his arrival in London, Clennam notices the injured foreigner surrounded by "a crowd of people" on the pavement (177). Although these "bystanders" know that the foreigner has been wounded in a traffic accident with a mail coach, they must confront the problem of communicating with a person who cannot speak English (177-78). Unlike these bystanders, Clennam can understand "a feeble voice" uttered by the injured foreigner (178). Therefore, Clennam decides to help him as a translator:

"That's well. You are a traveller?"

"Surely, sir."

“A stranger in this city?”

“Surely, surely, altogether. I am arrived this unhappy evening.”

“From what country?”

“Marseilles.”

“Why, see there! I also! Almost as much a stranger here as you, though born here, I came from Marseilles a little while ago. Don’t be cast down. . . . I won’t leave you, till you shall be well taken care of. Courage! You will be very much better, half-an-hour hence.” (178; bk. 1, ch. 13)

Clennam comes to forge a sentimental tie with Cavalletto through their conversation, in which he finds that both of them are strangers in the city. As a result, he comes to see the injured man as his fellow rather than a mere foreigner. This process is somewhat similar to what Rorty presents in *CIS* as “the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers” (xvi). Before the appearance of Clennam, no one had listened to Cavalletto’s voice. Therefore, this conversation between Clennam and Cavalletto is the precise moment at which Cavalletto is transformed from an object into a subject. The bystanders are not sure whether the injured foreigner is a “Frenchman” or “Porteghee” or “Dutchman” or “Prooshan” or some other nationality (178). In other words, they perceive him as something unfamiliar in a vague sense, and he accordingly becomes the object of their observation. This is the process through which his presence is subsumed into their general notion of the foreign. As opposed to this abstraction, Clennam recovers Cavalletto’s personality and concreteness by acknowledging him through conversation. Through this defense of Cavalletto’s concreteness, Clennam’s power of sympathy resists the violence of abstraction. In this sense, Rorty’s philosophical vision of sympathy and anti-foundationalism is embodied in Clennam’s behavior.

In *The Powers of Distance*, Amanda Anderson points out that Clennam’s “delicate intercultural negotiations” become possible due to his “alienated relation to his homeland” (85). In the conversation with Cavalletto, Clennam presents himself as a stranger to the city, due to his long exile from England. For Anderson, “the story of Arthur Clennam” symbolizes “a particular form of critical cosmopolitanism” that problematizes the intercultural exchange underlain by the global experience (71). Therefore, *The Powers of Distance* emphasizes the meaning of Clennam’s return to London after his “twenty years in China” (72). Anderson suspects that “the vague sense of guilt haunting this commercial traveler from the east” is connected to “a wider sensitivity to the violence of British global capitalism and imperial concerns” (72). This

indication is quite essential to my pursuit of postcolonial sympathy in *Little Dorrit*, because Anderson clarifies the remarkable link between critical sensitivity and the imperial experience in the characterization of Clennam. Therefore, the next task of this paper is to discuss the function of Clennam's liberal sympathy in the imperial setting of *Little Dorrit*.

5. Arthur Clennam and the Imperial World

The story of Arthur Clennam is characterized by his resistance to two powerful authorities: Mrs. Clennam and the Barnacle family. In the domestic space, he opposes the continuation of the family business of oriental trade, managed by Mrs. Clennam, from which the Clennams have been profiting since before his birth. Clennam perceives that his mother has been the central authority in this commercial activity as well as the household issue. It was Mrs. Clennam, after all, who once decided to send him to China to look after the family business (62). Despite a recent decline in their dealings, Mrs. Clennam expects her son to “infuse new youth and strength into” the oriental business (67). However, one of the main purposes of Arthur's return from China to London is to propose they “abandon the business” (61). This decision is a remarkable moment in his life, because it is the first time he has expressed his own will, contrary to his mother's authority.

Before his arrival in London, Clennam confesses that twenty-year stay in China has broken his personality (35). He describes this past as an “exiled” experience, in which he was “shipped away to the other end of the world,” and is not willing to be engaged with oriental trade any longer. As a victim of the family business, Clennam has experienced how oriental trade torments those who are engaged in this commercial activity. In this respect, his past and his sensitivity are deeply connected to his experience of imperialism.

There seem to be two major reasons that Clennam is so eager to renounce his family dealings in China. In the first place, he points out that his family has failed to keep “track of the time” in the oriental business (60). In addition, he confesses the concern that “some one may have been grievously deceived, injured, ruined” by his father's activities as an oriental trader (63). This statement implies a loose connection between his liberal sensitivity towards those who suffer and his vague anxiety in regard to commercial activities in China.

In “The Opium Trade and *Little Dorrit*,” Wenying Xu suggests that Clennam's involvement with China raises the question of opium trade (55). According to this

interpretation, it is estimated that “Arthur’s twenty years of business in China dates roughly between 1805 and 1825,” and that “the opium trade was already rapidly expanding” in this period (55). The Clennams, however, are assumed to import cotton into China from India, under the monopoly of the East India Company over the Chinese market (55–56). Xu concludes that the family business became ineffective because the Clennams treat raw cotton, rather than opium, as the main commodity (56). In other words, Clennam needed to trade in opium if he intended to halt the decline of the family business in China. Therefore, his withdrawal from oriental trade implies that he is reluctant to participate in imperial crime. In this manner, Xu characterizes Clennam’s vague sense of guilt as the collective anxiety of empire (58). There is the imperial negotiation between Britain and China behind Clennam’s domestic conflict with his mother.

Clennam’s abandonment of the oriental business is a turning point in his life. It is an attempt to recover his own will by fighting the authority of his mother. This is also the decisive moment at which his sensitivity comes into conflict with imperialism. His concern about the potential victims of the family business motivates him to decline further involvement with oriental trade. Thus, his liberal sensitivity leads him to avoid contributing to imperial guilt in China.

In the case of Clennam’s domestic affairs, the connection between liberal sympathy and the critique of imperialism remains vague and loose. His resistance to imperial authority becomes more explicit when he struggles against the Circumlocution Office, which is governed by the Barnacle family. Like his abandonment of the family business, Clennam chooses to act on his own will and oppose the Office (539–42). In his introduction to *Little Dorrit*, Stephen Wall points out that “Barnacleism has become not only national but imperial” (xxiii):

No intrepid navigator could plant a flag-staff upon any spot of earth, and take possession of it in the British name, but to that spot of earth, so soon as the discovery was known, the Circumlocution Office sent out a Barnacle and a dispatch-box. Thus the Barnacles were all over the world. . . .” (422 ; bk. 1, ch. 34)

The prosperity of the Barnacle family is dependent on the construction of an imperial network. The more the British Empire expands its political and economic territory, the more members of this family may be sent to the imperial periphery to secure colonial interests. The Circumlocution Office decides who will hold administrative posts, such as

“a Chinese consul” and “a governor-general of India,” in the imperial peripheries (429). Thereby, the Office functions as an authoritative center to maintain this imperial network.

Clennam is recognized as “a most ferocious Radical” by the Barnacle family because of his objection to the norm of the Circumlocution Office (225). He frequently appears in “[t]he waiting rooms of that Department” to address his complaints about the public policy of the Circumlocution Office (542). His antagonism towards the Barnacle family has a suggestive implication in the context of postcolonial criticism. Since Clennam was exhausted by his duty as an oriental trader, a position that potentially contributed to maintenance of the imperial connection between Britain and China, he is also a victim of the imperial network. In this sense, he is a postcolonial subject who has suffered due to the violent forces of imperialism. Therefore, his resistance is a postcolonial objection to imperial authority. Thus, the story of Arthur Clennam demonstrates the practice of postcolonial intervention, in addition to the enlargement of liberal sensitivity.

Interestingly, Clennam’s treatment of Cavalletto dramatizes the way in which the enlargement of liberal sympathy is transformed into a critique of imperialism. After Cavalletto’s recovery from the traffic accident, Clennam struggles to secure a living space for this foreigner. This is why Clennam attempts to introduce Cavalletto to the local community of Bleeding Heart Yard (321–23). The residents of Bleeding Heart Yard, however, are deeply imbued with anti-foreign sentiments originating from the Barnacles (322). The Circumlocution Office repeatedly proclaims that foreigners are potentially harmful to the domestic residents, and that they are miserably inferior to Englishmen (322). These prejudices lead the people of Bleeding Heart Yard to believe that foreigners are “always immoral” and have “no independent spirit” (322–23). The statement that “every foreigner has no independent spirit” seems to share with the logic of imperialism the sentiment that the unfamiliar is always inferior. Therefore, the treatment of Cavalletto represents a fundamental clash between liberal vision and imperial ideology. Clennam encourages the residents to recognize Cavalletto as their fellow, while the Office advocates the exclusion of this foreigner.

Although facing prejudice, Cavalletto remains in good spirits while living in Bleeding Heart Yard, “as if he were in the most flourishing circumstances” (322). As a result of their daily encounters with this cheerful foreigner, the local residents come to realize that he is “doing no harm, drawing no knives, committing no outrageous immoralities” (323). In this respect, by placing Cavalletto among the local residents, Clennam partially succeeds in changing the perception of foreigners by the people of Bleeding Heart Yard.

On the other hand, this postcolonial intervention does not achieve complete subversion of imperial ideology. Unlike Clennam, these local residents do not cultivate sympathy towards the foreigner. They still see Cavalletto as inferior because of “his childish English” (323). Adopting what they assume to be his poor linguistic faculty, the local residents address him using primitive language similar to that “addressed by the savages to Captain Cook, or by Friday to Robinson Crusoe” (323). Despite Clennam’s liberalist struggle against the logic of imperialism, which constructs a division between the superior and the inferior, it is still retained by the local residents.

6. Two Different Types of Liberalism in *Little Dorrit*

Just as Mehta distinguishes between Rorty’s liberalism and nineteenth-century liberalism, *Little Dorrit* also suggests two different types of this philosophy. This is exemplified by the difference between Clennam and Mr. Meagles, who first appears in the second chapter of this novel as Clennam’s fellow oriental traveler.³ His family are enjoying a trip around the world, thanks to his success as a banker (34–35). On the surface, he also seems to have the same liberal sensitivity as Clennam. Firstly, he looks after an orphan from the Foundling Hospital in London because his family, Mrs. Meagles in particular, were affected by “this forlorn world” of the orphan (32–33). He is willing to welcome an unfamiliar subject into his private space as one of his own family members. Secondly, he also expresses anger against the inefficiency of the public administration (137). He voices passionate support for Daniel Doyce, an international engineer, and realizes the acute need to reform his own society (134–36). Like Clennam, Mr. Meagles is antagonistic to the present condition of authority.

Meagles’s liberal attempt is, however, unsuccessful compared with that of Clennam. The orphan considers Mr. Meagles to be a selfish man and hates him (40). This is because Mr. Meagles did not hesitate to change her name, from Harriet to Tattycoram, without consulting her (33). Therefore, to her, his liberal practice is just a sham. His blind struggle to protect the orphan becomes a violent oppression of her voice. In addition, his liberal sensitivity is easily incorporated into the practice of imperialism, as his resistance to the Circumlocution Office gradually vanishes. Since his daughter is married to a relative of the Barnacle family in the Chapter thirty-four, he is absorbed into the present political arrangements. Thus, the story of Mr. Meagles symbolizes the failure of liberalism in *Little Dorrit*.

One of the capital differences between Clennam and Mr. Meagles is reflected in their

attitudes towards foreign languages. In *Charles Dickens's Networks*, Jonathan Grossman suggests that Mr. Meagles embodies “the nadir of language as a barrier,” while Clennam performs “the connective power of bilingualism” (191). On one hand, Clennam’s multilingualism is essential to his interactive communication with Cavalletto. On the other hand, Mr. Meagles is obsessed with being monolingual. He refuses to acquire “any knowledge whatever of the language of any country into which he travelled” (37). This monolingual principle was based on his “unshaken confidence that the English tongue was somehow the mother tongue of the whole world, only the people were too stupid to know it” (840). His intercultural negotiation assumes the cultural supremacy of English. Therefore, his approach to the unfamiliar is not an interactive dialogue between two different cultures, but rather an outward expansion of his own culture.

This national self-confidence indicates the ultimate complicity between Meagles’s liberalism and imperialism. Like Clennam, Mr. Meagles is described as having an oriental background. His oriental travel, however, did not arouse any concern about the imperial victim. He rather enjoys the encounter with the oriental attractions in Egypt such as “the Nile, and the Pyramids, and the Sphinxes, and the Desert” (35). For him, cultural otherness is not understood, but consumed, through these cross-cultural encounters. Therefore, his liberal voice, like much nineteenth-century liberalism, retains an imperial tint.

Meagles’s negative treatment of the unfamiliar also becomes visible at his cottage when he introduces his collection of artifacts commemorating his worldwide travels to Clennam:

Of articles collected on his various expeditions, there was such a vast miscellany that it was like the dwelling of an amiable Corsair. There were antiquities from Central Italy, made by the best modern houses in that department of industry; bits of mummy from Egypt (and perhaps Birmingham) . . . Roman cameos, Geneva jewellery, Arab lanterns, rosaries blest all round by the Pope himself, and an infinite variety of lumber. (210; bk. 1, ch. 16)

This collection is mainly composed of antiques and accessories from Italy, but also includes oriental articles. In *Excavating Victorians*, Virginia Zimmerman describes the collection as “exploitation” of the past because these foreign articles are stripped of their own historical contexts and fused into “his [Meagles’s] contemporary English life” (159). They are displayed without any systematic order. The only common feature among them

is that they are all unfamiliar to Mr. Meagles. These objects are labeled as equally foreign regardless of whether they are from Europe or the Orient. The internal difference among the unfamiliar never becomes Meagles's central concern. He just seems to enjoy them as something different, as his evaluation of them usually entails comparing them with his own culture (209). Thus, the historical and geographical distinctiveness of each article has been dissolved in this general abstraction of the unfamiliar. Mr. Meagles clearly suggests that the main aim of his travels is to amuse his family (34). Likewise, the artifacts in his collection are only consumed for the sake of his own amusement. Unlike Clennam, Mr. Meagles does not have any ethical perspective to treat their foreignness and local difference.

His liberal sensitivity is characterized by progress, expansion, and assimilation. In *Liberalism and Empire*, Mehta points out that liberal tolerance in the nineteenth century actually assumes "the notions of superiority and inferiority, backward and progressive, and higher and lower" (20). Whereas Clennam embodies Rorty's liberalism, Mr. Meagles exemplifies nineteenth-century liberalism.

7. The Ending of *Little Dorrit* and the Possible Crux of Postcolonial Sympathy

The story of Arthur Clennam presents the enlargement of the scope of his sympathy from the domestic space to the imperial world. The practice of liberal sensitivity entails active resistance to the present imperial authorities. Clennam's two decisions — withdrawal from oriental trade and his sympathetic actions towards the injured foreigner — imply the precise moment that liberal sensitivity is transformed into postcolonial sympathy. His individual achievement exemplifies the way in which Rorty's liberalism can be reconciled with Bhabha's postcolonial critique of imperialism.

The ending of *Little Dorrit*, however, might disclose a different aspect of postcolonial sympathy. The climax of the novel begins with the financial collapse of Merdle's Bank, which radically changes Clennam's social situation (743–44). As a result of this social turmoil, he loses his entire fortune and chooses to be imprisoned as a debtor in the Marshalsea, to atone for his guilt (744–50). His prison life seems to represent a regression of liberal sensitivity, because the prison wall detaches him from "the fevered world" (837). Finally, his serious concerns are limited to the private affairs of "Little Dorrit" (752). In this respect, his liberal sensitivity shrinks during this imprisonment despite its remarkable enlargement earlier.

Furthermore, the relation between Clennam and the Circumlocution Office is

changed during this time by Ferdinand Barnacle, who once called Clennam a radical. He visits the Marshalsea prison to arrange a particular agreement with Clennam:

“Oh yes, you are! You’ll leave here. Everybody leaves here. There are no ends of ways of leaving here. Now, don’t come back to us. That entreaty is the second object of my call. Pray, don’t come back to us. Upon my honor,” said Ferdinand in a very friendly and confiding way, “I shall be greatly vexed if you don’t take warning by the past and keep away from us.” (770; bk. 2, ch. 28)

Unlike Mr. Meagles, Clennam succeeds in avoiding complicity with the imperial structure enforced by the Barnacles. Ferdinand Barnacles, however, finds an alternative plan with which to deflect liberal resistance against imperialism. Ferdinand’s suggestion is based on the logic of a division between the private and the public. The Circumlocution Office withdraws from Clennam’s domestic space, and he is requested to withdraw from the social space of the Barnacles. Thanks to this division, the climax of the novel avoids a radical conflict between Clennam and the Barnacles. Whereas Clennam succeeds in eliminating imperial authority from his living space, the imperial structure still survives outside his own world.

It is easy to read the same procedure in the destruction of Clennam’s house, a symbol for the connection between the domestic and the imperial of his youthful days. After his refusal to continue with the business, Mrs. Clennam still clings to their oriental trade, which temporarily seems to be revived by virtue of the active participation of her servant, Jeremiah Flintwinch (67). His wife finds that there is “a fair stroke of business doing,” and “more people” than ever come to the office for commercial issues (361). This imperial connection, however, suddenly collapses due to the destruction of their house: “In one swift instant, ... it heaved, surged outward, opened asunder in fifty places, collapsed, and fell” (827). The Clennam family is not capable of continuing interaction with the imperial periphery because their commercial center is no longer available. What is more, as a result of this shocking event, Mrs. Clennam loses her ability to speak and cannot continue with her business in China (827). Additionally, Jeremiah seems to escape to Hague before the collapse of the house (828–29). In this manner, a series of events wipes those who are engaged with imperialism out of Clennam’s living world. His new life with Little Dorrit will be not haunted by the shadow of the Empire.

It is difficult to determine whether this problematic ending suggests the triumph of postcolonial sympathy or its failure, but it is still possible to grasp the central feature of

Clennam's postcolonial sympathy by examining the novel's climax. That is, so long as liberal sensitivity generates local resistance to imperialism, postcolonial sympathy cannot effect a radical subversion of imperialism.

In *Charles Dickens's Networks*, Jonathan Grossman indicates that "*Little Dorrit* represents how individuals within this system, who project an omniscient-like view of it, nonetheless must perpetually come to be aware that their own perspectives are always partial, incomplete, and belated" (195). This is exactly the case with Clennam. In his visit to the Circumlocution Office, Clennam is given a runaround from one department to another, and has no idea what each office actually does (122–30). Since the power of sympathy is based on the local relation between individual subjects, the language of sentiment finds it difficult to describe the whole picture. As a result, Clennam is unable to perceive the monstrous system of the Circumlocution Office. The interconnections are too dense and extensive for him to understand how it functions as a whole (Grossman 195). To complete the critique of imperialism, the liberal subject needs a language of system in addition to a language of sentiment.

8. Conclusion

Although the writings of Rorty are usually unfamiliar to those who pursue Dickens studies, his conceptualization of sympathy can provide a new theoretical framework with which to analyze the issue of sentimental narrative in the works of Dickens. In my reading of *Little Dorrit*, Rorty's own discussion of Dickens helps uncover the active aspect of Arthur Clennam. Clennam is the embodiment of Rorty's liberal vision of sympathy, because his sensitivity towards those who suffer advances the recognition of them as his fellows. His energetic aid toward Cavalletto illustrates the way in which anti-foundational sympathy shapes the sentimental tie that goes beyond national boundaries. In this way, Clennam's story depicts how the scope of his sensitivity is enlarged from domestic concern to what is foreign to him.

Clennam's liberal sympathy is different from Meagles's, which assimilates the concrete difference of the foreign into the familiar structure of generality. Just as Mehta distinguishes Rorty's liberalism and the nineteenth century's, *Little Dorrit* presents two different types of liberalism by emphasizing the difference between Clennam and Meagles. Clennam's liberalist struggle against Mrs. Clennam and the Circumlocution Office designates the precise moment at which the enlargement of liberal sensitivity becomes the critique of imperialism. Concern for the victim motivates him to fight

against the violence of imperial logic. Therefore, liberal sympathy can be transformed into postcolonial sympathy. To conclude, the plot of *Little Dorrit* offers a possible reconciliation between Rorty's liberalism and Bhabha's postcolonialism through its description of postcolonial sympathy.

Lastly, the ending of the novel suggests the possible crux of this postcolonial sympathy. Although Clennam's liberal sensitivity enables him to perceive imperial violence, he cannot apprehend the complete image of the imperial structure. Imperial authority remains in place at the end of the novel, even though Clennam succeeds in removing its interference from his private living space. This problematic ending may give rise to the question of whether or not the sympathetic man or woman in Dickens's works can acquire the social imagination that would enable them to grasp the complete structure of imperialism. Further examination of this connection/disconnection between sympathy and the social imagination will be the next task for those discussing Dickens using Rorty's theoretical language.

Notes

- 1 This might also be true for Rorty. In "Ethics without Principles" (1994), Rorty greatly appreciates David Hume's moral philosophy due to its acute consciousness of sentimentality (75–77). Although Rorty never explicitly refers to the direct link between Dickens and Hume, both of them are discussed under his conceptualization of sympathy.
- 2 The possibility of postcolonial sympathy is mainly discussed in studies of the eighteenth century. In *A Turn to Empire*, Jennifer Pitts describes Adam Smith as one of the "eighteenth-century critics of empire . . . with a sensitivity to cultural particularity that led them [these critics] to respect many of the values embodied in non-European societies" (244). If Dickens's sentimentality also can be seen as against imperialism, it might be indebted to this intellectual legacy of the eighteenth century. Nancy Yousef, in fact, points out that "Dickensian sympathy is worth recognizing as an inheritance of an influential strain of ethical psychology that prevailed in English culture *prior* to the dominance of Utilitarianism . . . , eighteenth-century sentimentalism" (54).
- 3 Rigaud could be another important character in discussion of liberal sympathy in *Little Dorrit*. Just as Rorty mentions Harold Skimpole as the example of the possible crux of liberal sympathy, the characterization of Rigaud seems to suggest a similar problem. Although Rigaud is proud to be "a citizen of the world," this "cosmopolitan" awareness does not cultivate sensitivity towards victims (24). Concerning the detailed analysis of his insensitivity, see Juliet John's discussion on Rigaud in *Dickens's Villains*. I am not going to proceed with substantial discussion on Rigaud because he has no direct link with the oriental world. Unlike Clennam and Meagles, his geographical perception is limited to Europe. This is the main reason I choose to discuss Meagles rather than Rigaud as part of the analysis of postcolonial sympathy in *Little Dorrit*.

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