

Administrative Worlding: Paperealities and Bureaucratic *Trompe L'oeil* in British Fiction

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Bureaucratic paperwork would seem to have little in common with literature, and yet, writers have often portrayed administrative documentation as a creative act akin to the writing of fiction. Notably, in *The Locked Room* (1986), Paul Auster likens censuses to fiction through his portrayal of an aspiring author who finds an unlikely creative outlet in his day job as a census taker:

I don't know how many people I invented—but there must have been hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. [...]

It gave me pleasure to pluck names out of thin air, to invent lives that had never existed, that never would exist. It was not precisely like making up characters in a story, but something grander, something far more unsettling. [...] As opposed to the story writer, I was offering my creations directly to the real world, and therefore it seemed possible to me that they could affect this real world in a real way, that they could eventually become a part of the real itself. No writer could ask for more than that. (1987: 249–250)

In other words, the census taking narrator compares his fabrication of 'lives that had never existed' to the invention of fictional characters, glorying in the generative power of official information. From the narrator's perspective, his census 'creations' differ ontologically from fictional characters only in that they have the potential to become 'a part of the real itself'.

By drawing our attention to the ways in which (falsified) administrative documentation may be read as converging with fictional worlds, Auster's novel unsettles the antinomies of literature and administration that continue to be invoked in research on literature and bureaucracy. That is, despite the efforts of scholars such as Dean de la Motte and Ceri Sullivan to highlight various forms of intersection and

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synergy between bureaucracy and literature (De la Motte 1994: 27–29; Sullivan 2013: 7–9), bureaucracy still tends to be regarded as literature’s non-creative other. Notably, Sukanya Banerjee argues that fiction, with its affordances for ‘creating life-worlds’, stands in opposition to bureaucracy, which is ‘just about managing [life-worlds]’ (2020: 152). In short, Banerjee suggests that the novel ‘distinguishes itself from a bureaucratic document [...] through its creation of characters’ (2020: 152). However, this dichotomous, contrastive conceptualisation of literature and bureaucracy, which characterises administrative statecraft as an ontologically neutral and fundamentally non-creative ‘managing’ of social reality, clearly does not accord with the sense of creative release that Auster’s narrator finds in his job as a census taker.

Bureaucracy is often conceived of as a ‘dead zone of the imagination,’ to borrow anthropologist David Graeber’s apt formulation (2012: 123), and yet, bureaucratic systems have sparked the imagination of numerous writers over the past centuries, including major authors such as Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens and Franz Kafka. Moreover, as the present essay will show, works of ‘administrative fiction’ (Waldo 1968) frequently portray various forms of bureaucratic creativity and figure administrative documentation as a mode of worlding akin to literary world-building.¹ In order to capture the prevalence of this topos in administrative fiction, and to trace its evolution over time, the present essay will take the form of a diachronic survey that examines relevant passages from selected works of British fiction from the late eighteenth to the twenty-first century. My close readings of such narrative samples cannot account for the complex engagement with state bureaucracy in these writers’ oeuvres, but instead they can serve to spotlight the iterative and shifting literary treatment of the ontological effects of state bureaucracy.

The phenomenon of bureaucratic creation—which I term *administrative worlding*—has been addressed in previous research, but it has yet to be theorised as such or described in depth as a literary motif or concern. Therefore, before turning to my selection of literary texts, I will endeavour to define administrative worlding as an analytical concept, by drawing on scholarly commentaries on administrative statecraft and fictional worlds.

¹ On bureaucracy and the imagination, see also Graeber 2015.

Administrative worlding and papereality

The ontological effects of information technologies have long been a point of interest not only for authors of ‘administrative fiction’ but also for scholars—and they continue to be hotly debated. In the inaugural issue of *Critical AI*, Katherine Bode and Lauren Goodlad (2023) use the term ‘data worlds’ to describe the ontology of contemporary data practices and regimes. Goodlad and Bode’s delineation of this concept builds on a 2022 article in which Orit Halpern and colleagues argue that ‘data’ has undergone a radical transformation only in the last few years: having previously constituted a means of representing extant phenomena, data now ‘creat[es] the world it would describe’ (203). However, Goodlad and Bode dispute the idea that data’s creative capabilities are of recent origin, a position which the present essay will seek to further support by providing a literary pre-history of sorts to contemporary data worlds.

Twenty-first-century data regimes far outstrip the informational capacities of paper-based government bureaucracies, but state institutions have historically also tended to ‘create the world they would describe’. By choosing what features or place-names go on an official map, or what categories are employed in a statistical survey, or whose presence in a country is officially recognised, state institutions produce state-backed accounts of social reality that in turn reshape the social world. As Pierre Bourdieu emphasises in theorising the symbolic power of the state, the authority of the state’s ‘official’ account of the social world is such that it confers qualities and properties onto social phenomena (2014: 50). Indeed, Bourdieu characterises official representations of the social world as having a well-nigh ontological force—a ‘genuinely *creative*, quasi-divine, power’ (1999: 66–67). In other words, state institutions, and individuals who have been delegated state authority, have the power not just to name existing entities, but also to create new, officially recognised entities and relations. This world-shaping power of the administrative state cuts across numerous institutional practices, including registering, census taking, cartography, database management and personal identification. In terms of the *longue durée* of state documentation, the phenomenon of administrative worlding is arguably as old as the technology of writing—an ‘infrastructural power’ that emerged within early city-states (Mann 1984: 193–194). However, it is only in the era of the modern nation-state that administrative technologies of documentation have come to create

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entire ‘worlds’, in and by the production of a greater volume and density of official information.

The ontological effects of administrative statecraft have been observed in numerous scholarly disciplines. In the study of official statistics, for instance, Alain Desrosières highlights the ‘statistical construct[ion] of reality’ (1998: 177), whilst David Harvey goes so far as to suggest that the nation-state itself was ‘brought into existence by virtue of statistical representation’ (2009: 265). Paralleling Harvey’s analysis of the role of statistics in state formation, Denis Wood and John Fels observe that states are largely dependent on maps, ‘for to map a state is to assert its territorial expression, to leave it off is to deny its existence’ (1992: 11). Likewise, examining the ‘hegemonic effects of state mapping’, Matthew Sparke notes that the ‘names on the government maps, the names of state, as it were, are held up here as the only real names, [...] flatly presented as admitting no alternatives’ (2005: 11, 21). The generative power of administration has been addressed also in literary scholarship, by researchers investigating literary engagements with different institutional domains, such as archival practices, cartography and law (Bischoff 2020: 260–263; Cheah 2016: 8; Groebner 2007: 258; Irimia 2022: 10–12; Jaffe 2010: 2; Kafka 2012: 116; Korda 2013: 46; Richards 1993: 14–16; Robinson 2019: 24–25). However, the phenomenon of administrative worlding and its relationship to literature has yet to be delineated in a systematic fashion.

In what sense, then, does official documentation create or sustain an administrative world? I propose that administrative worlding involves three basic mechanisms in terms of its effects on the social world: (1) the *transformation* of entities through administrative documentation, (2) the *invention* of entities that do not exist outside of state records and (3) the *derealisation* of entities which are not included in official documentation. With regards to the first category—transformation—this form of administrative worlding is aptly described by Bourdieu, who conceptualizes state bureaucracy as a form of ‘state magic’ whereby ‘acts of official recording’ bring an ‘ontological promotion, a transmutation, a change of nature or essence’ (1996: 376). Indeed, the status of a given social phenomenon is altered simply by virtue of its being institutionally documented and thus consecrated as ‘officially real’ (Mathur 2016: 3). The second category—invention—may be understood as the generation of an ‘administrative fiction’, to borrow political scientist James C. Scott’s

terminology—it signifies the creation of virtual entities that have ‘no social existence whatever outside the document’, e.g., surnames invented for the purpose of record-keeping (Scott 1998: 68, 254).² The third category—derealisation—denotes the ways in which a lack of administrative recognition may cause social phenomena to ‘fail to exist *de jure*’ (Groebner 2007: 257). This form of erasure is summed up by the Latin legal phrase, ‘*Quod non est in actis, non est in mundo*,’ meaning ‘what is not written up in official records, does not exist in the world’.

The ontological dimension of official administrative documentation is most readily apparent in cases where official records radically depart from, and yet take precedence over, observable reality. ‘What can be more “divine”’, Slavoj Žižek asks, ‘than the traumatic encounter with bureaucracy at its craziest—when, say, a bureaucrat tells us that, legally, we don’t exist’ (2003: 120). Žižek’s example of ‘divine’ bureaucracy not only captures the worlding dynamic that I wish to highlight, but it also illustrates the permeability of the aforementioned categories of transformation, invention and derealisation, inasmuch as the administrative invention (the purported death of the individual in question) is bound up with a form of derealisation (the consequences for the person mistakenly pronounced dead). Acts of administrative recording, then, have profound social effects: administrative invisibility may lead to social invisibility; likewise, an ‘administrative fiction’ may take on a life of its own.³

As indicated above, official documentary practices ‘world’ not only in the sense that they shape the social world, but also in that they produce textual constructs reminiscent of fictional entities. As David Dery notes, bureaucratic institutions ‘live by, maintain, and modify an autonomous world of their own creation’, a ‘world of symbols, or written representations, that take precedence over the things and events represented’ (1998: 687, 678). However, Dery was not the first scholar to observe the existence of such ‘paperealities’, to borrow Dery’s apt expression. In an 1843 article about a conflict between German wine-producers and government officials, Karl Marx observes that the functionaries who were tasked with surveying the vineyards created a

² For instance, as Ann Laura Stoler notes, official bureaucracies may produce ‘records of things that never happened’ (2009: 5).

³ Maurizio Ferraris notes that ‘we have complex social organisms whose origin derives exclusively from documents’ (2013: 234).

‘bureaucratic reality’ that stood ‘alongside the actual reality’, and that priority was given to ‘the reality depicted in the dossiers, which [was] official and therefore of a state character’ (1975a: 344–345). In another 1843 article, Marx notes that state officials treat the ‘really existing [...] in the light of its bureaucratic nature, its other-worldly, spiritual essence’ (1975b: 47). For Marx, then, administration has an almost ethereal quality in that it creates a shadowy official reality.

Marx and Dery provide highly illuminating commentaries on bureaucratic papereality, but they do not consider the agency of civilian non-bureaucrats in the production of such worlds. Administrative media are, in fact, interfaces open to inscription and manipulation not only by state functionaries, but also by non-bureaucrats. Jane Caplan and John Torpey note that fraudulent civilians have historically ‘taken up the state’s tools’ to create ‘new identities and names, a parallel world of revised or resistant identities and relationships’ (2001: 6). Caplan and Torpey describe this ‘parallel world’ as arising from the fraudster’s co-option of administrative tools; however, the fraudster is, in fact, only latching onto the ontological mechanisms that inhere in official documentation.

A comparison of administrative and literary worlds

Official documentary worlds, or ‘paperealities’, clearly differ from fictional worlds in many respects, but they resemble fictional worlds in that they are composed of delimited sets of entities (the places, people or things that have been documented). That is, administrative ‘characters’ are comparable to fictional characters in that they are ‘constructs of textual activity’, to cite Lubomír Doležal’s commentary on characters in fiction (1988: 488). By definition, administrative documentary practices produce referential claims about the actual world, which is not the case with fiction. And yet, as Bourdieu observes, there is always a ‘gap between the official and the reality’ (2014: 35). Moreover, bureaucratic paperwork has a tendency to become self-referential. ‘In bureaucracy’, as literary scholar Dean de la Motte notes, ‘writing becomes copying’ (1994: 25). Indeed, according to Patrick Joyce, the symbolic power of the bureaucratic file depends primarily on its relationship to other files: ‘[o]nly secondarily does the authority of bureaucratic writing rest upon something outside the system of which it is a part’ (2010: 108). Through this solipsistic aspect of bureaucratic documentation, official paperealities come to resemble

fictional worlds also in their self-referentiality and ontological separateness.

When exploring how bureaucratic realities compare to fictional worlds there is not only the ontological status of administrative information to consider, but also the question of whether or not paperealities constitute ‘worlds’ according to the definitions provided by possible and fictional worlds theorists. In order to speak of a ‘world’, Marie-Laure Ryan suggests, there must be ‘a connected set of objects and individuals; habitable environment; reasonably intelligible totality for external observers; field of activity for its members’ (2001: 91–92). When evaluated by these criteria, it becomes clear that paperealities do not constitute typical worlds. That is, whilst criteria one and three apply for the typical papereality, it makes less sense to speak of a ‘habitable environment’ or ‘field of activity’. However, looking beyond text-based information genres such as censuses or registers, a graphic administrative tool such as cartography certainly produces bureaucratic realities with spatial dimensions. In other words, a multimedia administrative system comprising both textual and graphic documentation partially fulfils the criteria listed by Ryan.

Depending on factors such as genre and style, aesthetic works produce various forms of ‘worldedness’ (Hayot 2012: 46). The same may be said for administrative worlds. Clearly, most information genres will generate a weaker form of worldedness than narrative fiction since they lack the immersive dimension of fictional worlds, which invite us to step into the world, so to speak. And yet, paperealities come in many different shapes and forms. Not all official documentation is numerate or informational—certain forms of paperwork are closer in nature to the realm of storytelling. Indeed, Arlette Farge notes that an eighteenth-century judicial archive containing documentation of trials and police work ‘opens onto a hidden world’ of vivid personalities and gripping events (2013: 5). A comparative analysis of bureaucratic paperealities might begin by distinguishing between, on the one hand, the more dynamic types of worlds produced by archives, databases and registries—which are updated day-by-day and minute-by-minute—and, on the other hand, the more static paperealities, such as that of the decennial census, though censuses

also generate worlds that unfold over time.⁴ The characteristics of a given papereality will also differ depending on whether it is produced by a single administrative system or by a set of interlinked systems. Indeed, just as ‘worldedness’ may occur at the level of ‘the collection of works’ in the case of narrative fiction (Hayot 2012: 50), censuses, registries and databases may be understood as coalescing into a super-papereality consisting of the sum total of all official information held by a given state or group of states.

Administrative worldedness is ultimately determined, then, by the state’s informational objectives and capacities. In addition to the question of the accuracy of official information, standards such as consistency and the notion of completeness come into play. In analysing the census as a ‘mode of imagining’, Benedict Anderson spotlights what he terms the ‘fiction of the census’ or ‘bureaucratic *trompe l’oeil*’: the idea that ‘everyone is in [the census], and that everyone has one—and only one—extremely clear place’ (2006: 166, 184). Incidentally, a similar urge for completion may be detected in high realist fiction, which ‘assumes through its length the possibility of a completed and enclosed fictional world’ (Clarke 1980: 60). Both novelistic and bureaucratic forms of writing are concerned, then, with creating the impression of ontological completion and closure.

Paperealities are shaped also by the socio-political structures and ideologies that underlie the state’s informational projects, an important case in point being the patriarchal nature of many information states past and present. For instance, as Jane Humphries and Carmen Sarasúa observe, censuses and official records produced by the Victorian British state ‘systematically underrecord women’s work’, thus creating a ‘statistical mirage’ (2012: 44). Another Victorian-era example of patriarchal administrative worlding is the legal principle of coverture whereby married women were placed under their husbands’ guardianship; in the words of eighteenth-century jurist William Blackstone, ‘the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband’ (1766: 430). This ‘legal fiction’ with ontological overtones played an important

⁴ Cornelia Vismann observes that there is a particular dynamism to institutional files, which are living documents in this sense: ‘[t]he unlimited capacity for addition and circulation turns files into a medium of presence. [...] Files take on ontological qualities’ (2008: 10).

part in the oppression of women, and was targeted by social critics and comedic writers. Famously, in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), Mr Bumble is reminded of the fact that 'the law supposes that [his] wife acts under [his] direction', to which he answers, '[i]f the law supposes that, [...] the law is a [sic] ass' (1931: 394).

Having examined and theorised the ontological effects of administrative practices, I will turn, in my next section, to the treatment of administrative worlding in British fiction.

Administrative worlding in modern British fiction

The history of British administrative statecraft begins with the so-called Domesday Book, the official record of a survey of England and Wales ordered by King William the Conqueror in 1086, which arguably represents the first papereality created on British soil. Over the early modern period, Britain developed an increasingly sophisticated administrative culture of documentation, which in turn generated new literary impulses. Notably, the introduction of licenses for begging and passports for vagrants inspired a 'rogue literature'—e.g., John Awdeley's *The Fraternity of Vagabonds* (1561) and Thomas Harman's *Caveat for Common Cursitors* (1566)—in which beggars and vagrants were characterised as 'tricksters carrying forged passes' (Hindle 2006: 226). During this period, there was not only widespread alarm about fraudsters, but also popular antagonism to the spread of writing, perceived as 'a tool of the authorities, a method of domination' (Chartier 2014: 122). The civilian population's vexation with the uptick in administrative documentation is reflected in William Shakespeare's description of Jack Cade's rebellion in *King Henry VI, Part 2* (1594), in which Cade and his rebels set out to 'kill all the lawyers' (2004: 4.2.72), and 'burn all the records of the realm' (4.7.12). In his rallying cry, Cade bemoans the symbolic power of official records:

Is not this a lamentable thing, that of the skin of an innocent lamb should be made parchment; that parchment, being scribbled o'er, should undo a man? Some say the bee stings, but I say 'tis the bee's wax, for I did but seal once to a thing and I was never mine own man since. (4.2.72–78)

With this critique of bureaucratic textuality, Shakespeare not only voices a critical response to the expanding documentary culture, but also indicates the ontological effects of official textuality. The passage quoted above is

but one example of the intense engagement with bureaucratic culture in the work of Shakespeare and other early modern writers (Dunne 2017). However, at this stage, the British administrative state was still only in its infancy—state bureaucracy would become far more powerful and ubiquitous over the following centuries.

The present survey will focus on representations of administrative worlding in modern literature. Whilst there are noteworthy poems about British officialdom—including *Departmental Ditties* (1886), Rudyard Kipling's collection of poems about colonial bureaucracy in India—it appears that the ontological effects of administrative statecraft have not been treated in verse or dramatic works to the extent that they have been characterised in prose fiction, though bureaucracy and metaphysics are combined in Kipling's humorous billing of the afterlife as '[t]he Last Department where nor fraud nor fools, / Nor grade nor greed, shall trouble us again' (1922: 41). For this reason, the survey will focus on prose fiction, as opposed to drama or poetry.

Perhaps the first major British novelist to thematise administrative worlding is Laurence Sterne, in his vignette of French bureaucracy in *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768). Sterne's narrative begins *in medias res*, with the protagonist, Mr Yorick, proclaiming that, '[t]hey order [...] this matter better in France', thus foregrounding the commonplace notion that the French outdo Britons in administrative affairs (1861: 11). Yorick's claim is disputed by his valet, prompting a hasty departure for France the very next morning, nominally on a grand tour of continental state administration, 'one of the greatest efforts [Yorick] had ever made for knowledge' (86). However, in the excitement of embarking on this trip, Yorick forgets that he needs a passport in order to visit France, as France and England are at war. After staying in Paris unlawfully for a period of time, Yorick decides to travel to Versailles in the hope of procuring a passport from the French authorities. En route, Yorick feels the weight of having to identify himself to the authorities as an almost existential burden: 'There is not a more perplexing affair in life to me, than to set about telling any one who I am,—for there is scarce any body I cannot give a better account of than of myself' (106). The contemplative Yorick arrives unprepared for the meeting at the embassy and flounders until he spots a volume of Shakespeare's plays lying on the table: 'I took up Hamlet, and turning immediately to the grave-diggers scene in the fifth act, I laid my finger upon YORICK' (106). This

impromptu manoeuvre causes the French official to exclaim, ‘Mon Dieu!’ and—embracing Yorick—‘Vous êtes Yorick’ (107). In a decidedly Kafkaesque turn of events, then, the state functionary mistakes Sterne’s protagonist for the court jester in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (who has died prior to the action of the play), and Yorick leaves the cabinet victoriously, having received a passport that is but ‘a little tarnished by the figure [he] cut in it’, as the ‘King’s jester’ (110). This absurdist variation on the fraudster narrative, in which a literary character unintentionally impersonates a character in the literary canon, is more than a pastiche on the purported literal-mindedness of the French: it constitutes a typically Sternean play with questions of ontology and fictionality, one which highlights the correspondences between the ontology of literary works and that of official documents. In Sterne’s novel, that is, a Shakespearean character becomes ‘a part of the real’, to cite Auster, through the granting of a passport, an administrative mix-up that blurs the lines between fiction and bureaucracy.

The early nineteenth century saw the emergence of large-scale administrative projects documenting the lives of the British populace, such as the decennial census, the national registry and the statistical inquiry. As Thomas Richards puts it, the Victorian state’s documentary practices combined to produce a ‘system of representational order—an order of social imagination so powerful that it [could], in effect, construct social reality’ (1993: 11–16). At this time, long-standing parochial administrative systems were also coming under increasing scrutiny. In the novella ‘Cousin Marshall’ (1932), Harriet Martineau highlights the prevalence of fraudulence in Britain’s parish-based system of poor relief. One of the characters in Martineau’s novella is a pauper named Mrs Bell, who delays reporting her son’s death to the authorities so as to retain his allowance of poor relief:

Mrs. Bell, who always went herself to receive the weekly allowance, lest her husband, through his dislike of the business, should not ‘manage it cleverly’, took credit herself for having given notice that the doctor need not take any more trouble about her poor boy, as he was past hope and nothing more could be done for him; but she omitted to state the reason for his being past hope, (viz., that he was dead,) because it would have been inconvenient to give up the allowance received on his account. (1832: 54)

This duplicitous pauper visits charity societies to collect food and clothes for ‘the patient’ long after her son has passed away (55). However, although Mrs Bell ‘flatter[s] herself that she ha[s] ‘managed very cleverly’,

her neighbours soon begin to suspect that she has been ‘tak[ing] parish money for [her] dead child’ (55, 58). Martineau’s fear-mongering account of a bureaucratically literate pauper’s exploitation of the system of poor relief is encapsulated by the ghastly image of the (un)dead child who lives on as an administrative fiction in the books kept by the poor law officers, which is accentuated by the narrator’s uncanny counterfactual references to the deceased child as ‘the patient’.

Administrative worlding is a key trope not only in literary accounts of civilian fraudulence and administrative accident, but also in critiques of maladministration. In Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853), legal-administrative mechanisms are described as drawing concerns, people and estates into a bureaucratic textual vortex, ‘warp[ing]’ social relations and causing ‘objects [to] lose their natural aspects’ (1977: 434). Similarly, in Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1857), the infamous Circumlocution Office causes people and affairs to undergo strange transformations. All manner of things are

indiscriminately tucked up under the foolscap paper of the Circumlocution Office. Numbers of people were lost in the Circumlocution Office [...] and never reappeared in the light of day. Boards sat upon them, secretaries minuted upon them, commissioners gabbled about them, clerks registered, entered, checked, and ticked them off, and they melted away. (2020: 120–121)

The suggestion is that bureaucratic processes render social phenomena inaccessible, whisking them away to another plane of existence. Dickens figures bureaucracy as a form of modern-day magic also in the sketch ‘Red Tape’ (1851), by highlighting the inventiveness of the bureaucratic miscreant who ‘will pull more Red Tape out of his mouth, at a moment’s notice, than a conjuror at a Fair’ (1851: 481). In other words, Dickens’s ‘Red Tapist’ is a magician-like figure who seemingly subverts or extends the limits of the real, by producing ‘impossibilities’ and ‘imaginary obstacles’— administrative entities that have ‘no existence out of [Red] Tape’ (481, 483). Departing from the idea of bureaucracy as ineffective, drab and monotonous, then, Dickens reconfigures red tape as a source of enchantment and delight, associating bureaucracy with creativity and the imagination.

H. G. Wells’s speculative novel *A Modern Utopia* (1905) moves into a high-tech administrative paradigm in which the term ‘papereality’ begins to feel like a misnomer. Advocating for a technocratic form of state

socialism, Wells envisions an administrative world state that combines biometrics and integrated databases to keep track of people globally, thus enabling a form of controlled borderlessness. *A Modern Utopia* provides not only a highly prescient vision of the future, but also a suspenseful thriller about two Edwardians who are suddenly cast into the utopian world. When the two visitors' identifiers are requested by utopian state functionaries, they confess, 'we come from another world. Consequently, whatever thumb-mark registration or numbering you have in this planet doesn't apply to us' (1967: 160). Unsurprisingly, this explanation is rejected by the utopian bureaucrats. And yet, when the protagonists' thumb-marks are processed by the sophisticated world state apparatus, and it is found that they have biometrically identical utopian doubles, the bureaucrats are confronted with a reality that their database cannot explain. In *A Modern Utopia*, then, there is an ontological proliferation whereby the actual world becomes entangled not only with the possible or utopian world, but also with the bureaucratic reality of the database.

Joseph Conrad is another author who explored matters of administrative worlding in the early twentieth century. In 'The Shadow-Line' (1916), Conrad's first-person narrator remarks upon the dehumanising side of naval bureaucracy, bemoaning the Harbour Office clerks' tendency to view seamen 'merely [as] subject[s] for official writing' (1963: 234). The protagonist is aggrieved by 'the artificial superiority of a man of pen and ink to the men who grapple with realities outside the consecrated walls of official buildings': '[w]hat ghosts we must have been to him! Mere symbols to juggle with in books and heavy registers, without brains and muscles and perplexities' (234). In other words, Conrad's first-person narrator suggests that the Harbour Office's records simultaneously produce epistemologically shallow information and a bloodless form of administrative spectrality. This passage typifies Conrad's tendency to critique official textuality on precisely those points where his own style of writing is famously at its strongest; whereas the Harbour Office clerks pay no attention to the nuances of social reality, Conrad's artistic mission lies precisely in 'grappl[ing] with realities' and rendering social 'perplexities'. The above passage thus exemplifies how Conrad's polemic with 'official writing' doubles as a means of valorising literature.

Britain's involvement in major wars during the first half of the twentieth century catalysed further state expansion. Evelyn Waugh's *Put*

Out More Flags (1942) satirises not only military and intelligence operations during WWII, but also the emergent welfare state. One strand of the plot concerns three siblings, the Connollies, who board an urban evacuation train without the knowledge of the authorities. The subsequent trajectory of these children provides a trenchant commentary on the peculiar dynamics of administrative worlding:

These [children] had appeared as an act of God apparently without human agency; their names did not appear on any list; they carried no credentials; no one was responsible for them. They were found lurking under the seats of a carriage when the train was emptied on the evening of the first influx. They had been dragged out and stood on the platform where everyone denied knowledge of them, and since they could not be left there, they were included in the party that was being sent by bus to Malfrey village. From that moment they were on a list; they had been given official existence and their destiny was inextricably involved with that of Malfrey. (2001: 86)

In short, the bureaucratic welfare operation is such that unknown children cannot be cared for till they have been 'given official existence' within the urban evacuation programme. Once the children have arrived in Malfrey, however, the Connollies' case continues to cause administrative headaches, as the unruly children severely test the limits of the villagers' hospitality:

In six weeks they had become a legend far beyond the parish. When influential old men at the Turf in London put their heads together and said, 'The whole scheme has been a mistake. I was hearing last night some examples of the way some of the evacuees are behaving...' the chances were that the scandal originated with the Connollies. They were cited in the House of Commons; there were paragraphs about them in official reports. (89)

In other words, once the Connollies have been given 'official existence' by being included on the list of evacuees, their papereal presence swells, as they become leading characters in a continuing administrative saga.

The postwar era saw the consolidation of the British welfare state, epitomised by the establishment of the National Health Service in 1948. In the 1980s, however, there was a turn toward protectionism and the reduction of welfare services. This political zeitgeist is captured in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a novel which gives administrative worlding a fantastical spin. The two protagonists of Rushdie's novel, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha are travelling to England from India, when their flight is hijacked by terrorists who detonate explosives

onboard the plane. This explosion causes Farishta and Chamcha to fall from ‘Himalayan heights’, miraculously surviving, only to find that they have fallen ‘out of the sky into some wrongness, some other place, not England, or perhaps Not-England, some counterfeit zone, rotten borough, altered state. Maybe [...] Hell’ (2008: 136). Moreover, they find themselves gradually metamorphosing, Gibreel into the Archangel Gabriel and Saladin into a goat-like devil. Here, Saladin’s bodily transformation is bound up with the police’s scornful refusal to recognise him as an English citizen; ‘there’s been a mistake’, Saladin pleads with the police, ‘you’ve got to believe me, I’m a British [...] with right of abode, too’—but when he cannot ‘produce a passport or any other identifying document they beg[i]n to weep with mirth’ (144). The horns growing on his forehead are cited as evidence to his alien status: ‘if it’s proof you’re after, you couldn’t do better than *those*’ (145). Eventually, Saladin does regain his citizenship, albeit not his normal appearance, when a call to the ‘Police National Computer [...] promptly identifie[s] him as a British Citizen first class’ (169). Rather than being brought to the police station, Saladin is taken to a sanatorium where he joins a host of similar international travellers-cum-mutants, which includes ‘businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails’ and ‘a group of holidaymakers from Senegal who were doing no more than changing planes when they were turned into slippery snakes’ (173). In characterising the xenophobic treatment of non-Western travellers in supernatural terms, Rushdie highlights the ontological dimension of the state’s symbolic violence: “‘how do they do it?’” Chamcha wanted to know. “‘They describe us,’” one of the mutated persons explains, “‘That’s all. They have the power of description’” (174). Moreover, when Saladin emerges into the streets of London, after a further period ‘cocooned’ in a rooming-house together with immigrant families curiously described as ‘temporary human beings, with little hope of being declared permanent’ (273), his devilish persona is still tied to his liminal status as an ‘[i]llegal immigrant’—he is described as a ‘being who had crossed the frontier, evading the normal controls’ (297). In short, the magical realism of *The Satanic Verses* is well-suited to capturing the ontological dimensions of the state’s symbolic power.

The mention of a ‘Police National Computer’ firmly places Rushdie’s novel in the nascent paradigm of digital administrative statecraft, with new conditions for the storing, accessing and transferring of information. In *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994), Scottish author James Kelman

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portrays the civilian non-bureaucrat's experience of digital administration in welfare institutions. Kelman's protagonist Sammy loses his eyesight early on in the novel in a violent clash with the police, and when he visits the hospital to file for benefits, he is careful not to divulge any information that will incriminate the policemen, fearing retribution. However, during the interview that ensues with one of the hospital functionaries, Sammy, inadvertently reveals the cause of his injury during what he perceives as an informal interlude in the interview:

a wee altercation with the sodgers; they gave me a doing. [...]

The boy had started hitting the keyboard again.

What're ye writing that down? said Sammy.

Yeh.

Well I'd prefer ye not to.

I've got to but Mister Samuels.

How?

Cause it's material.

...

We're required to do it.

Sammy sniffed. Ye no got a delete button?

Yeh but no for this operation. If the customer doesnt want something in they're supposed to not say it. Once it's in it cannay come out. I dont have the authority; I'm just a Preliminary Officer. I'm not allowed to adjudicate on something where it's material.

Ye didnay write down the football stuff.

Well that isnay material. (1995: 98)

The novelty of computer-based transcription renders the meeting strange for Sammy, creating a layer of ontological complexity. In a desperate attempt to retract what he had let slip about the 'wee altercation with the

sodgers', Sammy withdraws his benefits claim. However, as he learns during a subsequent interview with a senior member of the hospital staff, the 'material' is logged in the institutional archive:

So is that my claim for Dysfunctional Benefit scrubbed now?

Well I'm afraid not, it is withdrawn though.

How d'ye mean like it stays on the computer?

Yes, but it's filed as a withdrawn claim. (110)

This whole episode dramatises the intricate interplay between civilian non-bureaucrats and state functionaries in the co-production of official information. Sammy's attempt to file a benefits claim for his loss of sight without specifying the cause makes for a highly revealing study of the type of ontological play and murkiness that bureaucratic procedures entail.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, integrated supranational databases were paired with biometrics to create transnational surveillance systems that resemble Wells's vision of controlled borderlessness.⁵ The European Union's efforts in this regard are satirised in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004), which describes the endeavour of establishing a 'Pan European Border Authority' with a system of 'common information collection and retrieval' established on the premise that 'if you combine the database with biometrics, you can cut through everything. No more lies' (2005: 252). Predictably, the biometric database does not prove a panacea for all problems of identification. Rather, it creates its own 'lies'. When a computer virus infects the database it starts to 'identify [...] innocent people as known criminals, failed asylum seekers or persons being monitored by European intelligence services' (283). Ironically, when the new border authority orchestrates an initial mass deportation, its leading PR agent is mistakenly identified as a 'suspected pyramid fraudster and failed asylum seeker' and is expelled from the EU (283). The closing pages of the novel meditate on the ontological uncertainty caused by the computer virus. On the one hand, the virus has helped create 'records of events which may not have taken place,' and, on the other hand, there will have been certain 'events [that] took place but left no record'

⁵ On the parallels between Wells's utopian bureaucracy and contemporary border regimes, see Foster (2022).

(273). Whilst the disruption to the biometric database is the result of a freak accident, the various permutations of administrative worlding that have been examined in the present survey of British fiction suggest that this type of administrative ontological uncertainty is, in fact, far from exceptional.

Conclusion: The best of all possible official worlds

In 'The Great Tasmania's Cargo' (1860), which was Dickens's last great satire on Victorian officialdom, British colonial administration in India is figured as 'the Pagoda Department of that great Circumlocution Office on which the sun never sets and the light of reason never rises' (1860: 37). Conducting a private investigation into a case of colonial maladministration, Dickens's narrator encounters his 'official friend Pangloss [who] is lineally descended from a learned doctor of that name, who was once tutor to Candide' (38). Echoing his forebear's sanguine motto, Dickens's Pangloss maintains that British officialdom is in every aspect impeccable: 'in his official capacity, he unfortunately preaches the doctrines of his renowned ancestor, by demonstrating on all occasions that we live in the best of all possible official worlds' (38). Pangloss's refrain about 'the best of all possible official worlds' not only focuses Dickens's critique of the imperial state's perceived tendency to absolve itself of blame, but it also underlines Dickens's long-standing interest in administrative worlds, an interest that he shares with the other authors whose work has been examined in the present essay.

Literary representations of British state bureaucracy show that the rise of the modern administrative state caused a great deal of 'ontological stress', to borrow Thomas Pavel's terminology (1981: 157). Dickens's Pangloss lives in the best of all possible official worlds, Sterne's Yorick is officially confused with his Shakespearean namesake, Martineau's fraudulent paupers make deceased children subsist in Poor Law registers and Rushdie's undocumented persons and precariously situated international travellers mutate into devilish and temporary beings. In these works, then, state bureaucracy is critiqued as a form of modern-day sorcery or god-like omnipotence, producing irresistible ontological effects through the combination of administrative technologies and the state's symbolic power. These pressures are shown to be felt not only by civilians, but also by state functionaries themselves, as in Kelman's account of the clerk who apologetically explains, during the interview with Sammy, that

he has to abide by bureaucratic protocol ('I'm not allowed to adjudicate on something where it's material'). At the same time, the aforementioned writers highlight the inevitable slippages, gaps and fissures that arise through the production of bureaucratic paperealities, emphasising that the pressures of official documentary practices can be manipulated and countered by various actors, including not only professional bureaucrats but also civilian non-bureaucrats.

By investigating the symbolic power of the administrative state through the prism of fictionality and novelistic world-building, I hope to have opened avenues for further exploration in the field. Notwithstanding Dickens's embittered declaration that the black magic of red tape is 'the peculiar curse and nuisance of England' (1851: 481), administrative worlding likely represents a salient theme in depictions of state bureaucracy in other literary traditions and contexts. The present study has been limited to bureaucratic 'curses' conjured up in British works of fiction that critique bureaucratic systems and practices, emphasising the analytical modelling that such works provide, but there is a great deal more to explore with regards to the relationship between literature, the state and bureaucracy, not least in terms of the ways in which works of fiction may be seen to reinforce the symbolic power of the state, especially in cases where the fictional world aligns with the official papereality.

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