‘The Cash Nexus’: Realism and Conspiracy in Balzac and Dickens

My gaze is like God’s: I can see into their hearts. Nothing is hidden from me. No one refuses the man who ties and unties the purse strings [...] Power and pleasure—do these two words together not sum up your whole social order? (Balzac, ‘Gobseck’)

Wonderful was the way in which she would store up the City Intelligence, and beamingly shed it upon John in the course of the evening: incidentally mentioning the commodities that were looking up in the markets, and how much gold had been taken to the Bank, and trying to look wise and serious over it until she would laugh at herself most charmingly and would say, kissing him: ‘It all comes of my love, John dear.’

(Dickens, Our Mutual Friend)

I.

In these two passages Balzac and Dickens provide the reader with very different illustrations of what money can do. Both come at significant points in the narratives’ management of information: Gobseck’s reflections on omniscience accompany the revelation that he is part of a brotherhood of moneylenders who, between them, surveil the social life of the whole of Paris. Bella Wilfer addresses her husband near the end of Our Mutual Friend, after his proper identity and inheritance have been restored, the predatory financial intrigues of others have been repelled, and harmony in the household and general economy has been established under the rule of ‘love’. This is not at how Balzac’s novella ends, with Gobseck dying alone in his apartment, surrounded by piles of perishable goods that have rotted and been claimed by
insects, but what the stories have in common is that the basis for representing the social life of the cities in which they take place is the circulation of money, whose volatility and mutability I associate (as have others) with literary realism in the nineteenth century (Brooks 2005; Kornbluh 2014; Lukács 1972; Vernon 1984). An association that has not been explored is between realism and the presence of a conspiracy that serves to frame and propel the narrative. My claim in this chapter is that in different but complementary ways, these novels rely on ‘conspiracy theories’ as the basis for their narrative presentation. Looking back at nineteenth-century fiction in which money relations (the ‘cash nexus’) are the basis for plots of deception and conspiracy, it also becomes clear that the origins of contemporary conspiracy theories about international finance lie in the literary form of realism.

There was something deeply suspicious about money and the behaviour it provoked. The deregulations of finance from the early nineteenth century onwards, including a removal of a ban on usury in 1833, the provision for joint-stock companies in 1844, and ongoing deregulation of financial speculation, established conditions for market volatility. Our Mutual Friend includes bankruptcy brought about by the fluctuations of ‘Shares. O mighty Shares!’ and a company whose principal activities are the extraction of interest on debt and trading in devalued bills of exchange. Walter Bagehot wrote in the Economist about the credit crisis of 1866 (shortly after the publication of Dickens’s novel) and described the social atmosphere when doubts about value leaked into the market: ‘Many people were a little suspected, and almost everybody shared in some infinitesimal distrust’ (2003 [1866]: 322). It’s surprising then that Bagehot, when writing as a literary critic, found fault in Dickens for his preoccupation with ‘the pecuniary side of life’ (1891 [1879], 2:194), considering how jitters in the money markets could create such
ideal social conditions for novels of modern life, in particular conspiracist plots of financial intrigue.

In his article ‘Against Plot’ in *Our Mutual Friend*, Michal Peled Ginsburg cites Franco Moretti’s work on the Bildungsroman and his claim that in the form’s English tradition the protagonist does not have the resources to generate plot on her own; plot relies on a villain who intervenes to deny her her rights, for instance of property. She fights back and ‘[p]lot is erased as a mere aberration or nightmare, the reign of innocence and order is restored’ (1992: 177). That formula is consistent with the antagonisms that drive the narrative of *Our Mutual Friend*, which rely on setting conspiracies of predatory, avaricious capitalism, at diverse social levels, against a model of the productive economy that was founded on honest and open personal relationships. In this ideal economy of just deserts, the protagonists’ moral education is accompanied by wealth and financial security is afforded the deserving poor. The predication of Dickens’s complicated plot on the (dis)entanglement of what he saw as distinct healthy and unhealthy economies (filth and lucre in Christopher Herbert’s article (2002)) reveals a fact also laid bare in Honoré de Balzac’s short fictions, namely that the circulation of money is the basis for realism’s conceit of being able to represent the ‘whole social order’ of the modern city.

Plots revolving around money were not new, but embedding narrative in a realist setting that implied the totality of social relations was. The basis for the wholeness of these worlds should be linked to the recognition that economic relations could penetrate the breadth of social experience, implying the connection between realism and money that this chapter explores. Moretti refers to the question asked in *Bleak House* that speaks equally to narrative construction and narrated intrigue (plot and *plot*): ‘What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of the world, who, from opposite sides of great gulsfs, have,
nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!’ His answer is that in Dickens’s London
novels, it is ‘always the same’: ‘a bloodline. Lost and disavowed children, secret loves of the
past, missing and stolen and insane wills: all acts that have separated into the many urban sub-
systems the family that now the novel brings together again’ (1999: 129, 130 (original
emphasis)). It is the instability that accompanies money that makes certain types of plot possible:
of social elevation and decline (fortunes acquired and lost), of mercenary alliances and criminal
conspiracies (plots to defraud), and how death transforms life (the inheritance).

The importance of contemporary fiction to economic analysis was apparent to nineteenth-
century commentators. Friedrich Engels wrote in a letter of 1888 that he had learned more from
Balzac ‘than from all the professed historians, economists, and statisticians of the period
together’ and Marx made Dickens first on his list of the ‘present splendid brotherhood of fiction-
writers in England’ who had ‘issued to the world more political and social truths than have been
uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together’ (1854). Pierre-
Joseph Proudhon was another enthusiastic reader of Balzac, also of the historian Michelet and
the poet Nerval. Paul B. Crapo argues it was his attachment to these romantic thinkers that
formed the basis for his ‘conspiratorial view of society’, which he epitomized in Confessions of a
Revolutionary (1851) as ‘the conspiracy of the altar, the throne, and the money-box’ (Crapo
1981: 190).²

The status of money, or the status to which it referred, underwent a transformation in the
European nineteenth century. Whereas money had previously been a token of wealth, whose
basis was in landed property, the more ephemeral and volatile signs of wealth such as clothing
and artworks increasingly became its evidence. The liquidity and transvaluation of wealth
allowed for deception and confusion, as Anna Kornbluh’s wonderful study of Financial and
Psychic Economies in Victorian Form shows by pointing out that in Samuel Johnson’s eighteenth-century dictionary, to ‘realize’ (in a financial sense) meant to convert liquid wealth into land (property). ‘The Victorian usage, by contrast, connotes the conversion of land into money, and more generally the conversion of assets, whether “real” estate or virtual futures, into the realer real of capital’ (2014: 2 (original emphasis)). Contrary to new historicist accounts of how realist novels naturalized the new social and economic order, Kornbluh argues that the realist novel was a form able to render the unreal transformations that accompanied the modern economy, or to ‘think the conditions of fictitious capital’ (4). Peter Brooks notices a paradox in Balzacin realism that is a consequence of money’s unreality: ‘[T]he world he describes in such impassioned detail seems, like the inflationary economy, menaced with collapse, mined from within by the threat of non-meaning.’ The city, under these conditions, appears as a series of ‘labyrinths, total environments where survival depends on your ability to read the signs, penetrate appearances’ (2005: 33, 22). The plots depend on the use of information and the practice of deception.

The moneylender is the best-equipped navigator of this labyrinth of speculation and false appearances, self-interest, and vanity. In Balzac’s story ‘Gobseck’ the circulation of credit and a conspiracy are the basis for realist representation of this volatile world. The titular character is a usurer, whose loans underwrite the bourgeois economy after the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in France. Omniscience is made plausible when narrative point of view can be attached to the moneylender’s privileged knowledge of his borrowers’ personal lives. In both ‘Gobseck’ and History of the Thirteen (L’histoire de Treize, 1833-35), Balzac situates these networks of influence as only part of a larger cabal of powerful men who ‘met together in the evenings like conspirators’ (Balzac 1974, 13), and whose secret society exists to surveil and
direct the social life of the city. The basis for the narrative omniscience is control of credit, which is embedded in conspiratorial networks and establishes a template for contemporary views (Balzac’s and of our own age) that political democracy is a diversionary spectacle while real power and control is exercised in the shadowy world of international finance.

In Dickens the situation is different. Writing about omniscience in *Our Mutual Friend*, Audrey Jaffe points out that the psychological realism of characters in the novel depends on their level opacity to one another, whether through deliberate deception or due to their variously constrained degrees of insight into human nature and the world. Omniscience is therefore the overall management of partial knowledge, ‘by means of which a narrator demonstrates his knowledge’ (1987: 91). Importantly, partiality of knowledge always involves money relations and the harmonization of personal relations is only possible when financial affairs are well regulated and full information is disclosed to all parties (including the reader). The novel ends with a healthy version of the economy available to the omniscient author and reader, whose view at the close is a more benevolent (motivated by ‘love’) but equally penetrating version of Gobseck’s godlike gaze.

The view that social relations were increasingly economic relations was a common diagnosis of nineteenth-century life, in and outside of fiction. The narrator of ‘Gobseck’ reflects that ‘Gold contains every potential and provides every reality’ (2014: 455) and Bella Wilfer famously acknowledges that ‘I have money always in my thoughts and my desires; and the whole life I place before myself is money, money, money, and what money can make of life!’ (Dickens 1997: 455). Karl Marx wrote in ‘The Power of Money’ that ‘[i]f money is the bond binding me to human life, binding society to me, connecting me with nature and man, is not money the bond of all bonds?’ (1844 (original emphasis)). Thomas Carlyle put it even more
succinctly in *Chartism* (1840), coining the term ‘cash nexus’ to describe the deplorable (to him) subordination of all relations to economic exchange. The phrase reappears in *Past and Present* (1843) in a complaint against the new religion of money: ‘Cash-payment the one nexus of man to man: Free-trade, Competition, and Devil take the hindmost, our latest Gospel yet preached!’ (1870: 212).

Carlyle’s critique cannot (and should not) be detached from anti-Semitism, for although *all* social relations are caught up in his claim, hostility towards Jewish moneylending is a consistent thread of *Past and Present*: the word ‘Jew’ appears 15 times in the text and in every case is associated with usury. The first instance is only the most graphic of Carlyle’s distasteful characterizations: he describes the dependence of the virtuous Abbot Hugo on ‘usurious insatiable Jews; every fresh Jew sticking on him like a fresh horseleech, sucking his and our life out; crying continually, Give, Give!’ (74). Oversight of money’s circulation has these associations also in the works by Balzac and Dickens considered here. We are told that Gobseck is half-Jewish, and in *Our Mutual Friend* the predatory money-lending business Pubsey and Co. *appears* to be fronted by Riah, who is Jewish (though he serves as a scapegoat who is exploited by the real owner). These stories of the power of money use or refer to the idea that Jews control modern social and political life through the control of credit—a conspiracy theory that is familiar to us today. To explore nineteenth-century literary realism’s reliance on relations of money, and to find that those relations were often framed as racially charged conspiracies, brings us face to face with an uncomfortably familiar problem: that critiques of the modern political economy are often deeply entangled with familiar tropes of predatory finance.

II.
History of the Thirteen (1833-35) refers in its title to a secret society and the preface begins: ‘In Paris under the Empire thirteen men came together’ (1974: 21). They are the Dévorants de Devoir (‘Companions of Duty’), ‘whose origins must be sought in the great mystic association formed among the craftsmen of Christendom for the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem’ (24). Balzac never provides a more detailed account than this vague sketch of ‘a sort of Society of Jesus in favour of the devil’ (26) and Herbert Hunt comments in his editorial note on the story that ‘Balzac’s ideas in this matter lack clarity’ (25n). We are told that the conspirators are criminals, but with remarkable qualities and that ‘the names of these thirteen men were never divulged’ (21). As Thomas Conrad observes, the fact that only four of the thirteen are actually named in the collection generates ‘the allure of mystery’ and Balzac’s re-use of characters throughout his work (sometimes as major, sometimes as minor ones) encourages the reader to search for other member of the thirteen elsewhere in his vast body of fiction (2016: 67).

A rare study of conspiracies in Balzac’s Comédie Humaine offers the formula: ‘One character influences a second character to act upon a third. This is the elemental structure of the Balzacian conspiracy’ (Mileham 1982: 16). According to this account it is the presence of intermediaries that generates narratives whose conspiracist character depends on a sequential series of relationships. This structuralist analysis confines the scope of conspiracy to the function of intermediary characters within the plot. It also precludes any connection between the presence of conspiracies and the representational modes that constitute realism, which of course link the stories to the ‘real’ Parisian scene that Balzac takes so much time to reflect on at the start of each of these stories before the narration of events. Also, by examining only the works of the Comédie Humaine, Milehan’s book does not consider the centrality of conspiracy to Balzac’s earlier
fiction. *History of the Thirteen* and the earlier ‘Gobseck’ (1830) refer directly to secret societies that conspire to direct and exploit affairs in Paris through a variety of means, whereas this scaffolding of conspiratorial association seems to drop out of Balzac’s later work. Conrad refers to the *Thirteen* as a ‘protocycle’ of stories that anticipated and was later absorbed into the larger *Comédie Humaine*, which he describes as ‘an immense mapping of contemporary society’s network of alliances’ (2016: 72 (my translation)). The first part of the title of Conrad’s article describes the change in Balzac’s fiction: ‘From closed circle to open network’ (*du cercle fermé au réseau ouvert*), and while this neatly summarizes the movement away from discrete narratives situated within a conspiratorial frame to a galaxy of Parisian stories, a tension between openness and closedness also operates within the idea of the conspiracy itself.

The description of the Thirteen in Balzac’s preface stages this tension at the level of syntax:

> This association, living in society but apart from it and hostile to it, accepting none of its principles, recognizing no laws or only submitting to them out of sheer necessity, devoted to one single cause, acting entirely and solely for any one of its members when he called for their collective assistance […] (26)

The fragment’s structure makes the meaning ambiguous. It may be that the final participle clause quoted here (‘acting entirely and solely for any one of its members’) defines the preceding one (‘devoted to one single cause’), but it is just as possible that this is simply the fifth in a series of participle clauses, all of which refer non-sequentially back to the first noun (‘this association’). Do the clauses radiate separately from the term they qualify, or are they arranged in a hypotactic series in which each is inflected by the previous one? The ambiguity is identical in the French-language original. The syntax reprises the structure of *History of the Thirteen* as a whole: the
stories feature elements of a secret society whose limited articulation blocks understanding of their overall purpose—the ‘one single cause’ that either is not named, or if it is, is a tautological one: ‘acting entirely and solely for any one of its members’. The single cause of the Companions of Duty (or Devotion) is to be devoted and loyal to one another—a closed circle to be sure. This puzzle reflects the important difference between Balzac’s and Dickens’s incorporation of conspiracy into narrative form: by the end of Our Mutual Friend the plots to defraud have been exposed, the conspirators expelled from the narrative, and there are no more secrets to reveal. In Balzac, the mystery of the Thirteen is never entirely disclosed.

The principal plots of all three novellas that make up History of the Thirteen are intrigues of passion set in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, though all depend on other locations, either in the city or outside France. In the first, ‘Ferragus: Chief of the Companions of Duty’, the rare phenomenon of an ideal marriage becomes contaminated and ruined by suspicion. Auguste de Maulincourt pursues a vain love of Clémence, the devoted wife of Jules Desmarets, to which end Auguste stalks her ‘as attentively as a police agent on the track of a conspirator’ (37) into the disreputable Rue Soly, where she appears to be pursuing an affair with the as-yet unnamed ‘Ferragus’, who is a criminal and member of the Thirteen. We and the other characters learn (too late) that he is her father because by this time Auguste has driven Jules to despair by denouncing the innocent Clémence of infidelity, causing her to die of a nervous condition. Like the other members of the Thirteen, Ferragus has almost supernatural powers at his disposal but they are no protection against the loss of his daughter and the story ends with the view from Jules’s carriage of Ferragus in broken senility.

The story is unlike the others, being the only one in which a member of the Thirteen is reduced to this condition; normally it is only the women who are destroyed. In ‘The Duchesse de
Langeais’ (who appears in passing in ‘Ferragus’) the Duchesse is so expert at playing the coquette that she awakens the passion of Armand, the Marquis de Montriveau, a soldier and explorer (and member of the Thirteen) overcoming his preternatural resistance to feminine charms. When he is made to realize (by another member of the Thirteen, Monsieur de Ronquerolles) that her love has not been in earnest he kidnaps her and begins heating the iron cross with which he will brand her. He relents only when she judges herself deserving of such punishment, at which point she withdraws to a convent on a Mediterranean island to sublimate her belated passion as religious devotion. The long Parisian episodes are bookended by later events: his discovery of her in religious penitence with which the story begins, and the ending, in which his attempt to liberate her is prevented only by the fact that she too has expired of a similar unspecified neurological ailment as Clémence’s. The story’s original title was explicit in its warning to women: ‘Ne touchez pas la hache’ (‘Touch not the Axe’). After one tale of an ideal love corrupted by suspicion and another of fatally mis-timed desire, ‘The Girl with the Golden Eyes’ is one of erotic passion fulfilled, between Henri de Marsay (a member of the Thirteen) and Paquita, whom he seduces. When Henri suspects her to be giving herself to another he resolves to murder her but arrives in her private apartment to find that her other lover is his own half-sister, who has committed the bloody crime already.

Why Balzac chose to set these stories within the conspiracist frame of the ‘Thirteen’ identified in the title and presented in the preface, is not at all obvious. None of the stories requires the presence of the secret society and although members of the Thirteen have near-supernatural faculties of strength, persuasion and intelligence, at no point does the plot turn on these powers. Hunt, in his introduction to History of the Thirteen, attributes the idea of the secret society to ‘an amusing though perhaps regrettable trait in Balzac’s psychology’, namely ‘a taste
for the mysterious and the terrible, the cloak-and-dagger element so characteristic in the
“Gothic” novel; Balzac even set up a secret society in 1838, named the Chevaux Rouges, though
this was apparently little more than a dining club (1974: 8, 9). While conspiracy may be
redundant to the stories, it is not extraneous to the realist narration. The representation of the
Faubourg Saint-Germain, within the wider social life of Paris, at a time when the nation state was
undergoing spasmodic political change, required a schema to tie these variegated social scenes
together—or a form of ‘cognitive mapping’ to use Jameson’s expression. Jameson makes this
point in The Geopolitical Aesthetic when he identifies a crisis of representation that emerges
when social systems are highly integrated through networks of communication that become the
only means of representing themselves as subject: ‘the representational solution as well as the
representational problem of this world system’s cognitive mapping’ (1992: 10). He admires
conspiracy fiction such as the novel The Crying of Lot 49 and the film Videodrome for their
placement of conspiracies within networks of communication: the postal system and broadcast
media respectively. In Balzac the schema of the conspiracy is the grounds for representing the
overlapping networks of erotic and financial interest for which the secret society was an
amenable aesthetic figure.

We see how this type of suspicion can destabilize the familiar object-world, and
particularly via communicative networks, as per Jameson’s point above. When Jules Desmarests
is considering how to intercept an anticipated letter from Ferragus (whom he suspects to be the
lover of his wife), he wonders how he could possibly outwit someone with such immense
resources of intelligence, for whose dark purposes the material world can be put to use:

But will this profoundly clever man, so logical in his slightest acts, who sees, foresees,
calculates and even divines our thoughts, will he even answer the letter? Is he not likely
to employ methods consonant with the power he wields? Will he not send his reply through the agency of some clever scoundrel, or perhaps in a jewel-case brought to her by some honest man who has no idea what he is carrying, or in the wrappings of shoes which a shopwoman will very innocently deliver to my wife? (107)

These material objects referred to here—jewellery and shoes—circulate in the economy of appearances of the Faubourg. The ‘methods consonant with the power he wields’ are to make use of the circulation of commodities that support the vanities of the Faubourg. To articulate vanity, commodity, desire and jealousy within the story Balzac needs a system of cognitive mapping. To do this he employs the figure of the conspiracy whose powers of omniscience and affinity with the false appearances of the commodity provide the schema for the realist representation of Paris at the start of the age of fictitious capital. The secret society, because invisible, serves as a background against which the visible narrated events can be set, and allows for them to be invested with mystery.

The earlier story of ‘Gobseck’ (1830) had already rehearsed a presentation of the social life of Parisian aristocratic life under the figure of the secret society. The narrator Derville is a lawyer who recollects his encounters as a young man with the moneylender Gobseck, who we learn was born in Holland in 1740 to a Dutch father and a mother described only as Jewish. His early career at sea has introduced him to adventure and fortune in all parts of the world (later, it is suggested he might have been a slave trader). Where Paquita’s transubstantiation into precious metal—an amalgam of gold and desire in Henri’s infatuated mind—Gobseck seems hardly alive: Derville wonders ‘Does he even know if a God exists, or an emotion, or women, or happiness?’ but immediately acknowledges that his world conquests and mastery of emotion have given him
a type of omniscience, for ‘in addition to his millions in the bank, he could also lay mental claim to the whole earth, which he had roamed, mined, weighed up, evaluated, and developed’ (232).

This is a story about omniscience, about the power to know that is granted the moneylender. Gobseck describes the range of his creditors: ‘It may be a girl in love, or an old shopkeeper sliding toward collapse, another desperate to cover up her son’s misdeeds, a starving artist, or some prominent figure who’s slipping in favor and for lack of money may lose the fruits of his work’ (241). He quibbles over pennies and charges his clients for the most trifling expenses incurred, so his miserliness is the precondition for the social range of Paris and its desperate dramas of money that opens up to him, and to Derville, and to us the reader. It is this passage that concludes with Gobseck’s terrifying declaration—‘My gaze is like God’s’—and the explicit connection between the control of credit and omniscience: ‘Nothing is hidden from me. No one refuses the man who ties and unties the purse strings’ (241).

Reprising the theme of money as a kind of heresy (‘a sort of Society of Jesus in favour of the devil’ as Balzac say of the Thirteen, and cash as ‘our latest Gospel’ for Carlyle), Gobseck refers to a ‘Vatican council’ of moneylenders, a secret society that surveils and controls the social life of the city: ‘There are a dozen of us here in Paris, all silent and unknown kings, the arbiters of your destinies’ (241). They pool knowledge in a ‘black book’ and each is the controller of a separate sphere. The judiciary, city finance, administration, and commerce each has its eminence grise that controls its credit. Gobseck himself is responsible for watching ‘eldest sons, the artists, fashionable society, the gamblers—the liveliest segment of Paris life’ (241-42). The suggestion of a conspiracy of moneylenders that controls the destinies of the city is like the frame of the Thirteen in that it provides a basis for knowledge of an entire city. The conceit of realism is to make this total knowledge plausible. Conrad, writing about the absorption of
conspiracist frame of *History of the Thirteen*, concludes that ‘[g]radually, the opposition between the pact of the secret society and the covenants of bourgeois society, between the unknown background and the formal settings of modern history, will eventually fade’ (72) but it seemed in *History of the Thirteen*, and prior to that in ‘Gobseck’, that to do so required an assembly of men from whom nothing could be hidden.

III.

*Our Mutual Friend* is a novel whose principal characters’ wellbeing depends on being able to distinguish between those who are trustworthy and those who only seem to be. The reader is permitted to immediately recognize some scoundrels, but is misled, along with the characters in the book, by other deceptions and conspiracies to deceive. To this extent, the novel is a world like ours, in which the reader is a citizen among others, whose power of judgment may be more or less astute. The rule of realist representation is partiality: to see a fraction of things but not the whole, for the idea of seeing the whole all at once—an impossibility—is veiled by a carefully curated atmosphere of mystery.

The first chapter, ‘On the Look Out’, is set on the river Thames with ‘Gaffer’ Hexam surveying the surface of the water for tell-tale ripples and half-seen objects. His daughter Lizzie manoeuvres the boat, horrified by the object of their search (we do not yet know what it is). His macabre trade is fishing bodies out of the river for financial reward and the shapes he is on the look-out for are of a face, a torso, a leg. Gregg A. Hecimovich connects the novel’s immediate attention to processes of acute observation with the paratextual clue that the first edition of the published novel included with the first page: a slip of paper that obscured part of the initial paragraph and announced an act of deferred decoding: ‘The Reader will understand the use of
the popular phrase OUR MUTUAL FRIEND, as the title of this book, on arriving at the Ninth Chapter (page 84)’ (1995: 959). In the popular print culture of games and puzzles, Dickens is said to be a ‘riddler’ who ‘mercilessly chops up the continuity of narrative, description, and plot, forcing his reader to despair finding order amidst a disjointed world that appears little more than an unstable heap of fragments’ (969). Hecimovich’s enthusiasm for the novel’s proto-Modernist, fragmentary qualities misses what I see as its insistent moral order. The narrative development is towards a restored economy (ruled by ‘love’) whose component parts all function in proper relation to one another like a clock. The degree to which the mechanism was distorted—chiming the wrong hours—is also the amount of pleasure experienced as Dickens recalibrates the workings so that we and the characters can eventually tell the proper time. The restoration of order involves the alignment of virtue and its economic and moral rewards, and the exposure of conspiracies to defraud that attempted to appropriate undeserved material reward. Through networks of virtue as well as networks of deception, the entire social range of a city becomes imaginable: no longer as partial and dubious knowledge, but as the extension of a virtuous paradigm.

The riverine economy of Limehouse in East London represents one end of the city’s totality; its social antipodes is the dining room of the Veneerings, whose social gatherings are occasions for self-promotion masquerading as generous human sentiment. By the end of the novel Veneering has become an MP (‘for the public good’) and soon after is bankrupted by financial speculation. The novel’s careful construction is evident in the progress of Twemlow, a minor character who on first arriving at the Veneerings is entirely confounded by the social pretence (an ‘abyss to which he could find no bottom’), but in the course of the story helps to expose a conspiracy to defraud and eventually, at the Veneering’s dining table again, speaks up
against class snobbery by defending the marriage of Eugene Wrayburn to the morally spotless
Lizzie Hexam—who aided her father in searching the Thames for profitable bodies in the first
chapter. These plots connect, as Moretti observed, through matters of inheritance and networks
of debt that gather up the strands of the novel’s range. In other words through a ‘cash nexus’ that
is both the novel’s subject and its principle of representation.

The inheritance that brings these social worlds together is constituted of ‘dust’: ‘Coal-
dust, vegetable-dust, bone-dust, crockery-dust, rough dust and sifted dust,—all manner of Dust’
(1997: 24). Dust swirls through the novel and city like the tide that ebbs and floods, and the
predominant fortune of the novel is amassed (as with Gaffer Hexam’s more macabre profession)
by collecting the shifting residue of city life and converting it into value. John Harmon is the
inheritor of this dust-wealth on the condition, set by his malicious father, of marrying Bella
Wilfer, a woman he does not know. He decides to exchange identities with a sailor who is then
killed and dumped into the Thames, found by Hexam in chapter one and mistakenly declared to
be Harmon. The real Harmon is also left for dead in the river but survives and resurrects himself
as John Rokesmith, in which role he is employed as secretary to ‘Noddy’ Boffin, known also as
the ‘Golden Dustman’. Boffin was the dust contractor of Harmon senior and becomes the
inheritor of the fortune following the presumed death of Harmon junior, and adapts to the role of
a man of means by spending lavishly (and, at first, generously), leading the unscrupulous seller
of ballads and imposter Silas Wegg to initiate a conspiracy against him. Boffin becomes aware of
the webs of insincerity that have surrounded him and adopts the pretence of becoming a miser in
order to test the virtue of others. He and Henrietta Boffin decide to execute the intention of the
will by taking on Bella as a surrogate daughter, which makes it possible for her and
Harmon/Rokesmith to meet and eventually fall in love without mercenary incentive on either’s
part. Meanwhile, Lizzie Hexam has sacrificed her own prospects to enable her younger brother to advance himself by enrolling at a school, where he is taught by the severe Bradley Headstone, who falls violently and disastrously in love with Lizzie. After the death of her father, Lizzie is sheltered by Riah, the ‘gentle Jew’ who acts as bookkeeper and public face of a predatory money-lending firm, Pubsey and Co., where he is racially abused by the real usurer (Fledgby) and made to act as lightning rod for others’ associations of Jews with exploitative finance.

The restoration of order requires that virtue is (eventually) rewarded with happiness and financial security, conspiracies to defraud are foiled, and—importantly—identities and things lose their ambiguous character and become knowable as they truly are. The dust settles and the novel comes to an end when the narrative no longer has the volatility and transformations of commodities to propel it. The passages in Our Mutual Friend where there is extreme attention to physical matter occur when the stability of the setting and its objects is most open to doubt. These are also the moments when the nature of characters’ intentions and association are most difficult to penetrate. The opening scene on the river is one example; passages where dust or paper blow through and gather are others. The meeting of Harmon (in disguise) and Pleasant Riderhood in her ‘Leaving Shop’ illustrates the point as well:

It was a wretched little shop, with a roof that any man standing in it could touch with his hand; little better than a cellar or cave, down three steps. Yet in its ill-lighted window, among a flaring handkerchief or two, an old peacoat or so, a few valueless watches and compasses, a jar of tobacco and two crossed pipes, a bottle of walnut ketchup, and some horrible sweets these creature discomforts serving as a blind to the main business of the Leaving Shop—was displayed the inscription SEAMAN’S BOARDING-HOUSE. (346)
Pleasant has established a trade from the flow of goods and people that pass through and briefly settle in Limehouse Hole. Her business is a pawnbroker of low-value goods, ‘lending insignificant sums on insignificant articles of property deposited with her as security’ (345). These items may seem ‘valueless’ but they are of the very same substance, if in in miniature, of the mounds of dust that loom above the story and instigate its narratives of deception. It is the detailed itemization of the material world in flux (causing it to be momentarily still) that constitutes an ‘antinomy’ of realism’s representation of the unstable commodity. It is fixed in time and space while registering the potential for mutability and change that vibrates within it. Jameson has recently described a similar but utopian volatility in literary realism’s contemplation of the object world, an ‘immanent transcendence, in which transformation of being would be somehow implicit in being itself, like a strange kind of wave running through matter, or a kind of pulsation of energy throbbing in the things themselves’ (2015: 216). In *Our Mutual Friend* there is a similar expectancy attached to material items, but one which I associate with the duplicitous economy of false appearances operating under figure of the conspiracy.

When Harmon enters the shop to confront Rogue Riderhood for his perjuries, Pleasant sizes him up to decide if he can be taken at face value as she would any other item of passing trade:

His manner was the manner of a sailor, and his hands were the hands of a sailor, except that they were smooth. Pleasant had an eye for sailors, and she noticed the unused colour and texture of the hands, sunburnt though they were, as sharply as she noticed their unmistakable looseness and suppleness, as he sat himself down with his left arm carelessly thrown across his left leg a little above the knee, and the right arm as carelessly
thrown over the elbow of the wooden chair, with the hand curved, half open and half
shut, as if it had just let go a rope. (347)

Harmon is here in disguise, probably in the costume of ‘Julius Handford’ that he briefly adopted
after his disappearance, but Pleasant with her eye for market value seems suspicious of these
‘careless’ mannerisms. She notices the absence of callouses on his hands even though he holds
them ‘as if’ he has just released a rope. The reader is encouraged to engage in some detective
work at this point and ask: has he stained his hands, or is it the remaining effects of exposure to
the sun in the southern country he has left in order to receive his inheritance? The foundation for
suspicion is the reader’s assumption that the novel is located within an analogue of our own
world of continuities and consistence, a ‘circle of solidarities’ as Roland Barthes describes the
reality effect in Balzac’s story ‘Sarrasine’ (1990: 156). The attention to colouring, texture, and
gesture are not given out of a love of detail for its own sake but to alert the reader to the duplicity
of these scrupulously rendered appearances, even if in this case and that of Boffin’s miserliness
the deceptions have virtuous ends.

This is not the case with the deceptions that are the daily business of Pubsey & Co.,
which pre dates and exploits any human or material resource it can turn into profit and advantage.
Fledgby’s favourite line of work is ‘bill-broking’, the purchasing of distressed securities at
heavily reduced rates and their realization at a higher price. There is so much bad credit in
circulation that these ‘queer bills’ are gathered into parcels or ‘lumps’ by his long-suffering
employee, Riah. Fledgby’s comments could not make the interchangeability of waste and value
any more clear: “Half the lump will be waste-paper, one knows beforehand,” said Fledgby.
“Can you get it at waste-paper price? That’s the question”’ (420). There was concern at this time
about how, following banks’ ability to issue and trade their own bills, their traded value could
easily fall beneath their face value. J. S. Fleming, Esq. was interviewed by the Select Committee on the Operation of the Bank Acts and the Causes of the Recent Commercial Distress in 1858; his explanation of which Western Bank’s bills had devalued conveys the volatile value of paper currencies:

I think the Western Bank perhaps discounted as largely London bills as any other bank in Scotland, and thereby they provided London money to meet those adverse exchanges, while the proceeds of those London bills when discounted found their way into other banks, and came against the Western Bank in the exchange; they were getting London bills and giving in exchange Scotch money. (‘British Parliamentary Papers: Monetary Policy Commercial Distress 4’: 371)

As well as this speculation in vulture funds (to borrow a more modern expression), Fledgby is a usurer and so represents the traits of predatory capitalism associated in Victorian London with Jewishness, a characterization that Deborah Epstein Nord describes as ‘economic anti-Semitism’, which she illustrates with reference to the cameos of Jewish sellers and lenders that appear in Henry Mayhew’s 1861-62 study of London Labour and the London Poor (2011: 28). Fledgby’s use of Riah, then, as the figurehead of his firm is an act of deception that exploits anti-Semitic tropes. Wrayburn, Headstone, and Jenny Wren reveal their limitations by the degree to which they misunderstand the virtuous Riah and fall back on a prejudicial stereotype. Nord summarizes the origins of the character of Riah in Dickens’s own history. Dickens expressed private concern in 1860 that the buyer of his Tavistock House, a ‘Jew Money-Lender’, would conduct the purchase unscrupulously (quoted in Nord 2011: 27). Forced to confront his own prejudices when the Anglo-Jewish Davis family conducted the purchase with impeccable openness, he was inclined to take seriously a letter from Eliza Davis three years later criticizing the character of
Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1837). Dickens was preparing *Our Mutual Friend* at the time and the introduction of the kindly, protective character of Riah is attributed to this context. Riah is the almost alone in the novel as an male character who does not deceive another and is never subject to the reader’s misapprehension. While he has an obligatory double-identity it is only due to others’ refusal to find him honest. Dickens’s intention, it seems, was to make amends for his own prejudicial stereotype and rebut a conspiracy theory that persists today: ‘the idea that Jews might be pulling the strings behind the scenes, manipulating the Christian puppets of high finance’ (Nord 2011: 37). To do so, he reverses the relationship of finance and Jewishness by making Riah the public scapegoat of a predatory financial operation that is controlled by a ‘Christian’ puppet-master of fictional capital, Fledgby.

Riah is a central node in the novel’s many plots but unlike Gobseck, the threads that connect him to the other characters’ lives are of empathy and care rather than the power wielded by debt, although other characters in the novel mistakenly believe this to be the case. Franco Moretti’s diagram of the narrative structure of *Our Mutual Friend* is inaccurate for placing Riah in the ‘largely autonomous narrative universe’ of ‘Hexam and the East End’ and outside the overlapping zones of the Boffin plot and the West End (1999: 131). He seems to overlook the scene where Twemlow sits nervously in the waiting room of Pubsey and Co., having offered to act as guarantor to a bad loan. Also, although Riah’s influence does not impinge topographically on the Boffins and Harmon’s story, his job duplicates thematically Boffin’s role as collector of dust that swirls through the entire city. Riah gathers the paper bills of questionable value (instead of dust) into bundles; these recall the multiple references to paper’s dustlike circulation through the city: ‘It hangs on every bush, flutters in every tree, is caught flying by the electric wires, haunts every enclosure, drinks at every pump, cowers at every grating, shudders upon every plot
of grass, seeks rest in vain behind the legions of iron rails’ (147). Gobseck’s networks of credit made omniscience of the entire city possible, just as in Dickens’s last completed novel it is the mobility of commodities that permits the vision of the city as a whole.

Not all readers were satisfied with the presentation of Riah. G. K. Chesterton was unwilling to go along with Dickens’s moral programme and repeats Eugene’s derogatory use of ‘Aaron’. He wrote that Riah ‘looks like one particularly stupid Englishman pretending to be a Jew, amidst all that crowd of clever Jews who are pretending to be Englishmen’ (1911: xii). The ease with which Chesterton reinscribes the trope through a simple reversal of roles gives cause to wonder whether a legacy of anti-Semitism can really be lifted by making one character honourable. Riah’s redemption cannot single-handedly recuperate ideas about Jewish financial practices in contemporary London. As Nord points out, Dickens repeatedly refers to Riah’s old-fashioned clothing, and his presentation as ‘a benign and self-sacrificing sage of a by-gone era, an era that predates even the time of Fagin or Mayhew’s street-sellers’ (39). Nord’s argument is that he can only be extricated from Jewish association with the harmful practices of the modern economy by recovering an Old Testament dignity—that is, by aligning himself with Christianity historically, and by behaving in a Christian way in the modern world. The idea of an unscrupulous financial network (a cash-nexus), whose lures and deceptions Christians could only struggle through, hoping that their trust would eventually be rewarded, only reinscribed a vision of the socio-economic world in conspiracist terms to which Semitic associations were attached.

IV.

At the time of writing, accusations of anti-Semitism trouble the UK Labour Party and are particularly attached to the party’s leader, Jeremy Corbyn. One point of contention is whether
criticism of the State of Israel is, de facto, anti-Semitic, as is said to be the implication of the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism (Sedley 2017), which Corbyn resisted and eventually accepted in full. A less publicized issue, and arguably more important, is whether criticism of capitalism itself carries traces of anti-Semitism, as is suggested in a recent article in the *New Statesman*, which refers to the ‘deep-seated theoretical underpinnings of left critiques of capitalism that have anti-Semitism as their logical consequence’ (Bolton and Pitts 2018). The authors wish to isolate critiques of the ‘1 percent’ (which may tend towards identifying targets on the basis of religion or profession) from the more socially encompassing scope of Marxism, but it is not easy to do so when we recall how enthusiastically Marx and others drew on the works of Balzac and Dickens, and how—I have argued—the breadth and scope of those works was underpinned by realist representation, in turn underpinned by a racially specific idea of financial circulation.

A key piece of evidence in the charge against Corbyn is his apparent endorsement of a mural in the Borough of Tower Hamlets in East London when it was about to be removed for its anti-Semitic imagery. The mural by the artist Mear One depicted a group of elderly, bearded, suited men sitting around a monopoly board resting on the naked backs of workers. This is set against a backdrop of belching furnaces and nuclear reactors, overlooked by an eye enclosed in a triangle at the top of a pyramid, recognizable both as the image on the US 1 dollar bill and from the symbolism of Freemasonry.4 To one side a figure holds up a sign that reads ‘The New World Order is the Enemy of Humanity’ (‘Freedom for Humanity’ 2019). Not only is the image replete with conspiracist imagery and suggestion, its cabal of conspirators is strikingly close to the idea of a group of men controlling affairs that appear in Balzac’s stories ‘Gobseck’ and those that make up the *History of the Thirteen*. Corbyn became associated with the artwork after he questioned the decision to remove it in a Facebook message: ‘Why? You are in good company.
Rockefeller destroyed Diego Viera’s mural because it includes a picture of Lenin’ (Dysh 2016). The comparison doesn’t really hold, except when subjected to substitution whereby the actor in one event (Rockefeller) is equated with the represented subject of the other (the ‘Jewish’ conspirators), and likewise the author of the Tower Hamlets mural (Mear One) with the subject of the other (Lenin) through their common opposition to global capital. The slippage of terms is revealing.

Another current furore over anti-Semitism uncannily repeats Dickens’s attempt to purge his presentation of predatory capitalism in Our Mutual Friend of Jewish association. Shortly after publishing Pedro Baños’s How They Rule the World: The 22 Secret Strategies of Global Power (2019), Penguin Random House commissioned Baroness Julia Neuberger to rule on whether the book was anti-Semitic. There was cause to do so: 300 pages’ worth of material had been removed from the original Spanish-language version in which the author recycled anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the Rothschild family, whom he compared to the Illuminati. The preoccupations of the Amazon.com reviews for the book are telling: they are mostly either complaints that the removal of the original material is censorship (a conspiracy to conceal the conspiracy), or jubilation that the censorship backfired and drew accidental attention to the book’s real message of Jewish control. Nord’s analysis, from a very different perspective, judges Dickens’s rehabilitation of Riah to be equally unsuccessful. Penguin stopped printing How They Rule the World in June 2019 after Neuberger concluded that the book contained ‘echoes of conspiracy theories’ (Flood 2019).

The wall against which such theories echo is one that separates the idea of the world as it really is, as opposed to what we could call the ‘official world’ of its self-declared nature. Realist fiction is not confined to one side or the other, as the opening quotations to this chapter illustrate:
‘Gobseck’ has the surveillance of usury as its solid floor, whereas Our Mutual Friend ends by dispelling conspiracy and establishing a transparent economy of information, gathered from the reputable papers and transmitted like light, ‘beamingly’, into the household and whose only deception is the charming pretence at seriousness. The examples of literary realism studied here both rely, however, on the conspiracy theory of Jewish influence as the grounds for their representation of the world. The ‘cash-nexus’ that was so alarming to nineteenth-century commentators persists as a conspiracy theory of financial speculation. What is the mantra of the ‘realist’ critic of political life if not ‘follow the money’?

1 As Emma Clery has shown in recent work on the eighteenth-century ‘Novel of Inheritance’, restitution was not always the outcome.
2 Describing Marx’s and Proudhon’s political programmes as conspiracist is not my intention here but it is worth noting that Proudhon explored the idea of using the networks of secret societies to disseminate his pamphlets (see Crapo 1981).
3 ‘Ce monde à part dans le monde, hostile au monde, n’admettant aucune des idées du monde, n’en reconnaissant aucune loi, ne se soumettant qu’à la conscience de sa nécessité, n’obéissant qu’à un dévouement, agissant tout entier pour un seul des associés quand l’un d’eux réclamerait l’assistance de tous […]’
4 Mear One’s mural was very similar in concept and composition to the well known image published in the Industrial Worker in 1911, of the ‘Pyramid of Capitalist System’, which showed the workers bowed from supporting the bourgeoisie on their backs, who in turn supported the army, in a series that ended with the monarchy and above them capital itself represented as a bag of money.