# Dickensian Liminal Ports and Issues of Ambiguous or Hybrid National Identity: Boston and Boulogne

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It matters how one enters a country, how one begins a journey. The choice of route makes a difference to the traveler's experience, and it is this idea of the importance of entry points for the traveler that this essay discusses. Charles Dickens traveled a great deal, as was common for many literary men (and some women of letters) in his time. In addition to his stints as a tourist, however, Dickens lived abroad periodically, and he traveled as a part of his career, both as a journalist and as a performer offering public readings of his works. Of course, since England is an island nation, any travel outside the country necessarily entails the choosing and using of ports of departure and entry.

In the early and mid-Victorian period, more port options existed than today's water travelers enjoy, so Dickens's choices of ports can be read as important signifiers. For instance, as I explain in *Dickens and Massachusetts: The Lasting Legacy of the Commonwealth Visits*, Dickens's choice of Liverpool as the point of embarkation for his first American tour in 1842 rather than London, the most common point of embarkation for transatlantic travelers, demonstrates something significant about his character (34–36). Dickens gave up convenience for the sake of novelty; that is, he

chose Liverpool because he wanted to travel to America via newfangled steamship rather than by sail, and there was only one line using this new technology at that time for crossings to North America. He chose the Cunard Line's *Britannia*, which ran from Liverpool to Boston via Halifax. His close friend, the actor William Macready, had visited and enjoyed Boston very much, so once his route was determined, Dickens was eager to see the sights his friend had described. Mostly, however, Dickens's choice of ports for the 1842 trip was dictated by his interest in modern transportation technology; thus Boston is aligned with newness in a way that other American ports were not, a fact overlooked by other scholars who largely ignore details of travel except the perilous sea journey which Dickens himself recorded at length. Indeed, my approach is informed by semiotic modes of inquiry which presume all manner of signs can and should be read as meaning-full and significant, though problematized by post-structuralist understandings of the ways in which signifiers always miss the mark. My analysis examines biographical and literary details heretofore ignored or dismissed in order to reassess Dickens's life and literature. I contend that ports matter. They can be read.

## 1. Liminality

Dickens only visited America twice, and both times he entered the continent via Boston (with an en route stop to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in Canada). He was a much more frequent visitor to the European continent, however, and made use of several entry points there. France was his most common destination on these visits, although he spent time in other countries, including an extended stay in Genoa, Italy. While Calais is and was the most popular French port of entry for the English, and Dickens certainly used it and wrote about it, as well, Dickens's "French Watering-Place," Boulogne-sur-Mer, was the most important European port for Dickens just as Boston was his most important American port. Dickens undoubtedly had access to other options, but these places captured his imagination and his heart and won his life-long affection.

Boston and Boulogne may seem an unlikely pairing, but these two port cities are significant liminal spaces that serve as sites of blended identity not only for Dickens but also for all Victorian visitors. While Boston and Boulogne are and were very different in many ways, their similarities are notable. Most obviously, both were important seaports—regional centers for commerce and transport, with extensive

shipping and fishing industries, and a fair amount of shuttling of people, as well. Of course, this is true of many ports, but some of the details are intriguing—both had been former English colonies, both were associated with military conflict with the English, both were somewhat (though not wholly) Anglicized in customs and culture, both were filled with many English speakers, and both places were gateways to foreign lands that Dickens criticized. These in-between spaces seemed to function in important ways for the author, serving as refuges, in a sense, and fostering his creative energy.

Adam Hallett, in "Bound for Boston," defines a sea voyage as a ritualistic liminal space of ambiguity and disassociation, with the landfall as the "consummation of the passage" (69). I contend that the arrival in port does not always result in an end to liminality. In fact, with Dickens's interactions with both Boston and Boulogne, I see a continuance of the ambivalence and disorientation of the voyage. The word liminality comes from the Latin word *limen*, meaning a threshold, and these cities function as thresholds, in-between spaces not in one country or another, not wholly American, not wholly French, yet not English either—but rather a borderland, frontier, or crossroads, cities that embody a complex duality. Visitors to these ports thus encountered sites of blended identity where they could embrace a more cosmopolitan sense of self. What happens in ports, in these mixing spaces, is, in fact, "genuine," and Dickens's portscapes of Boston and Boulogne are a sign of neither his Englishness nor his Francophobia but rather an indication of his openness to the creative forces of ambiguity.

Arnold Van Gennep first applied the term "liminal" to anthropology in 1909 in his discussion of the "nature and characteristics" of rites of passage. Van Gennep defined rites of passage as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age," arguing that all such rites, as Turner explains,

> are marked by three phases: separation, margin [that is, liminality], and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening liminal period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, […], is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is

expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions. (94–95)

Notable anthropologist Victor W. Turner rediscovered Van Gennep in the 1960s and popularized his use of the term liminality, developing a robust theory of the role that liminality plays in ritual passages in the small-scale societies he studied. Some theorists have questioned the application of this term to situations outside of those to which it was initially applied. Turner himself first made a distinction between the liminal and the term *liminoid*, which refers to experiences that have characteristics of liminal experiences but are optional and do not involve a resolution of a personal crisis (1974: 53–92). The liminal is an integrated component within society, especially its religious and social rituals. The liminoid is outside of such societal structures and is something experienced as play. Bjorn Thomassen further explains the difference this way: "The liminoid is a break from normality, a playful as-if experience, but it loses the key feature of liminality: *transition*." Thomassen asserts, however, that "By thus delimiting liminality, Turner underplayed the extent to which liminal moments or liminal experiences might be equally present in political or social transformations, i.e outside 'culture,' in a more narrow understanding of that term" (15). I think it is helpful to see Dickens's 1842 American trip, especially, and also his continental visits as rites of passage with far-reaching implications, and I see Boston and Boulogne as offering him something more than play—rather these ports dis-locate Dickens and facilitate transition to a new phase of his life and career.

Further, as Turner notes,

> The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are *neither here nor there*; they are *betwixt and between* the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and [the] ceremonial.

The passenger's experience of the liminal space or phase "is frequently likened to death, being in the womb, […], to darkness, […], to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (Turner: 1969, 95; emphasis mine). I see such markers in Dickens's descriptions of Boston and Boulogne, and I think his artistic choices in representing these locales signal the way he thought of these cities as transitional spaces.

In his article "Dickens Discovers Dickens," Jerome Meckier claims,

> After America, Dickens was never again an enthusiastic egalitarian: his conviction that Britain's institutions were antiquated and reforms too slow in coming remained unshaken, but he realized he was more English in thought or deed than he was American, French, or European […]. (17).

Although this may be partly true, evidence suggests that Dickens may have remained more egalitarian and cosmopolitan than such claims indicate. Michael Hollington's recent edited collection, *The Reception of Charles Dickens in Europe*, defends a similar thesis, demonstrating that Dickens ought not to be strictly associated with Englishness but rather a wider, global context. This essay illuminates this important idea in regards to Boston and Boulogne, never before discussed in this context, demonstrating how the very hybridity and liminality of these portscapes was what appealed to Dickens.

## 2. Boston

First, let us consider Boston.[1] Settled in 1630 by English Puritans from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the town of Boston soon gained prominence in North American trade due to its excellent seaport. Central to its early success was its accessible harbor and ship building industry. With the rapid development of the mid-Atlantic colonies by the mid-18th century, New York and Philadelphia surpassed the port of Boston as hubs of inter-colonial trade, but Boston countered by developing trade relations with countries other than Britain. While this move led to great financial success for the merchants of Boston, it also sparked British trade restrictions on the American colonies and contributed to the radicalization of prominent Bostonians, who objected to this threat to their source of wealth and to the imposition of new taxes. As retaliation for the Boston Tea Party, the British Parliament passed the Boston Port Act, which closed the port of Boston until compensation was paid for the damaged tea. Tensions surrounding this conflict, as well as other important events, led to the American Revolutionary War, and Boston was central to that conflict. It was the site of many clashes, such as the Battle of Bunker Hill during the siege of Boston in 1775. Sixty-seven years later, on 30 January 1842, Dickens visited the Bunker Hill Monument with the American poet and Harvard professor Henry Wadsworth

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[1] A fuller discussion of Dickens's relationship with Boston can be found in *Dickens and Massachusetts: The Lasting Legacy of the Commonwealth Visits*, co-edited by Diana C. Archibald and Joel Brattin. Some of the material on Boston in this essay was originally published in that volume.

Longfellow and the young Charles Sumner, soon to become one of America's greatest statesmen (Payne, 78). At the time that Dickens visited in 1842, the Revolutionary War was long over, but tensions were once more high between the former colony and the Mother Country over border disputes with Canada. In fact, there was even talk of armed conflict at the time as tensions mounted in the Aroostook War, the last major Anglo-American clash. Dickens was viewed as an unofficial diplomat whose trip it was hoped would ease tensions between the two countries.

Dickens had to get to America first, however, and the crossing was particularly treacherous that January when the ship encountered a terrible hurricane in the North Atlantic. With battered lifeboats strapped to the beleaguered ship, the *Britannia* entered the port of Boston 18 days after leaving Liverpool and docked around 5 p.m. on Saturday, 22 January 1842, just after sunset. For several hours before that, Dickens had been watching the shoreline, harbor islands, and cityscape. As he writes in *American Notes*, "The indescribable interest with which I strained my eyes, as the first patches of American soil peeped like molehills from the green sea, and followed them, as they swelled […] into a continuous line of coast, can hardly be exaggerated" (31). Dickens, then, first passed into the country through this transitional space, this threshold that begins with an increasingly visible stretch of coastline and islands, leading to the Long Wharf, in the heart of the waterside district, at the foot of one of the main commercial roads downtown, State Street, only a few blocks from the Custom House. It took hours to dock, so for Dickens there was plenty of time to anticipate and to enjoy the entry. It was not just the coast and dock that functioned as a liminal space, though; one might argue that his stay in Boston functioned as a prolonged transition period for his time in America as a whole, too, a sort of continuation of the voyage or movement in between the Old and New World.

Boston was a small but densely populated city in 1842, with about 95,000 inhabitants in the smallest square acreage of any major city of the time. The population of the city had more than doubled in the twenty years before Dickens arrived, but the city fathers had decided early on that if Boston were to maintain its position as the center of the arts and education for the nation, and a leader of commerce and the maritime industry, then they needed to invest in public works (Kay, 139). In the 1820s after it became incorporated, the city of Boston underwent extensive improvements such as the installation of sewers and gaslights under the

leadership of mayor Josiah Quincy. Boston boasted eight different railroad stations, two major theatres, and several other places of amusement (Payne, 6). Having established the first public school on the continent in 1635 and the first institution of higher education, Harvard College, in 1636, Boston long held a high reputation for intellectual excellence. By the time Dickens first visited, several American authors had emerged as creative forces, as well. The "Athens of America" that Dickens visited in 1842, was one of the oldest cities on the continent as well as one with a vibrant energy. In *American Notes*, Dickens, charmed by the streets of Boston, remarked on the feeling of "unsubstantial[ness]" that the bright newness of the city conveyed (34) and his sense of unreality as he walked through this space, experiencing a sort of déjà vu—a simultaneous recognition and alienation. Far from disturbing Boz, the dislocation seemed to delight him.

The inhabitants of the city, too, exhibited this strange combination of old and new. In 1842 the population was remarkably homogenous, with notably fewer foreigners than most other urban areas in the young country. Most immigrants preferred to arrive in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New Orleans, from where they could more easily gain access to the nearby rich farmland that they sought. While Boston continued into the early 19$^{th}$ century to be a major importer of goods and materials from abroad, it was not a favored destination for people (Fuchs, 17–18). With the start of the Irish Potato Famine in 1845, though, the city found itself flooded with Irish immigrants. But why Boston? By an interesting twist of fate, both Dickens and the Irish ended up in Boston for the same reason. "Because Boston was the terminus for the pioneering steamship service inaugurated by Britain's Cunard Line in 1840, and the rates were subsidized by the British government, even the poor could cross," and cross they did in droves (18). "By 1850, 35,000 of Boston's 136,000 residents—26 percent—were Irish" ("People & Events"). The Irish were nearly three-fourths of all foreign-born residents of Boston in 1850, and while the immigrant population was more diverse by the time of Dickens's second visit to the city in 1867–68, the Irish continued to dominate even then (Fuchs, 19–21). On Dickens's first trip to America, however, Boston had not yet been transformed by such immigrants; in fact, it was in many ways a city both ardently American (as the birthplace of the American revolution) and deeply English. Nowhere in the United Sates in 1842 could a visitor find a more striking mixture of old and new identities, and Dickens seemed drawn to

Bostonians not because they were so English, as Meckier contends, but because they embodied the best of *both* nationalities in a single people.

Within this remarkable city, Boz found a hero's welcome from the moment the *Britannia* arrived in the port. Writing to Forster on 29 January 1842, he said, "It makes my heart quieter, and me a more retiring, sober, tranquil man to watch the effect of […] [my flights of imagination] in all this noise and hurry" (*Letters*, 3: 35). But his affection for the city and its residents was just not founded on gratitude for his fans; rather, he admired the young republic as he experienced it in Boston. Yes, it was just English enough to be comfortable and familiar, but it was also innovative and energetic in a way that was distinctly American, at least his idealized vision of that imagined republic.[2] Through all that Dickens subsequently experienced in the New World, Boston would remain his ideal: "Boston is what I would have the whole United States to be," Dickens wrote to William Macready (3 January 1844; *Letters*, 4: 11).

Dickens only visited North America twice, and thus in some ways it was easier for Boston to remain his imagined ideal with so little contact. Did his love of the city really have to do with its in-betweenness, or was his affection a fluke, a mere product of his having encountered the United States first in Boston? I contend that Dickens's admiration for Massachusetts ran deeper and truer than scholars acknowledge, and his association with the Commonwealth proved fruitful for both his professional and his private life. As *Dickens and Massachusetts* demonstrates in detail, his association with Boston made a deep and lasting impression on him, affecting his choice of religion (Unitarianism) and his work on social causes (disability, education, labor) and serving as inspiration for parts of several of his works, including "Doctor Marigold," *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *A Christmas Carol*. Beyond these claims, however, I suggest here that one of the reasons why Boston exercised such influence over Dickens was its position as a threshold space. An examination of another such liminal port, Boulogne-sur-Mer, where he spent a great deal more time than in Boston, confirms that Dickens was, in fact, attracted to other such hybrid spaces, places attuned to his legendary restlessness.

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[2] *Dickens and Massachusetts* provides extensive commentary on his association with the city of Boston, arguing that Massachusetts, unlike the rest of the United States, *was* the republic of his imagination, the republic he came to see (2).

### 3. Boulogne-sur-Mer

The second largest city in its department, after Calais, Boulogne-sur-Mer is currently the largest fishing port in the country, specializing in herring. The city of Boulogne originated during the Roman occupation of France, in order to promote trade and serve as a launching site for the conquest of Great Britain. As Brunet's *New Guide to Boulogne-sur-Mer and Its Environs* (1862) notes, "Boulogne became, under the Romans, a most important sea-port and the place at which the intercourse between Gaul and Britain were carried on" (4). After the fall of the Roman Empire and the subsequent Germanic invasion, Boulogne eventually became once more an important medieval hub of political and cultural life. The French and English repeatedly engaged in armed conflict to gain control of this important district. During the Hundred Years War, the English occupied Boulogne several times, and the English again occupied the region from 1544 to 1550, after which the French paid 40,000 crowns to buy back Boulogne when the treaty, The Peace of Boulogne, was settled in 1550. During the Napoleanic Wars, in 1805, Napoleon amassed La Grande Armée to invade Britain, but these plans were halted by other European events and the resistance of the British Royal Navy (5–6). Clearly, Boulogne's past is intimately entwined with Britain—a complex history of conflict and connection. The imprint of hundreds of years of interwoven destinies has left a substantial and traceable legacy. Much like Boston, Boulogne's ties to England remained strong in the 19th century despite a history of bloodshed and rivalry. Both cities retained strong links to Great Britain, and Dickens appears to have been drawn to these ports at least in part because of this hybridity.

It is no wonder, given its location, that Boulogne-sur-Mer became a popular place to cross the English Channel. As Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in France* (1854) and Brunet's *New Guide to Boulogne-sur-Mer and its Environs* (1862) note, the "influx" of cross-channel visitors to Boulogne was "yearly upwards of 100,000 persons" (Brunet, 8). Certainly the majority of these travelers were transient, and, "despite (or because of) its substantial English resident population, fashion-conscious English travellers regarded Boulogne as a rather unexciting port of call on their way to more exotic destinations" (Edmondson, 57). The port's association with Englishness made it an undesirable locale for some, who saw it as a mere extension of Britain. James Buzard notes in his chapter on "Tourism and Anti-Tourism," that the English valued "genuine" European travel, constructing the genuine on a foundation

of denunciation, evasion, and putative transcendence of merely "touristic" purposes and behavior (81). To be considered "genuine," a place had to seem wholly alien, in other words. Dickens recognized this phenomenon in his fellow Englishmen's attitude toward Boulogne when he wrote to Forster, complaining of those "countrymen" who, "because it is accessible," say Boulogne "is of no character, quite English, nothing continental about it." Dickens advocates that the English ought to give the place a second chance, for "it is as quaint, picturesque, good a place as I know" (qtd. in Edmondson, 56). For Dickens, Boulogne's cross-cultural identity made it more, not less, interesting.

Getting there was far easier than the arduous ocean crossing to America, yet the English Channel is notorious for causing seasickness in passengers. Dickens wrote of his distress in a letter to his wife on 20 February 1847: "I crossed from Boulogne yesterday at half-past eleven—a frightful sea running nearly as bad as the Atlantic" (*Letters*, 5: 30–31). Notably, he connects the two crossings, explicitly linking the journeys to Boston and to Boulogne. Elsewhere, too, descriptions of the roughness of the passages link the two ports. Dominic Rainsford has examined the importance of the sea passage in his article, "Crossing the Channel with Dickens." He contends that Dickens developed in his writing and life a "sense of English vulnerability *on approaching* French soil" (7) since that crossing is associated with a sense of trauma and dislocation. Rainsford also suggests, "Dickens might well have detected his own latent Francophobia, and suppressed it" (11). If, indeed, such a hidden fear of the French "other" existed despite all appearances that Dickens was an enthusiastic lover of much of French culture, then perhaps, his enthusiasm for Boulogne was influenced by how English the town appeared to be.

In fact, Boulogne was, indeed, very English. As John Murray's 1864 *A Handbook for Travellers in France* explains, "The number of inhabitants is 36, 500, and in addition there are at least 3000 English residents; indeed, Boulogne, being within 5 hours of London, and 28 m. (2 hrs) by steam from Folkestone, is one of the chief British colonies abroad" (10). This is an interesting word choice, further linking Boulogne to Boston, as well. Murray points out the irony of the British colonization of land once envisioned as a launching point for an invasion of England. He notes that Napoleon's "intended victims have quietly taken possession and settled themselves down." Further, the English presence had made its mark in material ways:

> The town is enriched by English money; warmed, lighted, and smoked by English coal; English signs and advertisements decorate every other shop door, inn, tavern, and lodging house; and almost every third person you meet is either a countryman or speaking our language […]. (10)

While some eschewed the place due to these facts, Dickens downplayed their importance, highlighted the many charms of the area, and even went so far as to remark to Forster, "If this were but 300 miles farther off, how the English would rave about it!" (13 June 1853; *Letters*, 7: 97). Clearly, he loved the town, choosing to return to it many times with his family and later his mistress, and even placing his sons Alfred and Henry in a boarding school there run by the English clergyman, Mr. Gibson.

In "Our French Watering-Place" (1853) Dickens praises this port town that was known as a little England, the seaside resort of Boulogne. Throughout the piece, he notes the many charming features of the place, signaling out elements he sees as quintessentially French. For example, he writes, "There are public amusements in our French watering-place, or it would not be French." He describes the "sea-bathing" which "the French visitors," unlike the English, enjoy "all day long," with a musician nearby playing little tunes on a guitar (72–73). Then there is the "commodious and gay Theatre" where English audience members have trouble understanding whether the French vaudeville actors are singing or speaking, or the "Society of Welldoing" fêtes, charity parties raising money for good causes (73–74). Throughout the piece, Dickens highlights the appealing qualities of the French and sometimes downgrades his own countrymen by contrast, always in good humor, of course. For instance, he remarks on the many "boarding-houses […] [which] contain more bores from the shores of Albion than all the clubs in London" (75). But Dickens is not truly interested in raising the one group at the expense of the other. Rather, he is using the piece to counter unstated claims that Boulogne is not French enough to be a worthy destination. His closing to the essay is perhaps the most significant of all, however, as he explicitly addresses the hybridity of Boulogne:

> it is not the least pleasant feature of our French watering-place that a long and constant fusion of the two great nations there, has taught each to like the other, and to learn from the other, and to rise superior to the absurd prejudices that have lingered among the weak and ignorant of both countries equally. (75–76)

Other scholars argue Dickens is reassured by the Englishness he finds abroad, and one might think of this as contradicting the claim that he is attracted to the cosmopolitan, but I see here that it is not Englishness that he loves but rather its transformation. With both Boston and Boulogne, it is the "fusion," as he calls it, which appeals to him. Or put another way, it was the neither this nor that but the both/and which appealed to him. He was drawn to the in-between, the threshold.

Dickens speaks well of the people of Boston and Boulogne, moving against popular opinion and stereotype to a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the inhabitants of such threshold spaces. Victor Turner recognizes the ways in which the liminal state allows for social bonding and disruption of social boundaries and forging of new relations:

> What is interesting about liminal phenomena [is that] […] we are presented, in such rites, with a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties. (96)

The fact that Dickens, himself an outsider, recognizes the residents' humanity and feels a kinship with them speaks to the transformative power of the liminal in his rites of passage in America and France. It is the uncertainty of the liminal space that leads to growth, and Dickens's reflections on these experiences "betwixt and between" reveal a much more complex relationship with the world outside his homeland than is often recognized.

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