‘Something Strangely Mixed’:

A Study of The Comic Modes of Charles Dickens

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Abstract

This thesis asserts the importance of Dickensian comic modes. It engages with academic discourse and popular culture which between them have formulated a serious, socially engaged and psychologically dramatic Dickens in which comedy is muted. It examines the nature of Dickens's comedy and his debt to traditions of comic writing. It attempts to construct an understanding of Dickens in which comic modes are as vital as the dramatic to our understanding of Dickens's methods, themes and purposes.

It adopts an inclusive approach to methodology in recognition of the wide-ranging nature of Dickensian comedy, deploying theorisations of the comic in the context of a Marxist approach to nineteenth-century modernity. It asserts the importance of the tradition of comic quixotic fiction in which Dickens can be seen to have written. It demonstrates that Dickens developed an individual response to the nature of emergent modernity that can be distinguished by contrast with other theorisations of the comic from the period. It examines distinctive Dickensian comic formulations of comic characterisation and the equally distinctive nature of Dickensian comic language and satire.

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Introduction

Dickens and His Humourless Avatar

Our age has created a 'Dickens' that it needs. Startlingly, he is largely humourless. The ideological imperatives and the cultural mechanisms, particularly publishing and scholarly scrutiny through which 'Dickens' has been created, have muted, even ignored, his comedy. A reassertion of the importance of the distinctive Dickensian comedic mode is overdue, because without it our understandings are partial or incomplete. This study will reclaim him as a consciously comic fictional artist, with aesthetic practices of narrative, character and language which are rooted in comedic literary tradition. The distinctive nature of his comic mode will be revealed by an examination of the role that the comedic plays in Dickens's response to his contemporary cultural conditions and in the light of understandings of the comedic from contemporaries and near contemporaries. It will show him to be a consciously comic artist in his deployment of the comic in character and language and will respond to criticism that sees those practices as false, lacking in realism and painfully embarrassing to those with serious critical intent.

Dickens as we believe we know him is an incomplete and problematic ideological construct. This constructed Dickens reflects the needs of a highly-developed capitalist society and an ideology that seeks, paradoxically, to turn the misery of the past into a comfortable and comforting model of Victorianism. It is a heritage model, in which the social and psychological problems that capitalism creates are undoubtedly savage, but they also appear to be safely in the past. It is a model constructed through cultural and ideological mechanisms, both mass and elite – film and the media, publishing and academic study. This introduction will examine a select range of evidence from literary criticism and editions of Dickens's texts, focusing on *Great Expectations*, including scholarly editions, which will show this process in action.

The introduction goes on to show that the reading of Dickens that has resulted from this ideological construction privileges psychological trauma and social criticism – which are, of course, key aspects of Dickens's artistic vision – but that it does so in such a way that the comic fictional mode is suppressed, or, in what is the more likely process, simply ignored. The thesis presents an examination of Dickens's comic mode that reveals its polysemic and polymorphous nature and the roles which it plays in complex interrelationships with other modes in Dickens's imaginative purposes. The thesis thereby enables new ways of producing meaning from the novels, which result in new readings, and new means of understanding current readings.

However, the comic mode is not asserted in this study simply as a contestant in a battle for the Dickensian artistic soul, whereby a mode that has been suppressed takes its place at the expense of its suppressor. The comic mode is integral, with its own contribution to make to our understanding of Dickens's artistic vision. It is crucial to emphasise that this thesis does not argue simply that we should begin to see Dickens as a comic, rather than a dramatic, or melodramatic, novelist. It argues that the full range of Dickensian criticism should include thoroughly interrogated comedic modes, which are shown to contribute in their distinctive ways to Dickens's artistic expression, to his exploration of the mind and society of the nineteenth century and, therefore, to our critically informed understanding of his fiction and its relationship to his age and to our own.

A Dickens emerges from this process who is recognisably Dickens, but he is a changed Dickens, in which critically examined comic modes takes their rightful place in our multiple understandings of what we call the Dickensian. The comic modes enable Dickens to do things that drama alone cannot and they enable him to present the drama in richer ways than would be possible without it. It asserts that the critical separation of fictional modes, particularly that between the dramatic and the comic, is shown to create a false opposition because all modes interrelate intimately in the Dickensian – in fact, this is one of the distinctive characteristics of Dickensian comic modes – and our recognition of those interrelationships, and the insights such a recognition can bring, are overdue. A Dickens emerges who is not simply a comedian or a dramatist: he is both, but in order to capture that dual, or polyglot, or even multiform, Dickens, we need to reassert the comedian. Moreover, just as Dickens's dramatic modes are multi-layered, so there is no single comic mode, but a shifting, polyphonic, comedy that includes, variously, gentle humour, absurd farce, the comic grotesque, and satire shading into polemic.

The Critical Suppression of the Comic

> It is not long since I heard a very distinguished man express measureless contempt for Dickens, and a few minutes afterwards, in reply to some representations on the other side, admit that Dickens had 'entered into his life.'[1]

[1] G. H. Lewes, 'from a review of Vol. I Forster's *Life, Fortnightly Review*, February 1872, xvii, 141-54', Philip Collins, ed., *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 570. All subsequent references are to this edition, specifying author by surname and Collins.

Many early commentators appreciated and enjoyed Dickens's comic mode. An early unsigned review of *Sketches by Boz*, in the *Metropolitan Magazine*, refers to 'these admirable sketches, very many of which would form admirable groundwork for light comedies and farces.'[2] Another anonymous review, of the first number of *Pickwick Papers*, proclaims 'even extravagance may be pardoned in him, when he makes it so laugh-provoking', and a later review of the ninth number, asserts that '[w]e know of no publication that is productive of more genuine amusement than these Pickwickian papers.'[3] It is possible to detect, even in these simple examples, a tone which indicates the ambivalent attitude which was characteristic of critical thought on Dickens's comic mode. Items of praise come with a barb: the 'lightness' of the comedy, or the need to defend against 'extravagance'. For many of these commentators the comic is a potentially flimsy, or inartistic, mode.

Dickens's more elite readership, or those who sought artistic weight, seem to have been embarrassed by the comic, or at least to express an ambivalent attitude towards it. The anonymous reviewer of the first nine numbers of *Pickwick Papers* in the *Athenaeum* in December 1836 considered Dickens's comedy derivative, '[t]he *Pickwick Papers*, in fact, are made up of two pounds of Smollett, three ounces of Sterne, a handful of Hook, a dash of grammatical Pierce Egan'.[4] The reviewer goes on to make two other significant comments. First, the humour is vulgar, 'he runs closely upon some leading hounds in the humorous pack, and when he gives tongue (perchance a vulgar tongue)' and second, the humour is seen as a limited and limiting mode: quotidian and mundane,

> we earnestly hope and trust nothing we have said will tend to *refine* him. We do not want to be the weekly Hercules to his monthly Antaeus, because we are satisfied, that if he were once lifted from the earth he would lose much of his strength:- he is not for the 'cloud-capp'd towers and gorgeous palaces', for he could not be easy in them or near them.[5]

Dickensian comedy, then, even for these generally favourable reviewers, is seen as derivative, rather than the product of a tradition of comic fiction, as vulgar, and inartistic, and incapable of achieving serious intent. These strands of anti-comedic criticism are widespread from early in the critical record, and they are persistent.

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[2] Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*, ed., Dennis Walder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995). 'From an unsigned review of *Sketches by Boz*, *Metropolitan Magazine* March 1836, xv, 77', Collins, p. 30.

[3] 'From unsigned reviews of *Pickwick Papers*, *Metropolitan Magazine* May 1836 – May 1837': '(a) (May 1836, xvi, 15, reviewing No. I'; '(e) (January 1837, xviii, 6, reviewing No. IX'. Collins, p. 30, p. 31.

[4] 'Unsigned review of *Pickwick Papers* Nos. I – IX, the *Athenaeum* 3 December 1836, 841-3'. Collins, p. 32.

[5] Collins, p. 33.

Forster, in an enthusiastic review of *The Pickwick Papers* as early as July 1837, felt the need to disarm potential critics by emphasising the art that underlay what may otherwise have been identifiable as crudity, 'we can rarely now find anything that approaches to caricature or exaggeration without finding also some very shrewd and sound truth concealed beneath it'.[6] The author of another generally favourable review of 1837 also felt the need, while acknowledging Dickens's success in depicting, 'the comic peculiarities of the lower orders of Englishmen', to give advice on what he clearly saw as more worthy and more serious artistic objectives, that involved Dickens in a change of direction, 'Mr Dickens will allow us [...] to hope that his great powers are destined to leave some lasting monuments in our literature. This end, however, he will not attain without study, without labour and without care.'[7] Again, this criticism carries with it the implication that the comic is not the product of serious artistic endeavour and that it does not require the sobering and staid application that other modes draw on.

An early review of December 1837, possibly by G. H. Lewes, gives generous recognition to the comic mode, but also sees the humour as a problem identifying 'a continual straining after humorous things, and this straining gives a laboured air to the work, besides which, it gives a want of light and shade, which fatigues the mind'.[8] For an anonymous reviewer of March 1838 Dickens's comedy is transient,

> his incidental topics introduced to satirize the times [...] resemble the passing hits of a pantomime – side-splitting at first, decreasing in effect at each repetition, and vapid or unintelligible by the end of the season. This temporary attraction, but permanent defect.[9]

Similarly, for an anonymous reviewer of a reissue of *Martin Chuzzlewit* in 1861, '[i]t is not the object of Mr Dickens to represent the world as it is. The comic characters are only true to life in a remote and exceptional way.'[10]

The persistence of these critical positions on the comic can be noted in James Barrie's 1890 caricatured conversation between Dickens and stylised representatives of novelists who were presented as characteristic of the 1890s. Among the comments on Dickens that his successors make are,

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[6] [John Forster], 'from an unsigned review of *Pickwick Papers*, No. XV, *Examiner* 2 July 1837, 421-2' Collins, p. 37.
[7] [Charles Buller], 'from 'The Works of Charles Dickens', *London and Westminster Review* July 1837, xxix, 194-215', Collins, p. 52, p. 54.
[8] [G. H. Lewes?], 'from a review of *Sketches, Pickwick and Oliver Twist*, in the *National Magazine and Monthly Critic* December 1837, I, 445-9', Collins, p. 68.
[9] 'From an unsigned review, 'Boz and his *Nicholas Nickleby*', *Spectator* 31 March 1838, xi, 304', Collins, p. 70.
[10] 'From an unsigned article, *National Review* July 1861, xiii, 134-50', Collins, p. 192. Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), ed., P. N. Furbank (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).

> ELSMERIAN – We have no patience with humour. In these days of anxious thought humour seems a trivial thing. The world has grown sadder since your time [...]
> STYLIST – Humour is vulgar.
> AMERICAN – Humour, sir, has been refined and chastened since the infancy of fiction [...] [Y]ou are ticketed a caricaturist [...] We have analysed your methods and found them puerile. You have no subtle insight into character.[11]

The implications clearly echo the commentators from the earliest part of Dickens's career: the comic Dickens is inelegant, inartistic and crude; his humour is a distraction from serious artistic intent; it is incapable of conveying serious meaning or of shaping character. These criticisms, of inartistic crudity inextricably linked to his comic mode, are intimately connected with his popularity and are flavoured by disparagement of Dickens's intellectual capacity. They are criticisms which are present throughout the nineteenth century among Dickens's more elite critical readership. A review of *Bleak House* in *The Rambler* from January 1854, while praising Dickens as 'an unrivalled humorist', is dismissive,

> [h]e has no claims to be regarded as a writer of comedy; his characters are congeries of oddities of phrase, manner, gesticulation, dress, countenance, or limb, tacked cleverly upon a common-place substratum of excessive simplicity, amiableness, or villainy [...] Of wit Dickens has none. The intellectual portion of his nature is not sufficiently refined, keen or polished to appreciate the delicate subtleties of thought and language which are included in that singular and charming thing, a witty idea or expression. [...] He is not a man of thought.[12]

For George Eliot, in "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), there is a problematic divergence between Dickens's depiction of character in serious and comic modes. The nature of the problem reveals her artistic preconceptions and her attitude to Dickensian comic modes. She praises him for the verisimilitude of his comic characters, stating that 'he can copy Mrs Plornish's colloquial style with the delicate accuracy of a sun-picture', but asserts that he is unable to achieve higher fictional purposes and lacks artistic truth, referring to Dickens's 'frequently false psychology' and how,

> he scarcely ever passes from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness.[13]

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[11] J. M. Barrie, 'Brought back from Elysium', *Contemporary Review* 57 (June 1890), pp. 846-54, p. 853. Quoted by Collins in his introduction, p. 18.
[12] [James Augustine Stothert], 'from 'Living Novelists', *The Rambler* January 1854, n.s. I, 41-51', Collins, p. 297, pp. 294-5.
[13] George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), *Selected Critical Writings*, ed., Rosemary Ashton, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 260-95, p. 264. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Eliot identifies the 'humorous' with 'the external', asserting, by implication, her inherent understanding of the comic as superficial. In her own aesthetic she implicitly values the comic mode lower than the serious modes, anticipating that the latter are more capable of artistic purpose,

> if he could give us their psychological character – their conceptions of life, and their emotions – with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies.[14]

For Eliot, Dickens is good at comedy, but bad at psychological realism, and, for her, it is the latter against which he is to be judged.

Henry James's review of *Our Mutual Friend* in *The Nation* in 1865, while less explicitly directed at Dickens's comic mode than Eliot, nevertheless echoes Eliot's position on Dickens's shortcomings as a literary artist, shortcomings which implicitly denigrate the humour.[15] Where James does consider the comic, he sees the novel as evidence of declining artistry, with an emphasis on the external and the superficial, '[i]t is the letter of his old humour without the spirit [...] every character here put before us is a mere bundle of eccentricities.'[16] James portrays Dickens, not merely the comic Dickens, as shallow and inartistic, like Eliot's Dickens, one who falls short of the insights which psychological realism enable, 'it is one of the chief conditions of his genius not to see below the surface of things [...] we should, accordingly, call him the greatest of superficial novelists [...] He has added nothing to our understanding of human character [...] Mr Dickens is a great observer and a great humorist, but he is nothing of a philosopher.'[17]

Lewes, too, echoes Eliot, in his critique of Dickens which appeared as a review of Forster's *Life*, in February, 1872. Lewes acknowledges the importance of the comic mode to Dickens's fiction, while also highlighting his low opinion of it as a form of fictional art, almost expressing revulsion at what seems to be the sheer unthinking nature of the reader's reaction,

> [i]t will be enough merely to mention in passing the primary cause of his success, his overflowing fun, because even uncompromising opponents admit it. They may be ashamed of their laughter, but they laugh. A revulsion of feeling at the preposterousness or extravagance of the image, may follow the burst of laughter, but the laughter is irresistible, whether rational or not, and there is no arguing away such a fact.[18]

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[14] Eliot, p. 264.
[15] [Henry James], 'review in *The Nation* (New York) 21 December 1865, 786-7', Collins, pp. 469-73.
[16] Henry James, Collins, p. 470.
[17] Henry James, Collins, p. 472.
[18] G. H. Lewes, Review of Forster's *Life*, Collins, pp. 570-1.

The consequence for Lewes, as for Eliot and James, was that Dickens fell short of the artistic ideal. He had a 'glorious energy of imagination [...] which made him a creator, and made his creations universally intelligible, no matter how fantastic and unreal', in which his characters are 'merely masks', or they are 'pieces of simple mechanisms', or they are 'wooden and run on wheels', or they are 'frogs whose brains have been taken out'.[19] Like James, Lewes finds a popular, but intellectually deficient, Dickens who cultivates appeal at the expense of serious endeavour and for whom humour is implicitly denigrated as an aesthetic defence, '[t]hought is strangely absent from his works [...] his was merely an *animal* intelligence, *i.e.*, restricted to perceptions [...] He never was and never would have been a student'.[20]

Dickensian comedy, then, is implicitly diminished in the critical record because of its association with Dickens's populist success. Comedy is not a mode of serious endeavour. It is not an aesthetic category for a serious, intellectually respectable artist. For the first part of the twentieth century Dickens was widely read but was not regarded as a subject of serious study. As Deborah Nord suggests, a common theme of comment on Dickens in this period presented him as an artist of the child and of the childish, not a mature or serious artist.[21] Virginia Woolf's review of *David Copperfield* (1925) regards Dickens's fiction as 'not books, but stories communicated by word of mouth in those tender years when fact and fiction merge, and thus belong to the memories and myths of life, and not to its aesthetic experience'.[22] She struggles to contain her disdain at what she identifies as Dickens's faults, 'his sentiment is disgusting, and his style commonplace', 'he lacks charm and idiosyncrasy, is everybody's writer and no one's in particular, is an institution, a monument, a public thoroughfare trodden dusty by a million feet'.[23] His characters are surfaces for oddities, who 'come to life with all their appurtenances and peculiarities', or who, at points of emotional crisis, 'are of an indescribable unreality' and she finds benefit only in a Dickens who is capable of the superficial, the material and the surface,

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[19] G. H. Lewes, Review of Forster's *Life*, Collins, pp. 571-2, p. 574.
[20] G. H. Lewes, Review of Forster's *Life*, Collins, p. 576.
[21] Deborah Epstein Nord, 'The Making of Dickens Criticism', *Contemporary Dickens*, Eileen Gillooly and Dierdre David, eds, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), pp. 264-87, pp. 266-9. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[22] Virginia Woolf, rev of *David Copperfield* (1925), *Collected Essays*, Vol. 1, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), pp. 191-5, p. 191. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, intr. and notes Jeremy Tambling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004). All subsequent references are to these editions.
[23] Woolf, *David Copperfield*, pp. 192-3.

> [w]hat we remember is the ardour, the excitement, the humour, the oddity of people's characters; the smell and savour and soot of London; the incredible coincidences.[24]

Woolf's scorn is for Dickens as public institution, and Dickens as creator of characters who lack reality, and the comedy is an inevitable casualty of the sweep of her analysis.

George Santayana, though sympathetic to Dickens and to Dickensian comedy, nevertheless seems to regard Dickens in terms comparable to Woolf's inartistic, childlike Dickens. Santayana's Dickens seems a benign fool,

> [w]ho could not be happy in his world? [...] in spite of his ardent simplicity and openness of heart, how insensible Dickens was to the greater themes of the human imagination – religion, science, politics, art [...] he was like a sensitive child [...] Perhaps, properly speaking, he had no *ideas* on any subject.[25]

In the context of Santayana's portrait of Dickens, his defence of Dickensian comedy is a sophisticated one that seeks to recognise, to some extent, at least, the full power that this mode is capable of. However, he feels that it is necessary to present his case as a defence against critical forces – unnamed and unidentified by Santayana, though seeming the more pervasive, perhaps, because unnamed and unidentified – which define that comic as weak because it lacks realism,

> [w]hen people say Dickens exaggerates, it seems to me they can have no eyes or ears [...] The world is a perpetual caricature of itself [...] a conventional world, a world of masks, is superimposed on the reality, and passes in every sphere of human interest for the reality itself. Humour is the perception of this illusion [...] comedy throws the convention over altogether, revels for a moment in the fact, and brutally says to the notions of mankind, as if it slapped them in the face, There, take that! That's what you really are![26]

Santayana's defence of the comic mode is essentially a defence of its moral force, the Aristotelian capacity of comedy to highlight and expose to ridicule humanity's folly and vice.[27] His position is undoubtedly a valid one, but it is partial and limiting. He focuses primarily on comic character, and on what may be regarded as caricature, defending characters such as Quilp, Squeers or Buzfuzz from the charge of

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[24] Woolf, *David Copperfield*, pp. 192-3.
[25] George Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Late Soliloquies* (1922), intr. Ralph Ross (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967), pp. 58-73, pp. 58-9. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[26] Santayana, p. 65-6.
[27] Aristotle, 'On the Art of Poetry', *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T. S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 31-75.

falsity, 'the world is lying; there are such people; we are such people ourselves in our true moments'.[28] His analysis recognises the capacity to disturb,

> [w]e are afraid, ashamed, anxious to be spared. What displeases us in Dickens is that he does not spare us [...] This faculty, which renders him a consummate comedian, is just what alienated from him a later generation,

but does not recognise the range, the potential complexity, or the interrelationships of the comic modes.[29] In effect, his defence of Dickens is limited to the moral impact of satire, within an overall impression of a defective art and a defective artist, 'all the melodramas in his theatre, so provincial and poor'.[30]

Dickensian comic modes were a casualty of post-war critical evaluations of Dickens. Comedy continued to be not a direct target of hostile analysis but to be denigrated implicitly in a wider critique of Dickens as merely a populist. F. R. Leavis, in *The Great Tradition* (1948), refused to admit Dickens to the canon – with the exception of *Hard Times* – on the basis of an absence of moral aesthetic, calling him 'the great entertainer', who possessed,

> no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than this description suggests [...] The adult mind doesn't as a rule find in Dickens a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness.[31]

However, Leavis, together with Q.D. Leavis, subsequently argued for the rehabilitation of Dickens in *Dickens the Novelist* (1970), in ways that seem to give recognition to the comic mode.[32] Their aim – with an apparent lack of consciousness of the extent of the volte-face involved – contradicts F.R.'s earlier dismissive approach to the idea of Dickens as a serious artist, '[o]ne cannot, then, rest happily on the formula that Dickens's genius was that of the popular entertainer'.[33]

The Leavisite critical approach, of close and careful reading, enables the Leavises to recognise the role of comedy in the fiction, though it is a passing and undefined term, tacitly assumed to be uncomplicated. In the first chapter the Leavises defend *Dombey and Son* from potential critics of what they recognise could be seen as 'endless overworked pathos, for lush unrealities [...] childish elaborations [...] and for all the disqualifying characteristics [...] of melodrama' by asserting a countervailing string of strengths, which includes the comic,

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[28] Santayana, p. 66.
[29] Santayana, p. 67.
[30] Santayana, p. 60.
[31] F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), p. 19. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[32] F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[33] Leavis, *Dickens*, p. 29, p. ix.

> the genial force of Dickens's inexhaustible creativity is also strongly present, in the vigour of the perception and rendering of life, the varied comedy, the vitality of expression.[34]

They recognise, variously, 'robust ironic comedy' in the depiction of Mrs Chick, the 'peculiar strength of the humour in the supreme ranges of Dickens's art', that Mr Chick is a 'Dickensian figure of comedy' and that Polly and Susan's visit to the Toodle home 'is done with all the vivacity, force and humour of Dickens's genius'.[35] However, these references to the comic are critically unexamined. They are implicitly thought to be uncomplicated and, therefore, readily understood. And yet, even such passing references are freighted with meaning and potential ambiguity. If, as the Leavises assert, '[t]he Toodle family and milieu [...] stand for that which is repressed and denied by the Dombey code', then why is the comic such an important part of the depiction of that family?[36] What sorts of comedy are deployed, in what combinations, and for what purposes?

Significantly, the Leavises' study starts with *Dombey and Son*, described by the chapter heading that explores it as 'The First Major Novel'.[37] It therefore omits *The Pickwick Papers*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, novels all marked extensively by the comic mode. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Leavises' rehabilitation of Dickens as a serious artist requires a critical avoidance of the comedy. This stance is all the more marked because, in his championing of *Hard Times* in *The Great Tradition*, there is a sense of the potential of the comic as a source of critical insight into Dickens as an artist. In his examination of the scene at the end of *Hard Times* in which Gradgrind confronts his son Tom, absurdly costumed and blacked up, over the robbery at the bank, in which Gradgrind is forced to realise the failure of his parenting, Leavis asserts,

> the rich complexity of Dickens's art may be seen in this passage. No simple formula can take account of the various elements in the whole effect, a sardonic-tragic in which satire consorts with pathos.[38]

Leavis's insight, here, helps define the intention of this study. His recognition that Dickens's art is serious and complex, that it cannot easily be reduced and formulated for critically utilitarian purposes, and that the comic mode is key to that irreducible complexity are central tenets of this study. Where Leavis stops short: of

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[34] Leavis, *Dickens*, p. 2.
[35] Leavis, *Dickens*, p. 3, p. 5, p. 10.
[36] Leavis, *Dickens*, p. 10. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed., Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Ch. VI. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[37] Leavis, *Dickens*, p. 1.
[38] Leavis, *Tradition*, p. 241. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), ed., David Craig (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 299-301.

defining the nature and forms of that complexity, of locating the interrelationships and influences of modes and traditions of the comic, of determining the nature of comic character, comic language and the importance of comic theory, and his limited focus on a single novel, this study takes as its starting points. It is ironic that Leavis's insight into the potential of Dickensian comedy takes place in the book in which he denies Dickens's place in the canon, and in the book which was published over two decades before the attempt to rehabilitate the novelist.

Comedy, then, has been problematic for Dickens from the earliest days. It has been used to present him as inartistic, vulgarly popular and populist and, particularly, has illustrated how he cannot achieve the critical ideal of psychological realism. It has remained largely unexamined in detail as a potential focus of critical investigation capable of producing important insights into Dickens's artistic methods and purposes.

It was only from the middle decades of the twentieth century that Dickens began to gain critical acceptance. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, while Dickens came to be accepted into the canon as suitable for critical scrutiny, his acceptance was at the expense of his comedy which became suppressed and ignored in the process by which other, supposedly populist and therefore intellectually malign qualities, were critiqued. Ideological factors in the acceptance of Dickens into the canon militated against the enthusiastic adoption of the comedic mode as a critical focus. It is significant to the argument of this introduction that the critical acceptance of Dickens was in the wake of two waves of critical theory.

The first wave was Marxist. T. A. Jackson's *Charles Dickens: The Progress of a Radical*, (1937), emphasised Dickens's sociological relevance and the depiction of capitalist society in crisis. Jackson describes his serious and committed Dickens in uncompromising language, 'Dickens was much more profoundly Radical – much more near to *revolutionary* Republicanism – nearer to the very fringe of Communism – than in his earlier works he allowed himself to appear.'[39] However, it is a necessary part of Jackson's assertion of Dickens's political mission, that the comic is seen to be an embarrassment, or a distraction, to be explained away, or to be diminished. This process can be seen in Jackson's discussion of Mrs Pipchin and her system of education and how it accords with Dickens's wider critique of capitalist modes of education. He comments, '[y]ou may, if you please, call this caricature. But it is caricature of an order of genius which reveals the truth more essentially and more justly than any photograph.'[40] In this comment we see an important critical process in action. Jackson

[39] T. A. Jackson, *Charles Dickens: The Progress of a Radical* (1937), (New York: Haskell House, 1971), p. 52. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[40] Jackson, p. 67.

is both seeking to defend what he implicitly sees as potentially open to the charge of artistic weakness – the deployment of comic caricature – while asserting the serious mission of fiction, particularly the serious mission of the realist, in his use of the photograph as the measure of artistic truth. In this sense, his criticism is clearly in a longstanding tradition that diminishes Dickens's comedy.

Critics who were aligned to this Marxist tradition of the materialist, sociological, politically and morally engaged Dickens were profoundly troubled by Dickens's comic modes. J. Hillis Miller, in *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*, (1958), in his discussion of *Pickwick Papers*, asserts this serious Dickens at the expense of the comic, where he implicitly views, as Jackson does, the comic as the mode that confuses or obfuscates the serious mission that Dickens was engaged in, 'Dickens' recognition of the indifference or positive evil of much of the world was obscured by the high spirits of *Pickwick Papers*'.[41] To Hillis Miller, the comic is a mode for us to be warned against, which will blind us, if we do not take care, to what he is able to show us is the true Dickensian artistic mission, 'The novel remains comic, in both senses of the word, and Pickwick's expectations are, in a way, fulfilled. But the prevailing comic tone and the happy ending should not blind us to the darker side of Dickens' portrait of society. *Pickwick Papers* is a comedy played against a somber backdrop.'[42]

Barbara Hardy, too, working in the same materialist tradition in *The Moral Art of Dickens* (1970), is also troubled by the comic. She asserts the superiority of the psychologically realist and defends in terms which reveal her critical bias, Dickens's supposed ineptitude and lack of subtlety,

> [i]ncreasing the conspicuousness is Dickens's peculiar crudity [...] [if] I have at times seemed to over-stress this crudity by comparing it with the *finesse* and *nuance* of such psychological novelists as George Eliot and Henry James, I should here make it clear that such comparison was not made in the interests of preferential judgement, but in the hope of highlighting Dickens's individuality.[43]

For Hardy, literary art should not only be realist, but should also be unsettling and open ended, and from her perspective Dickensian comic modes not only do not carry serious artistic weight but, indeed, cannot carry such weight,

> [t]here are brilliant comic scenes with a great deal of satire, linguistic humour, and farce. But although these scenes usually have thematic relevance they seldom move – and why should they? – beyond a self-

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[41] J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (1958), (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 329. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[42] Hillis Miller, p. 27.
[43] Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. xi. All subsequent references are to this edition.

> contained action which raises no questions and leaves no disturbing loose ends.[44]

Dickensian comedy is not only evidence of Dickens's failure to give appropriate attention to serious themes,

> [l]ight comedy is certainly not an end in itself...The Tite Barnacles ought not to be so flimsy and silly, ought not to be figures of Dickensian fun,

but is also evidence of artistic failure,

> [t]he *vox humana* of the pathetic mode and the comic exaggeration of its opposite are good examples of Dickens's formal completion and fundamental failure to connect. The result is unintentional self-parody.[45]

The second wave of criticism by which Dickens was admitted to the canon in the mid-twentieth century was the psychoanalytic and, as Nord establishes, it was largely American and informed by intellectuals fleeing Europe from the 1930s onwards.[46] Nord describes, for instance, how Edmund Wilson in 'Dickens and the Two Scrooges' from *The Wound and the Bow*, (1941), sees Dickens in the context of Modernism, as a divided man where 'unconscious authorial conflict' results from successive traumas in Dickens's life which are sublimated into art: his father's imprisonment, his labour in the blacking factory, the public readings, and so on.[47] Nord argues that,

> [i]n Wilson's hands Dickens's life becomes a drama of psychic torment and ultimate self-immolation [...] Wilson made Dickens into a modern man and a modern writer [...] Aiming for a wholly different level and mode of realism, Dickens creates characters locked in neurosis [...] that derives from the novelist's own struggles.[48]

Nord also discusses another critic who wrote about the Freudian discovery of Dickens. Lionel Trilling, in what became his introduction to *Little Dorrit*, first published in the *Kenyon Review* (1952), explores the central image of the novel, that of the prison, and imprisonment. Nord explores the psychological significance of Trilling's discussion, showing that,

> [t]he prison-house, with its important biographical resonances and powerful historical reality, becomes, in Trilling's analysis, a symbolic rendering of the human psyche and, beyond that, of 'the ineluctable condition of human life in society'.[49]

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[44] Hardy, p. 108.
[45] Hardy, p. 19, p. 119.
[46] Nord, p. 271.
[47] Nord, p. 274.
[48] Nord, p. 275.
[49] Nord, p. 276.

Trilling is enabled, according to Nord, to invest 'Dickens's Christian vision with new meaning by linking it, perhaps improbably, to a Freudian understanding of human neurosis.'[50]

Neither what are here termed the Marxist nor the Freudian positions were, of course, monolithic. Each was a heterogeneous grouping of independent critics with their own imperatives. Furthermore, the Marxist, or sociological, and the Freudian, or psychological, interpretations of Dickens that began to draw him into serious critical study in the mid-twentieth century were not, and were not seen by their exponents, as mutually exclusive. The social and the psychological interpenetrate. Nevertheless, it is as if there were two ways of Dickens becoming a suitable subject of critical attention: Freud or Marx, and neither of these two ways gave due weight to the comic mode, at least in the formulations of these critics.

The suppression of the comic in each instance is not an inevitable consequence of Marxist ideology or psychoanalytic theory. Both Marxist and Freudian inspired critical imperatives which asserted Dickens as an appropriate subject for criticism have the potential to assert, too, the value of the comic modes. Marx wrote with scathing satire himself, for instance in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' and the modern Marxist scholar, Slavoj Žižek has written about jokes, and writes with humour on politics, philosophy and culture.[51] Freud wrote extensively on jokes, comedy and humour.[52] However, the formulations by both groupings of Dickens are not comic. As Marx and Freud were deployed to support arguments that Dickens should be admitted to the literary canon, it was a humourless version of both that served the purpose.

For those in the 'Marxist' grouping it is social reality which makes Dickens worthy of study. Jackson states,

> with Dickens [...] the sense of men in the mass in all their intimate multiformity was so ever-present that no man before him in England, and few since, ever gave so convincing a mirror image of what life feels like to plain, ordinary, everyday common people [...] Dickens never forgot that he

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[50] Nord, p. 277.

[51] Marx famously remarked, 'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.' Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, 50 Vols. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975-2005), Vol. 11, pp. 99-97, p. 103. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993). Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002).

[52] Sigmund Freud, 'Humour' (1927), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works* Vol XXI, trans. and ed., James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964). Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious* (1905, first English publication 1916), trans. and ed., James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976). All subsequent references are to these editions.

> had seen his father imprisoned for debt, and had been himself, as little more than a child, condemned to slavery in a blacking factory.[53]

Hardy discusses Dickens's constant radical questioning of society, a checking and investigation and discussion of social meaning by fiction and goes on to state,

> Dickens is primarily concerned with the nature of society, and his individual characters are pretty plainly illustrations, created by needs and roles, seen as agents and victims, within a critical analysis of contemporary England.[54]

Hillis Miller, too, though his focus is the nature of Dickens's imagination, agrees with this fundamental analysis,

> [t]he "world" is the totality of all things as they are lived in by all human beings collectively. For Dickens the concrete embodiment of this totality is the great modern commercial city, made up of millions of people all connected to one another without knowing it, and yet separated from one another and living in isolation and secrecy [...] Dickens' novels are a transposition into fiction of his assimilative way of living in the real world.[55]

For the 'Freudians', on the other hand, it is psychological trauma that makes Dickens worthy of study. Yet, for neither is comedy one of the multiple strands of the Dickensian. The comic dimension of Dickens is not only not a focus of critical attention, in fact it is seen, in parallel with the position of the comic in earlier Dickensian criticism, either as a problem, or it is simply ignored.

'Dude, where's my comedy?': Modern Dickens and the Absence of the Comedic

The basic premise of this study is that, despite the apparent blindness to the comic mode in the critical record, Dickens's fiction is saturated with comedy. It is barely possible to read a single page without some comic incident, humorous remark, dark aside, or satiric barb. Our experience of reading Dickens is profoundly marked by the comic, and yet there is a mismatch in our experience of reading Dickens and reading Dickensian criticism, where the text is profoundly comic, but the criticism seems to take little account of the comic or to be antagonistic towards it. Barbara Hardy seems to recognise such a mismatch in her comment on *Pickwick Papers*,

> I have often found that in attempting to give some account of its many features, I have succeeded in forgetting and neglecting much that seems striking when actually reading the book.[56]

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[53] Jackson, pp. 22-3.
[54] Hardy, p. xi, p. 4.
[55] Miller, p. xv.
[56] Hardy, p. 82.

A second basic premise of this study is that we cannot fully appreciate Dickens as a writer without a full examination of what the comic means, how it is formed, what its characteristics are, and, perhaps most importantly, why it is there in the first place. This thesis will demonstrate that the critically examined Dickensian comic mode can take its place as a major contribution to Dickens's artistic achievement because it is capable of serious artistic intent, because it is open ended and because it does leave disturbing loose ends. It will also demonstrate how a critically informed understanding of Dickensian comedy is productive of new meanings, of new readings of the fiction and contributes to new understandings of current critical positions. This thesis articulates a new critical grammar and vocabulary for reading Dickens.

This study, then, complements criticism of Dickens which has extended and developed our range of varied and multiple understandings of what we mean by the Dickensian. It seeks to establish the significant ways in which the absence of extended analysis of the comic modes in the modern critical record has left significant ellipses in the critical record. For instance, Hollington's *Dickens and the Grotesque* (1984) scrutinised the Dickensian grotesque, and identified it as,

> an essentially mixed or hybrid form, like tragicomedy, its elements, in themselves heretogenous (*sic*) (human forms, animal forms, the natural, the supernatural, the comic, the monstrous and misshapen), combining in unstable, conflicting, paradoxical relationships.[57]

Hollington locates the comic as one of the key constituents of the grotesque, but, from this early point in his investigation onwards, he does not further address the comic and the contribution it makes. The comic, in fact, seems to disappear from consideration despite the key role it plays in Hollington's formulation. This study, while not engaging in direct dialogue with Hollington, asserts the role of the comic as important in its own right and, by implication, pervasive in the Dickensian grotesque, as in much else. The comic depiction of bodily distortion, the comic deployment of prosopopoeia and reification, the portrayal of comic character and the exercise of comic language, all explored in subsequent chapters of this study, provide grounds for understanding the contribution that the comic makes to Hollington's hybrid form.

Paul Schlicke, in *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (1988), also identifies a facet of the Dickensian to which the comic is integral, and here, Schlicke does give due attention to the comic.[58] For instance, Schlicke explores the character of Quilp from *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and underlines not only Quilp's comic, as well as grotesque,

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[57] Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque*, (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 1.

[58] Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1985). All subsequent references are to this edition.

power, but indicates how the comic and the grotesque are intimately interrelated in the depiction of this character.[59] Schlicke also explores Dickens's description of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*, a similar mixture of the comic and the horrific, though for different fictional purposes.[60] Schlicke's focus on popular entertainment, however, leads him to use the comic as an analytical tool largely on an *ad hoc* basis, as if the term 'comic', were uncomplicated. Although Schlicke does relate Quilp to the popular traditions of puppetry, and does see him as expressive of the Freudian concept of aggressive self-gratification, his analysis of the comic more generally is of a mode which is critically lacking in complexity, and, largely benign, where Dotheboys Hall 'manifests the ebullience of Dickens's power to amuse [...] we can laugh heartily at the wickedness because we know it will be defeated.'[61]

The work of these two critics raises an important issue. Comedy is in danger, here, of becoming a broad and blunt critical tool which we unthinkingly assume we understand and which is in danger of simply receding into the critically unexamined background. It becomes unseen because it is accepted without thinking and it is thereby absorbed into under-scrutinised generic classifications of ameliorative 'entertainment' or 'amusement'. This study contends against the easy acceptance of a benign and unexamined comic mode and, in its place, it demonstrates a comedy that is complex, disturbing and alienating.

Schlicke argues that Dickens defends the values that popular entertainment represents and that Dickens saw himself in the role of popular entertainer, which raises a number of key critical issues. What ideological, political or aesthetic work is done by the comic mode in its popular manifestations? In what ways does comedy enable special perceptions of the world, special ways of seeing and understanding? How is it that characters can be both comic in their own right, and also the object of comedy? How does the comic contribute to the values which Schlicke argues that Dickens sees in popular entertainment,

> spontaneity, freedom, fancy and release [...] sensitivity, wonder and imagination [...] play and amusement [...] novelty and energy; the fascination with imitation and its problematic relation with reality; the sense of absurdity, in which delight and terror are never far apart?[62]

The essays which constitute *Dickens Refigured* (1996) are an attempt, according to John Schad's introduction, to 'explore the gaps that Dickens's writing lays

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[59] Schlicke, pp. 127-131.
[60] Schlicke, p. 35.
[61] Schlicke, p.127, p. 35.
[62] Schlicke, p. 14.

bare within the dominant discourses and structures of Victorian culture'.[63] They attempt to 'locate the foreign bodies that are always already inscribed in Dickens's fiction and prose' and 'to refigure this most central of Victorian authors through attention to all that makes his work so eccentric'.[64] The essays in this volume seek to show the disruption of Victorian orthodoxies through an assertion of 'the other', whether of bodies, desires, histories, spaces or people. Surprisingly, Dickensian comic modes play little or no part in these essays. The ways in which Dickensian bodies are comically warped, distorted and malformed; the comic misplacements of bodies and body parts; the identification of bodies with what they are not, or of objects which are not bodies with animated forms; the comically 'other' body, whether of Joey Bagstock's Indian servant, or of Quilp's bizarre configuration; all of these could have figured in such an examination. Bodies, and much else, are 'refigured' by the deployment of Dickensian comic modes and arguably the comic modes are 'eccentric' in the way that Schad defines the focus of *Dickens Refigured*. Clearly, then, it is a mode which seems under-examined by this collection and which needs to be asserted, or reasserted, in order fully to address the issues it raises.

A new Dickens is being discovered. Holly Furneaux, in her study of Dickens in the light of queer theory, has opened new areas for consideration which this study parallels as she laments that, 'darker readings are associated with critical sophistication [...] whilst sunnier, more optimistic interpretations appear to be naïve and wilfully, perhaps dangerously, partial.'[65] This study will define a Dickensian comic mode that may, at times, be far from sunny and optimistic – indeed, it will see nineteenth-century conceptualisations of Dickens's 'hearty fun' as equally incomplete a portrait as later conceptualisations – but it, too, will position Dickens against the critical sophistication that darkness alone is thought to indicate. In fact, this introduction will seek to provide evidence to account for the mechanisms that have privileged the darker readings.

Furneaux's optimistic queer reading of Dickens sits well with a critically examined comic mode which enables her readings to be extended and developed. Her diverse queer spaces are often characterised by the comic mode and by the same token, the comic is expressive of what she argues as the queer. For instance, she explores Dickens's non-heteronormative, male dominated, 'families of choice' – sited in Peggotty's boat, or in Sol Gill's shop – and their capacity for male nurturing.[66] In

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[63] John Schad, *Dickens Refigured* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 1. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[64] Schad, p. 1.
[65] Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 14. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[66] Furneaux, p. 28. *David Copperfield*, pp. 41-50. *Dombey and Son*, Ch. IV.

conjunction with other modes, these 'queer' locations are pervaded by the comic. The cheerful, gentle good humour and emotional warmth of Gill's shop, particularly after the introduction of Captain Cuttle, with its freely given and thoroughly enjoyed food and drink, mark that the comedic aspect of this environment is supportive of Furneaux's argument. The contrast with the satirised frozen ritual of the dinner held to celebrate Paul Dombey's christening highlights Furneaux's point regarding the Dickensian corrective to the dysfunctional Victorian monolithic family.[67]

Comedy is an important signifier in these queer spaces, but the form of the comedy is also important: the interplay between comic modes and of the comic with other modes carries moral meaning. Good humour works to mark an environment as 'other', but so too, does satire, though the moral outcome is entirely different. The good-humoured comedic signifies the diverse, the non-standard and the non-monolithic and it is the mode by which the human and humane Dickensian values come to be understood and asserted. By contrast, the non-comic, attacked through the mode of satire, is signifier of the monolithic, the stultifying and the deathly. Such insights may be extended even further, for instance to Furneaux's argument that the picaresque literary tradition is expressive of same sex intimacy, where the picaresque is also a comedic genre, or that Dickens's male nurturing figures, such as Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations*, are also comic figures.[68]

Catherine Waters's study of *Household Words* finds new approaches to Dickens's imaginative conceptions of material culture, the nineteenth-century drive towards commodification, and the relationships between people and things.[69] Waters delineates aspects of Dickens's imaginative approach and the coverage of this theme in the critical record, briefly considering in her introduction, for instance, Van Ghent's and Hillis Miller's examination of Dickens's interchange between people and things and the importance of 'his animation of objects [...] animism, anthropomorphism, and reification'.[70] In particular, she argues for recognition of the complexity of the relationships between people and things which are not limited to the abstractions of Marxist exchange value theory. Clearly, her main focus is not the comic and, in any case her subject is *Household Words* and the range of contributors to that periodical, but it is difficult, nevertheless, not to be aware that much of Dickens's interplay between the animate and the inanimate is comic in tone and, often, unnervingly comic. The comic becomes, in part at least, the medium by which an evolving narrative of the

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[67] Furneaux, p. 22. *Dombey and Son*, Ch. V
[68] Furneaux, p. 4, p. 8.
[69] Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's* Household Words*: The Social Life of Goods*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[70] Waters, p. 3.

diverse relationships between people and things is expressed. Dickens uses comedy to question meaning, purpose and identity in the rapidly developing context of a capitalist society. That questioning takes the form, often, of dislocated relationships between people and things. He creates a world where lawyers can be piano hammers, where a set of books can look like soldiers and think of a freezer, and where your own severed leg can become an object for sale and a grotesque comic synecdoche not just for yourself and your body, but for your social standing, as Wegg feels,

> 'I have a prospect of getting on in life [...] I tell you openly I should *not* like – under such circumstances, to be what I may call dispersed, a part of me here, and a part of me there, but should wish to collect myself like a genteel person.'[71]

Here, too, then, a study of the comedic can extend and develop the line of argument purely by recognition that much of what Waters considers is comic: what cultural, political or ideological potential does the comic mode bring to the argument? Why is so much of Dickens's treatment of commodity culture and commodification in the comic mode? Are there ways in which the interplay of comedic modes illuminates Dickens's conceptualisation of the material culture of his age, for instance in the difference between his depiction of the Midshipman emblem for Sol Gill's shop or the satire of the Veneerings' possessions?[72]

Sally Ledger locates a Dickens who is grounded in popular radicalism, which she examines in part through analysis of his satire.[73] Ledger is clear about the importance of the comic modes to Dickens's fiction, particularly the satiric, with her identification of 'the politics of laughter' in Pickwick's trial, where Sam's refusal to be cowed expresses the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, or the Artful Dodger's laughter at the expense of the court at his own hearing.[74] Ledger, then, has identified a potent Dickensian comedy. However, even here, her line of argument can be augmented by an examination of the range of Dickensian comedic modes. Satire, for instance, is presented by Ledger as a largely radical mode, where, paradoxically, it can be argued to have a conservative potential. Similarly, in what ways is Dickens's deployment of comedy itself radical? What of his artistic methods, his deployment of character, his manipulation of language?

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[71] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1852-3), ed., Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 54. *Dombey and Son*, p. 56. Charles Dickens. *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), ed., Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 127. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[72] *Dombey and Son*, p. 36. *Our Mutual Friend*, Ch II.
[73] Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[74] Ledger, p. 51. Mikhail Bakhtin explores the 'carnivalesque' in his discussion of Menippean satire, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), ed., Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 112-22.

John Bowen in *Other Dickens*, is the modern critic who comes closest to articulating the importance of the comic, particularly the conceptualisation of the comic that this study argues for, although even here the mode is a presence sensed rather than critically observed.[75] Nevertheless, the comic is a strongly sensed presence,

> to say that Dickens's texts are disturbing, radical, and transgressive is also to say that they are intensely pleasure-giving, the most wildly funny books in the language.[76]

Bowen recognises what this study demonstrates in its reading of the institutions and practices that have led to a range of understandings of Dickens which do not privilege the comic. He sees literary criticism as not merely a discipline, but disciplinary,

> [c]riticism often attempts to regulate the proper course and destinations of texts [...] 'Dickens' [...] is arraigned for lacking credit or credibility, for breaking this or that fictional or mimetic law [...] His readers too are disciplined or punished for being uncritical or naïve [...] characters who seem too flat or too large, for plots that seem too restless or disordered.[77]

His placing of 'Dickens' within quotation marks is an acknowledgement of the constructedness of the range of 'Dickens' that modern criticism and institutional practice deploys. Dickens, then, is oppositional to the disciplinary drive that seeks to turn his fiction into something other than what it is,

> [i]t is a law that distrusts division, multiplicity, and heterogeneity, and cannot think responsibility in ways other through their elimination. Dickens's characters, like his plots, are self-divided and proliferating, his rhetoric excessive, his forms unstable – and this must not be allowed.[78]

While Bowen's focus is not the comic, this study demonstrates comic modes which accord with his vision of Dickensian aesthetic resistance and subversion.

The important and illuminating work of all of these recent critics locates a new Dickens whose relationship to his age, to his fiction and to his artistic mission is complex and disturbing. His comic writing, perhaps his least understood mode, fits the same category, as well as being a mode which is in many ways under-explored in the readings of these critics. It is elusive, contradictory and paradoxical. It does not even have its own defined critical vocabulary, let alone its own established critical field.

From a range of critical perspectives, then, there is a need for a critical investigation of Dickens's comedy. There has been no single study of Dickens's comedy as a whole: across a range of fiction, and from more than a single theoretical

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[75] John Bowen, *Other Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[76] Bowen, p. 4.
[77] Bowen, p. 35.
[78] Bowen, pp. 35-6.

perspective. No single study accounts for the full range of factors to be examined: the debts to the literary traditions of comic fiction and satire, his response to the philosophies and theories of comedy of his age, the interplay between his imagination and the deployment of comic literary language and comic character. Within the critical record we often see Dickensian comic modes only in misleadingly isolated sections – the exploration of a mode, or of an individual text – where this thesis argues that a fuller picture is required that enables us to see across the full range of factors and across the full range of Dickensian fiction and assess how it, like other recent studies, enables us to see Dickens anew.

There have been critical examinations of Dickensian comic writing. The bibliography of this study indicates the explorations which have examined aspects of the comedic, or which have looked at features of comedy across a range of texts. There are also major studies, such as John Carey's, with a chapter that examines Dickens's comedic imagination, Kincaid's, which examines laughter as a rhetorical force from a Freudian and Bergsonian perspective, and Sylvia Manning's, which examines satire.[79] However, even these studies which, to varying degrees foreground Dickensian comedy, are often critically limiting in their approach.

Evidence of this can be found in Manning's study of Dickensian satire, which sees it mainly as social, political and cultural protest, rather than as a mode that produces laughter, a conception of satire that is strangely non-comic. Her definition of satire as 'a literary genre devoted to anatomizing of follies', avoids the complexity of the satiric mode, most notably two key issues: that satire is a mode intended to provoke laughter, and that it is intended to expose not just folly, but vice, an important consideration for Dickens as social reformer. However, in a manner which is confusing to the clarity of her own argument, Manning seems to contend that Dickens's satiric practices do not meet even this limited definition. She goes on to state that satire is variously a function of Dickens's skill with caricatured and grotesque characterisation, or it 'seems to be a sort of ironic commentary', or 'for Dickens satire is not necessarily literary: it is any form of truthful, ironic and often bitter commentary upon life', definitions which are strangely limited.[80] Manning's definitions seem to subsume the satiric mode into a blander, vaguely defined, and, therefore less critically helpful term. For Manning, satire is little more than a thematic or structural principle rather than an artistic method, with little sense of the pleasure of satiric laughter – a pleasure which is

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[79] John Carey, *The Violent Effigy*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1973). J. R. Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971). Sylvia Manning, *Dickens as Satirist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). All subsequent references are to these editions.
[80] Manning, p. 12, p. 5, p. 6.

mixed with aggression – and with little sense of the morally powerful satiric tradition of correction of folly and vice. Furthermore, Manning also contends that Dickens does not work within the classic tradition of satiric writing,

> Dickens knew the classic English satirists and Juvenal and Horace as well, but he did not see himself as the inheritor of their tradition [...] Classical satire is a highly literary genre whose practitioners are very conscious and proud of its long tradition. In this regard, Dickens's work is not satire.[81]

In contrast to Manning's position this study contends that it is the largely urbanised, radical but, often paradoxically conservative, nature of the satiric tradition that she denies to Dickens – with the functions of both healing and policing the social and psychological trauma which results from urbanised modernity – which informs Dickensian satire. His satire should be read in ways which reveal how he adapted the satiric tradition to emergent nineteenth-century modernity.

Manning's desire to downplay critically important aspects of the role of satire in Dickens's fiction, reveals her own critical preconceptions, and those of her time. In common with much criticism of the comic Dickensian mode, her concern is that the role of satire conflicts with her conception of realist, psychological fiction, which is her measure of judgement. She refers to 'breaches of novelistic realism', which can be justified in classical satire, but not in the realist novel which is her reading of Dickens, '[c]oincidence, or perverse fortuity, in the mimetic novel, tends to appear crude; in satire it is incidental and acceptable or even meaningful'.[82] This study seeks to rediscover the potential richness of the contribution that Dickensian satire makes to his fiction revealing its special nature and its reflection of the long tradition of satire.

Kincaid's emphasis is more sympathetic to the complexities of Dickensian comedy, to its deployment as a fictional mode, and to the ways in which it is implicit in Dickens's wider artistic purposes, from early to late novels,

> though the debt of this study to previous criticism is very great, the pervasive distinction implied in almost all of it between the serious and the funny is rejected. As a natural corollary, the notion that the humour is somehow detached from major concerns or that it functions mainly as a holiday or relief and the notion that it is genial, soft, or humanitarian seem to me demonstrably false.[83]

However, Kincaid's position is similar to Manning's, inasmuch as his focus on the comic is less an examination of artistic method, and more an examination of its thematic impact. This accounts for Kincaid's conception of laughter as a rhetorical

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[81] Manning, p. 7, also emphasised p. 234, p. 240, p. 235.
[82] Manning, p. 9.
[83] Kincaid, p. 5.

tool, as a means of extracting particular forms of understanding and emotional reaction from the reader, 'this is an attempt to approach them through humour, one of Dickens's most certain rhetorical tools'.[84] He displays the insights which he hopes his approach will bring, with reference, for instance, to the 'very solid agreement with a certain value system' that laughter implies,

> [h]e can use it to reinforce the feeling of freedom and the opposition to order and bureaucratic sterility in *The Pickwick Papers*, to undercut the apparent bourgeois comfort of *Oliver Twist* and force us into at least temporary sympathetic alignment with the world of Fagin and Sikes, to make effective the pathos of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, to define more emphatically the structural principle of contrasts in *Barnaby Rudge*, to urge us into agreement with an extremely sophisticated and worldly value system in *Martin Chuzzlewit*.[85]

Kincaid's approach, while clearly sympathetic to many of the aims of this study, particularly its ambition to reclaim comedy as central to Dickens's artistic purposes, explicitly excludes much of what underlies this study, namely the distinctive nature of Dickens's comedy, and how that distinctive nature can be investigated and defined, for instance through an examination of its relationship to the traditions of comic fiction,

> [i]nstead of studying Dickens's techniques (or style or historical influences) using the novels primarily as evidence, I mean to study the novels, using laughter as a critical tool.[86]

The limitations of Kincaid's approach, that it focuses on meaning revealed through laughter, rather than on the nature of the laughter itself, can be located in his introduction. His brief taxonomy of comic techniques is sketchy and reveals little of the interrelationships, the debt to tradition, or the range of comic impacts possible from the comic mode. In just over three pages, in a section titled, '*Some points of Dickens's technique*' Kincaid identifies '*Perspective*', '*The use of the concrete*', '*The force of the idiom*', '*Savagery*', and '*Darkness*'.[87] Interesting though his comments on these areas are, they do not amount to a serious examination of a complex fictional mode, but then, they are not intended to be,

> it is the tendency of his humour which seems to me most important, along with his use of that tendency as a rhetorical tool. I am not primarily concerned with just how Dickens gets us to laugh at Sairey Gamp, but I am concerned both with what meaning our laughter expresses and with the use Dickens makes of that meaning in terms of the entire novel.[88]

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[84] Kincaid, p. 1.
[85] Kincaid, p. 2.
[86] Kincaid, p. 2, fn. 4.
[87] Kincaid, pp. 5-8.
[88] Kincaid, p. 8.

It is a central tenet of this study that 'what meaning our laughter expresses' and 'the use Dickens makes of that meaning' are vital in an examination of the comic mode, but that equally important is, 'just how Dickens gets us to laugh'. An examination of that 'just how', this study demonstrates, illuminates and enriches our understanding of our laughter and Dickens's fiction. Kincaid concedes, '[l]aughter is such an intricate and explosive subject that in discussing it some degree of oversimplification is inevitable'.[89] Again, this study demonstrates that it is the complexity of the comic mode – the interrelationships of varieties of the comic, the influence of traditions of comic fiction and forms of, especially popular, comic drama, forms of characterisation, and the deployment of language for comic purposes, the tradition of satire – that must be central to the examination of it, if the result is not to be in danger of being simplistic.

The theoretical basis of Kincaid's analysis is largely the work of Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud, whom this study also uses in its examination of Dickens in the context of nineteenth-century conceptualisations of comedy. However, while both are undoubtedly important, Kincaid's emphasis on these two theoreticians of the comic has the tendency to privilege them at the expense of a wider range of sources of understanding comedy. For instance, the relationship between Dickens and the comic writing and comic theories of Thomas Carlyle, or George Meredith, both of whom inhabited similar contexts of emergent modernity as Dickens, Bergson and Freud, are useful in showing not just what Dickens had in common with other writers, and what he shared with nineteenth-century theories of the comic, but also how he differed from them. Kincaid limits his analysis by excluding what a wider range of theorists may have to offer.

Carey's study of the nature of Dickens's imagination, *The Violent Effigy* (1973), sees comedy as one quality of Dickens's imagination and it looks at Dickensian comedy in one chapter among others which deal with topics such as violence, order, and corpses and effigies.[90] Carey's mission is to defend Dickens's imagination and he does so in terms that echo critics such as Hardy. He sees the accusation of 'unreality' against Dickens through the eyes of these critics and he feels the need to defend Dickens's claim to realism, '[r]egarding Dickens as an imaginative writer does not entail marking down his work as a sort of fanciful vacation from 'real' experience', and he asserts, 'the power of imaginative literature to recast the seen world, to fracture and refashion notions of the real'.[91] This promising beginning, of a Dickensian imagination that is powerfully aggressive and expressive of cultural tensions in emergent modernity,

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[89] Kincaid, p. 8.
[90] Carey, pp. 54-79.
[91] Carey, p. 9, p. 10.

and with a capacity to define its own reality, is found again, in Carey's 'Endpiece'. Here, Carey asserts the possibility of Dickens's brotherhood with the imaginations of the twentieth-century, with Beckett, Pinter, Kafka and Sartre. He stops himself, however. These potential comparisons are a 'temptation' to be resisted.[92] Consequent on this failure of critical verve is that Carey's vision of the role of Dickens's comedy becomes an ameliorative one. In this model comedy shields and protects and, disappointingly, negates the exciting potential which Carey identifies for Dickens's imagination as a whole,

> [h]is humour serves as a weapon and refuge. It allows him both to cut through the fake of the 'real world', [...] and to keep the terrors of his imagination at bay. [...] The materials of horror may be there, but they are transmuted by humour into something more spirited and resilient. Laughter establishes Dickens's confidence, his superiority to menacing forces [...] Dickens's imagination transforms the world; his laughter controls it.[93]

Overall, then, Carey's formulation of the potential force of Dickensian comedy is circumscribed. There are hints of something more profound which are intriguingly unexplored, such as the way the comic can subvert the moral pattern of the fiction,

> [t]he pattern of crime and retribution that Dickens seeks to impose upon his fiction is simply blown aside by the comic vitality of the figures we are supposed to deplore.[94]

Similarly, Carey identifies a powerful black humour in Dickens's depiction of Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and of Gamfield in *Oliver Twist*, but he is curiously admonitory about how he feels we should react and he uses the same word as Lewes to describe what he thinks is our reaction: '[w]e end up feeling ashamed of Dickens for making us laugh'.[95] In contrast to Carey's position, this study takes as a starting point the vision of a Dickensian comedy that is powerfully disturbing, and where that disturbance is to be celebrated. In these situations – a viciously cruel institution for forgotten children, or deadly child labour – we do not feel ashamed of Dickens, but we are manoeuvred by him as a comic artist into feeling ashamed of ourselves for laughing and for enjoying our laughter. We are shocked at what we have become. Dickensian comedy agitates us out of the complacency that allows us to feel sorry for these dying children, and we recognise our complicity in society's indifference

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[92] Carey, p. 174.
[93] Carey, p. 175.
[94] Carey, p. 67.
[95] Carey, p. 72. Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), ed., Michael Slater (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 151-60. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed., Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 16-19. Referring to Dickens's opponents, Lewes states, 'They may be ashamed of their laughter, but they laugh.' Lewes, 'Review of Forster's *Life*', Collins, pp. 570-1.

to the exploitation and suffering of others who are weak and vulnerable. Dickensian comedy is no 'refuge' and we are at the point of its 'weapon'.[96]

Dickens and the Dark Traumas of the Victorian Age.

For a writer who used to be thought *the* comic novelist in the language, Dickens the humorist has gotten rather short shrift in the past decades.[97]

The suppression of Dickensian comedy is not limited to the literary critical record. It is an artefact of critical ideology within academic study, but it is also an artefact of wider ideological mechanisms, cultural, political and social, that interpenetrate with the literary, but are not circumscribed by, or limited to, it. There is a range of cultural artefacts that we call Dickens, a range of Dickenses who are contingent upon the mechanisms we use to read and understand him. As Janice Carlisle, in her edition of *Great Expectations*, states,

> a writer's or a work's reputation at any given time reflects specific reading practices that result, in turn, from a complex interplay of institutions and professions – education, publishing, printing, criticism.[98]

Dickens has been subjected to social, cultural, historical and political forces in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that have had the tendency to suppress Dickensian comic modes and such suppression is both symptomatic of, and essential to, the need for a dark and serious Dickens that meets both popular and more academic, philosophical, political and cultural needs. Such a Dickens plays into a crucial cultural dynamic by which our own social and economic problems, similar in kind but not in scale to those of the Victorians, seem comparatively benign. Successive editors of *Great Expectations*, for instance, have created a range of meanings of 'Dickens' and 'Dickensian' that are versions of the novel and the author, that are traceable to the original of both, but which are no more than avatars of them and, largely, humourless ones at that. Dickens has been transformed by the capitalist cultural mechanism of publishing and that transformation has come at the cost of the comedy.

Great Expectations provides the focus for this explanation because, although it is a weighty *bildungsroman* of the nineteenth-century gentlemanly ego, an exploration

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[96] Carey, p. 175.
[97] Edgar Rosenberg, ed., Introduction to Bibliography, *Great Expectations* (1860-1), (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), p. 740. All subsequent references are to this edition as *Great Expectations*, Rosenberg.
[98] Janice Carlisle, ed., 'A Critical History of *Great Expectations*', *Great Expectations* (1860-1), (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), pp. 445-62, p. 446. All subsequent references are to this edition as *Great Expectations*, Carlisle.

of the psychic malformations caused by hope, and of the damaging powers of the past – in other words it is expressive of materialist and psychological interpretative potential – it is also characterised by strands of comic writing, in a variety of forms and contexts and for a variety of imaginative purposes: satire, humour, comic character and language. It is written in a range of modes: serious and dramatic and yet comically vibrant, and the comic vibrancy, this thesis argues, is key to understanding its serious drama. Its contemporary reception, and Dickens's own comments on the work during and subsequent to its writing, emphasised the comic dimension and yet that is not how it is seen early in the twenty-first century.

Dickens saw *Great Expectations* in terms of the comic. His earliest recorded mention of the novel was in September 1860 when he refers to 'a very fine, new and grotesque idea [...] I can see the whole of a serial revolving on it, in a most singular and comic manner.'[99] In October he wrote to Forster,

> [y]ou will not have to complain of the want of humour [...] I have made the opening, I hope, in its general effect, exceedingly droll. I have put a child and a good-natured foolish man, in relations that seem to me very funny. Of course I have got in the pivot on which the story will turn too – and which indeed, as you will remember, was the grotesque tragi-comic conception that first encouraged me.[100]

This analysis by Dickens – a writer notoriously and frustratingly reticent on his own writing methods and purposes – is interesting because of the emphasis that he places on the comic, and how the comic plays in fundamentally important ways into the wider concerns of the novel, with his term, 'grotesque tragi-comic conception'.

Great Expectations is a masterpiece of the comic that reflects the full range of this Dickensian mode. In the first eight chapters alone, Dickens presents a child's comic perception of a bizarre adult world, and the consequent interplay between adult and child narrators and the reader, comic caricature in the characters of Wopsle, Mrs Wopsle and Pumblechook, social satire in the ridiculous grotesquery of the Gargery Christmas lunch, and the comic surreal, in the form of the morally articulate cattle that Pip encounters on the marsh. Comic characters, particularly Joe Gargery, but also the youthful Herbert Pocket, come to be seen as repositories of comic virtues. These examples often seem to echo Dickens's thematic preoccupations: there is a comic exploration of the problems of naming and the disconcertingly mutable nature of

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[99] To John Forster, [?Mid-September 1860], *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (The Pilgrim Edition) ed., Madeline House, Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), 12 Vols., Vol. 9. Viewed online 6th December 2011. All subsequent references to letters are to the online Pilgrim edition.

[100] To John Forster, [Early October 1860], *Pilgrim Letters*, Vol. 9. Viewed online 6th December 2011.

language, for instance. In addition to these examples from the early chapters are later comic set-pieces, such as Pip's fight with Herbert at Satis House, Mr Wopsle's performance as Hamlet, the drunken quarrel of the Finches of the Grove, and Wemmick's wedding. *Great Expectations*, in other words, can be read as a master-class in Dickensian comic writing, which explores many of the methods and themes of the comic mode that can be found in other novels.

The novel demonstrates the thematic importance of the comic mode and Dickens's artistry. Evidence of both may be found at one of the points of emotional crisis in the novel, when Pip wakes to find that Joe has been nursing him through illness. Pip expresses the admiration that he knows he should have felt for Joe all along, ''O God bless him! O God bless this gentle Christian man!''[101] Joe, too, is moved by Pip's recovery. And yet, within a few sentences Joe's mispronunciation, 'unacceptabobble' and rambling speech are comically exposed,

> 'For, as I says to Biddy when news of your being ill were brought by letter, which it were brought by the post and being formerly single he is now married though underpaid for a deal of walking and shoe-leather, but the wealth were not a object on his part, and marriage were the great wish of his hart '
> 'It is so delightful to hear you, Joe! But I interrupt you in what you said to Biddy.'[102]

Pip's 'tactful' intervention to refocus Joe asserts the knowingly ironic middle-class Pip which serves as an enjoyable comic foil to Joe's loquacity. However, it also restores to view the unreformed ego and is disquieting evidence that Pip has not changed and is still on a self-destructive course. Within a page or so, too, are the comic description of Joe's writing method, and further mispronunciations, 'coddleshell' and 'Mrs Camels'.[103]

The gradual replacement of the familiar terms of endearment in Joe's speech to Pip by more formal terms, particularly by the term 'sir', which Pip finds 'grated on me', makes Pip realise that 'the cause of it was in me, and that the fault of it was all mine.'[104] These scenes, then, are not simply comic or simply dramatic. Dickens is using both modes, in tandem, to create an emotional, moral and thematic impact which is more complex than either would be alone. It is not Pip who is the subject of the humour of this scene, even though he is morally at fault. On the contrary, it is the socially superior voice of the observing narrator, the voice of the older Pip, that underscores the humour

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[101] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed., Angus Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 472. All subsequent references are to this edition unless otherwise stated.
[102] *Great Expectations*, p. 473.
[103] *Great Expectations*, p. 474.
[104] *Great Expectations*, p. 479.

at Joe's expense, for instance, when he describes Joe's writing, '[h]e had a curious idea that the inkstand was on the side of him where it was not, and constantly dipped his pen into space, and seemed quite satisfied with the result', or, following Joe's touching explanation of why Pip kept secret his encounter with Magwitch all those years ago, when, condescendingly, the older Pip remarks that Joe is 'quite charmed with his logical arrangement'.[105] The gentle and affectionate comedy is at Joe's expense and it is refracted through Pip's superior social consciousness. Paradoxically, however, because of the comedy at his expense, Joe comes to represent the moral virtues and the selflessness of which Pip is so in need.

The comic mode in these scenes works, even if ultimately it may fail, to prevent a maudlin over-idealisation of Joe. It points to the continued consciousness of class superiority enjoyed by Pip, and by his fellow middle-class citizens, among whom we may include the implied reader, and it indicates the distance that Pip still has to go to achieve full self realisation despite his protestations to the contrary. The comedy in this episode enriches our understanding of the theme. Any critical stance that ignores it, or which sees it as inartistic, both of which are characteristics of the cultural mechanisms to be discussed later in this introduction as well as critical positions discussed earlier, seriously misses its significance.

The complexity of Dickens's deployment of the comic mode can be seen, too, in Pip's return to his home town, following his illness, at the end of the novel. The dramatic events of the revelation of the true origin of Pip's expectations, Magwitch's return, the failure of his flight, the fire at Satis House, and Pip's illness, have all passed and the novel seems to mature into a more thoughtful and reflective tone. Pip seems to realise, in part at least, how he has deceived himself, though, perhaps, with his intention to marry Biddy, not how he continues to do so. In essence, this is part of the emotional and thematic climax of the novel where, it may be supposed, Dickens would need to focus his dramatic powers.

And yet, on Pip's returns to the town of his youth, Pumblechook arrives at the inn and starts to berate Pip in his comically unctuous, self-important and hypocritical way. It is a typically Dickensian piece of satirical character assassination at Pumblechook's expense, the final emphasis for the reader, if not for Pumblechook's fellow townspeople, of his pompous self-regard. Dickens enjoys the comic language of Pumblechook, '[h]ere is Squires of the Boar present, known and respected in this town, and here is William, which his father's name was Potkins if I do not deceive myself.'[106] The scene seems, in terms of the structure of the novel, rather a gratuitous one. It

[105] *Great Expectations*, p. 474, p. 478.
[106] *Great Expectations*, p. 484.

contrasts with the dominant tone, in this part of the novel, of melancholy and low key introspection and it interrupts the narrative flow into the final pages of the novel.

However, this is to simplify the relationship of the scene to the narrative context. Pumblechook is, undoubtedly, satirised by Dickens, but Dickens also, paradoxically, allows him to speak with considerable force about Pip. Pip's refusal to eat watercress for his breakfast is scorned by Pumblechook, 'as if consistent with my downfall', and Pip's irritation with Pumblechook's fussing with the teapot is met with the latter's comment, for the benefit of his audience of landlord and waiter,

> 'I forgit myself when I take such an interest in your breakfast, as to wish your frame, exhausted by the debilitating effects of prodigygality, to be stimulated by the 'olesome nourishment of your forefathers.'[107]

These words are comic at the expense of Pumblechook, but they are also profoundly relevant to Pip and Pip's position in this part of the novel. They comment thematically on what has passed, and they comment, proleptically, on what is to come. Pumblechook's comic conflation of the words 'prodigy' and 'prodigality' is a Dickensian comic verbalisation of two important concepts. First, Pumblechook thought of Pip in the early days of his expectations, as Pip thought of himself, as a prodigy, as one marked with special favour and intended for greatness. Second, events have shown that Pip has, indeed, been 'exhausted' by prodigality, by his wastefulness of himself and of the resources of being a gentleman and he is returning, in his self-appointed role of prodigal son, and anticipating, in an act of marvellous condescension, his marriage to Biddy. Pip has deceived himself and he continues to do so. He has failed to benefit from the simple but wholesome moral nourishment of his forefathers, whether of the father who lived and died humbly and in obscurity, or of Joe, the loving substitute father whom he rejected in so demeaning a manner. He has, indeed, been prodigal as a prodigy.

Pumblechook, then, may be satirised in this scene, but the scene's value in the structure of the novel goes far beyond this satire of a relatively peripheral character. The joke of the scene is actually at the expense of Pip. Pumblechook's words serve to satirise Pumblechook, but they are essentially true and they underline not only the bitter joke that the past has played and the bitter joke that Pip has played upon himself but they anticipate the joke that is to come: that Pip will arrive at the forge and will find that the happy ending of comedy, in marriage, is not to be his, for the moment at least, and that the marital reward of virtue is to be Joe's. The roles from romance and melodrama that Pip attempts to play, that of prodigal son and romantic hero returning

[107] *Great Expectations*, p. 483, p. 484.

home, are as much comically false constructions and self-delusion as the role of gentleman which he tried, and failed, to play earlier in the novel. Again, the comedy is at the expense of one character, but the thematic point of it is for Pip.

The comic dimension, then, is a key element of the novel's structure, form, themes and purpose as well as of its genesis and its initial critical reception. Comedy is never merely a contrasting relief to the more dramatic or melodramatic features of the novel, but is always integral to the overall design of the novel and of individual episodes. *Great Expectations* is, in key respects, a comic novel, though it is a comic mode which is mixed with other, discomforting, formulations and with an emphasis on the cruel joke that lies at its heart. And yet, this is not how the novel is seen now. Editions of the novel downplay the comic and emphasise the darkly melodramatic and other modes, helping to construct understandings of Dickens which are non-comic and which, ironically, can then be criticised for excessive melodrama and sentiment. The editors and publishers reflect the sombre formulations of the Dickensian emphasised by, and which parallel, the materialist and psychological academic critical schools.

The 1996 Penguin Classics edition is, in this respect, typical.[108] It seeks to appeal both to the general and to the more specialist reader with its critical and editorial apparatus which includes not only an introduction and list of further reading but also a map of Kent in the early nineteenth century and a chronology of Dickens's life that, with its inclusion of personal and family details, attempts to fix Dickens as a social reality as much as a novelist. This 'version' of Dickens and the Dickensian, however, is largely blind to the comic. The front cover shows a detail from Turner's 'Chichester Canal', which focuses on a sailing ship moored in what appears to be a lonely stretch of river in a flat landscape.[109] The loneliness and isolation that the cover expresses is sharpened by the exclusion from the cover of a smaller boat, full of travellers, on the left of the complete image.[110] The cover suggests something of the doubling and duality within the novel with the stark silhouette of the ship reflected in the water. The summarised version of the story on the back cover presents the novel as a 'struggle for moral redemption', and it emphasises '[g]uilt and desire [...] terrifying encounter [...] mysterious summons'.[111]

These first impressions, created to both give a flavour of the novel and to entice potential readers, convey the idea that it is a darkly gothic tale of crime and sin. In

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[108] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1860-1), ed., Charlotte Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996). All subsequent references are to this edition as, *Great Expectations*, Mitchell.
[109] *Great Expectations,* Mitchell, front cover. Illustration of the front cover on p. 46 of this chapter, below.
[110] Joseph Mallord Turner. *Chichester Canal* (c.1828), Petworth House. Illustration on p. 46 of this chapter, below.
[111] *Great Expectations*, Mitchell, back cover.

many respects, of course, that is what the novel is, but it is not only that, and, in fact, what this summary leaves out, the comedy, is crucial not only to the novel that Dickens's actually wrote, but also to our understanding of the themes of crime, guilt and redemption.

The introduction to this edition continues this blindness to the novel's comic power. At no stage is the comic dimension of the novel mentioned and there is no reference to any of the comic scenes or any of the comic characters, except for one mention of Pumblechook, whose role as a satirised character is elided in favour of how he patronises Pip.[112] The 'Suggested Further Reading' contains only one text, Carey's *The Violent Effigy*, which studies, to any extent, Dickensian comedy.

This Penguin edition is not untypical in its blindness to Dickensian comic modes. The introduction to the Oxford Illustrated Dickens (1953), edited by Frederick Page, starts with quotations from letters in which Dickens emphasises the comic ideas which, for him, underlie *Great Expectations*.[113] However, the introduction quickly dismisses the several letters in which Dickens claims that his novel is comic, 'it is likely that Dickens was dashing off his letter too quickly to pick and choose his words. The critic who should adopt them would write himself down an ass.'[114] This tone of lofty dismissal of Dickens's own words extends to other ways in which Page deals with the comic. He notes condescendingly Alice Meynell's 'robust enjoyment of Dickens's extravagances and caricatures', he states that the novel has '[n]ot much in the way of great comic characters', and he refers to Joe as 'one of those caricatures which we accept with delight in Dickens'.[115] Page's introduction sees characters as 'redeemed by suffering, remorse, penitence.'[116]

The Everyman edition (1994), edited by Robin Gilmour, too, is blind to the comic dimension of the novel.[117] The front cover contrasts with the bleak image on the cover of the Penguin edition in that it shows a detail of one of the illustrations from the edition, Pip taking leave of Joe, with Biddy looking on in the background.[118] This focus on the human continues on the back cover which details the rich network of characters. The novel is summarised, unsurprisingly given the editor's own critical interests, largely in terms of Pip's desire to be a gentleman and in terms of passion and desire,

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[112] *Great Expectations*, Mitchell, p. x.
[113] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed., Frederick Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953). All subsequent references are to this edition as *Great Expectations*, Page.
[114] *Great Expectations*, Page, p vi.
[115] *Great Expectations*, Page, p. vii, p. ix.
[116] *Great Expectations*, Page, p. viii.
[117] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed., Robin Gilmour (London: Dent, 1994). All subsequent references are to this edition as *Great Expectations*, Gilmour.
[118] *Great Expectations*, Gilmour, front cover. Original illustration by Marcus Stone. Illustration of the front cover on p. 47 of this chapter, below.

'[b]ut can Estella possibly be part of Pip's great 'expectations'?'[119] Gilmour's introduction reflects these human concerns, and it sees the novel as less dark, and more biographical than the Penguin or the Oxford Illustrated, placing the narrative thematically within Victorian concerns and Dickens's own autobiographical concerns about social and domestic relationships.[120] It also places the novel formally within the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, and within the tension between realism and fantasy.[121] There is only one reference to the comedy in the sentence which describes Joe's visit to Pip in London as 'wonderfully funny'.[122]

The near absence of comment on the comic in this edition is all the more remarkable given that the essay which concludes the edition, 'Dickens and his Critics' starts with an account of, but a signal failure to account for, how early critics saw the novel as a return to comic form. In a remark which is reminiscent of Page's lofty dismissal of the comic mode in the Oxford Illustrated edition, Gilmour leaves it behind with a deft, '*Great Expectations* was not simply a return to the picaresque comic mode of the early novels but an important development from it.'[123] This comment, which has the double effect of allowing Gilmour to avoid analysis of the comic and to move on to areas that interest him more, highlights a number of issues which are significant in the study of Dickens's comedy. For instance, his use of the word 'simply' might imply that a return to an early comic mode was itself a simple act, rather than one which is laden with nuance. Further, the comic mode of the early novels can be seen to be considerably more complex than solely picaresque, even if the term 'picaresque' could, itself, be seen as an uncomplicated one. Again, his use of the term 'important development' carries a connotation that it is the development beyond the comic which is worthy of study, not the comic itself, and not the contribution that the comic can play in our understandings of Dickens's artistic intentions within a structure of narrative modes.

At the conclusion of his essay Gilmour does return to the perceptions of the novel's earliest reviewers, but in a space which contrasts markedly with the expansive account of the rest of his discussion, in terms which minimise the impact of the comic in the overall framework of the novel, and in terms which are vague, even critically bland and which deny conscious artistic intent, 'it is good to have pleasure restored [...] When the earliest reviewers praised the novel's comedy [...] they were acknowledging

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[119] *Great Expectations*, Gilmour, back cover.
[120] *Great Expectations*, Gilmour, 'Introduction', pp. xxi-xxix.
[121] *Great Expectations*, Gilmour, p. xxv, pp. xxvi-xxvii.
[122] *Great Expectations*, Gilmour, p. xxviii.
[123] *Great Expectations*, Gilmour, p. 452.

the energy of imagination which makes this saddest of Dickens's novels wonderfully liberating.'[124]

Edgar Rosenberg's scholarly Norton edition (1999) contains a range of editorial and critical apparatus. In his introductory survey of themes of the novel there is a nod towards the comic but no attempt at an extended discussion that could place comedy as part of the artistic whole.[125] Comedy is seen as part of the mechanism of the novel, separable and independent of what lies at the novel's core. His selection of Dickens's letters of necessity includes those which express the comic concerns which clearly dominated Dickens's composition of the novel and in the selection of critical excerpts and essays there is a continuing reference to the comic, though this is more evident in the excerpts from early criticism where the nature of Dickens's comedy and its alleged deterioration from its success in early novels, is a subject of continuing debate.[126] There is also an excerpt from Fielding's *Tom Jones*, in which Partridge comically observes a performance of *Hamlet*, which parallels Dickens's comic scene where Pip sees Wopsle perform in the same play.[127] It is significant, therefore, that this edition, with some claim to be, for its time, a definitive scholarly account of the novel, contains no modern essay which explores, to any real degree, the special nature of Dickens's comedy or its relationship with other modes. Within the selected bibliography Rosenberg devotes seventeen lines out of sixteen pages to humour, introducing his selection with 'For a writer who used to be thought *the* comic novelist in the language, Dickens the humorist has gotten rather short shrift in the past decades.'[128] It is interesting that in a text which explores so much of the nature of the novel and which is edited with such broad vision, that such a remark should not lead to

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[124] *Great Expectations*, Gilmour, p. 459.

[125] Rosenberg surveys the themes and methods of the novel. He identifies the 'degree of suspense which that few books of its caliber can match', the 'deeply troubling questions' such as 'the problematic sources of wealth', the 'sham claims of emotional and petty-financial parasites', the 'rights and wrongs [...] of the legal machinery and the judiciary' and so on. He does acknowledge the presence of humour, but in a way that expresses the lack of integration with these thematic concerns which this study seeks to assert, 'the long passage [...] that describes his sister's burial also happens to be one of the funniest in the book [...] How he manages to lull us into these genial mood swings remains, I suppose, his trade secret.' Rosenberg, *Great Expectations*, 'Preface', pp. xi-xix, pp. xii-xiii.

[126] Rosenberg, *Great Expectations*, 'Dickens's Letters on *Great Expectations*', pp. 531-6, 'Criticism, pp. 617-720. An early commentator, for instance, finds, rather eccentrically, that 'Wemmick strikes us as the great creation of the book, and his marriage the funniest incident.' 'From *The Saturday Review*, 12, July 20, 1861: 69:70'. Another is disappointed, 'the old rich humour shines wan and watery through an ever-deepening film of fancies farfetched and utterly absurd.' 'From *The Dublin University Magazine*, 58, December 1861, 685-93'. *Great Expectations*, Rosenberg, p. 617, p. 622.

[127] *Great Expectations*, Rosenberg, pp. 611-14.

[128] *Great Expectations*, Rosenberg, p. 740.

further discussion, if not analysis. Rosenberg does not seem conscious of this critical blind spot.

Carlisle's edition of *Great Expectations* (1996), like Rosenberg's, is a scholarly edition aimed at undergraduates. It contains the full text and a range of editorial and critical apparatus, including a selection of essays that aims to cover a range of critical perspectives. Its intention is to guide readers who are new to the novel in the key issues of its writing and the ways in which it can be understood. Carlisle's account of the critical history recounts, as others do, the role that the perception of the novel's humour played in both the conception and the reception of *Great Expectations*.[129] But also, as others do, the role of humour seems a minor part of the overall picture, with little embellishment beyond the mentions made by Dickens in his letters of the period, and by early commentators. Later in the volume, Said's discussion of potential deconstructionist readings of *Great Expectations* starts from an analysis of Wopsle's performance in *Hamlet*, and is firmly rooted in the comedy of the scene and how that comedy relates to the readings which Said chooses to pursue.[130] However, this essay constitutes a little over five pages of critical discussion out of a total of just short of two hundred pages. The edition's glossary does not contain the words 'comic', 'comedy' or 'humour', but does include 'canon', 'hegemony' and 'phallus'.[131]

This, then, is a trend among editions of *Great Expectations*. The introduction by Alan Sillitoe to The Oxford World's Classics edition (1999) makes no mention of the comedy in the novel at all.[132] Sillitoe emphasises the human drama of the novel, '*Great Expectations* is a novel about broken hearts', and he places it within his own experience as a reader.[133] The Wordsworth edition (1992) is low priced and aimed at a mass market.[134] Its cover is reminiscent of the Penguin Classics cover.[135] It is a maritime scene, in this case a harbour. The few human figures are seen only in silhouette and a distant, stark lighthouse stands as the only prominent single object, perhaps suggesting the novel's theme of the bourgeois ego emerging from the metropolis. It is interesting that both the Wordsworth and Penguin Classics editions choose ships for the front cover, suggesting, perhaps, a preoccupation with the blurred nature of borders and limits, regional, but also social and personal. The information on

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[129] *Great Expectations*, Carlisle, 'A Critical History of *Great Expectations*', pp. 445-62.
[130] *Great Expectations*, Carlisle, 'Cultural Criticism and *Great Expectations*', pp. 592-624.
[131] *Great Expectations*, Carlisle, 'Glossary of Critical and Theoretical Terms', pp. 625-37.
[132] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* ed., Alan Sillitoe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). All subsequent references are to this edition as, *Great Expectations*, Sillitoe.
[133] *Great Expectations*, Sillitoe, 'Introduction', pp. v-x, p. vii.
[134] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, intr. John Mepham (Ware: Wordsworth, 1992). All subsequent references are to this edition as, '*Great Expectations*, Wordsworth.'
[135] '*Great Expectations*, Wordsworth, front cover. Illustration of front cover on p. 47 of this chapter, below.

the back cover of the Wordsworth edition presents the novel largely as a *bildungsroman* with a strong narrative, 'the mysteries of the past and the convolutions of the fate through thrilling adventures'.[136] In its one word summaries of characters two comic characters are indicated, though with no indication of the comic dimension that they are to take, 'good-hearted room-mate Herbert Pocket and the pompous Pumblechook.'[137] The introduction, though clearly not aimed at a scholarly reader, is by no means simplistic in its reading of the novel, covering biographical and psychological issues and a range of critical insights including the Freudian and the historically contextual.[138] Nevertheless, this thoughtful account is still blind to Dickens's comic modes, their nature and the role they play in our understanding of the novel as a whole. Calder, in the 1965 Penguin Classics edition, is to some extent an exception, in that he starts his introduction by giving weight to the contemporary reception of the novel's comedy and he continues with frequent references that place it within the contribution that comedy can make to Dickens's overall artistic design.[139]

Editions, and scholarly and critical studies, tend to examine the sociological and cultural implications of the narrative in its historical context. Of course, the novel is serious and dark, and, of course it explores the psychological and social pressure of a culture undergoing extraordinary change, but it is not only serious and dark. Furthermore, the seriousness and the darkness of the novel are focused and textured by interplay with the comedic mode. And yet, all versions of the novel downplay noticeably the comedic mode.

Methodology

The critical coverage of Dickens's comic mode, then, seems partial and erratic, rather than comprehensive and systematic. This study addresses the ellipses in the critical record and stresses the importance of the totality: the importance of the traditions of comic fiction and of satire, the interweaving of comic modes, the relationships between comedy and other modes, and the nature of Dickensian comedy expressed through comic character and through the deployment of comic language. It reveals Dickens as a consciously artistic writer of comic fiction writing within traditions of comic fiction and responding to emergent modernity.

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[136] *Great Expectations*, Wordsworth, back cover.
[137] *Great Expectations*, Wordsworth, back cover.
[138] *Great Expectations*, Wordsworth, 'Introduction', pp. v-xi.
[139] *Great Expectations*, pp. 11-29.

In order to achieve its objectives, the methodology must, of necessity, be wide ranging, rather than tightly focused. There is no established wider critical field in which to neatly position this study in order for it to make a contribution defined by the borders of other contributions that map the ground which it will come to share. One of the key objectives of this study is to assert the wide ranging nature of Dickensian comedy and its importance to the fiction as a whole. Its perspective is not a single literary critical perspective, or a single understanding of the nature of comic fiction. It deploys Freudian and Bergsonian conceptions of the comic, although it is not limited to these. It also deploys a largely Marxist perspective on the nature of the social, economic and political changes that brought about the emerging modernity to which Dickens responds. It seeks to emphasise the multiple nature of Dickens's comedy and a single critical or theoretical viewpoint would circumscribe the analysis.

However, close analytical reading is an important part of the methodology throughout: comedy is an intricately deployed mode, shifting its forms and its manifestations, sometimes brutally apparent, sometimes seeming to be absent when most present, sometimes a sharp barb of a word or two, sometimes an extended sequence of character and action, and through close reading the study demonstrates a sensitive response to Dickens's linguistic and structural dexterity.

The first area to be analysed is Dickens's relationship to the literary traditions of comic fiction, how those traditions were absorbed by Dickens and how they became manifest in his fiction in response to the changed and changing conditions of the nineteenth century. Through an examination of Dickens's childhood reading in Chapter One this study will indicate the extent to which Dickens absorbed and used in his own comic fiction, the themes, methods and preoccupations of earlier literary traditions of comic fiction and it will demonstrate that his comic mode can be seen within a long tradition of comic fiction which goes back at least as far as Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Chapter One demonstrates how Dickens absorbed and recast for his own purposes not only the structural, narratorial and thematic features of the eighteenth-century comic novel, but also the profound epistemological disquiet that he found at the heart of the tradition of the picaresque and the quixotic in his writing of *The Pickwick Papers* and how that disquiet served the aesthetic challenge to modernity that Dickens's fiction articulates.

Chapter Two demonstrates Dickens's relationship to the comic visions of his age. Theories and perceptions of the comic from Thomas Carlyle, Henri Bergson, George Meredith and Sigmund Freud, all rooted in nineteenth-century social, psychological and cultural tensions, illuminate, by comparison and by contrast, the distinctive nature of Dickensian comic writing and reveal his imaginative and artistic

response to those tensions. This process of comparison and contrast is particularly useful in the absence of an articulation of comic theory from Dickens himself. It is well known that Carlyle, whose ideas of the comic are rooted in German Romanticism and the work of Jean-Paul Richter, was an important influence on Dickens's understanding of the nineteenth century as the age of the machine but the chapter reveals his less well attested influence as a comic theorist, particularly with Dickens's deployment of Carlyle's concept of the inverse sublime.[140] Meredith, as a comic theorist and comic practitioner, stands as a stark contrast to Dickens's own comic methods, which can be characterised as less ethereal, more popular and more populist but also darker, more fantastic and more grotesque. Such analysis of the contrasts with Meredith reveal not only Dickens's distinctive approach to the comedic but the exacting reading practices required even by Dickens's mass – as opposed to Meredith's more elite – readership.

Evidence from analysis of the comic theories of Bergson and Freud reveal how Dickens articulated the physical and psychic damage of capitalism which those later theorists formulated. The bodily distortions, contortions and malformations of character and their equivalents in the mind are analysed as expressive of victims of the mental and physical pressures of capitalism. The moral aberration of modernity is paradoxically depicted and also corrected by Dickensian comedy. This chapter demonstrates that the human body and the human mind, therefore, become comic metaphors both of the victim and of the rebel, comic sites of an ethical challenge to nineteenth-century ideology. The selection of this area for critical exploration demonstrates the distinctive duality of the comedy that Dickens deployed: appalled at the monsters of mind and society that modernity was bringing to birth but also fascinated by the pleasure that comic depiction of them yields.

The need for a wide-ranging methodology again becomes apparent in Chapters Three and Four, which analyse character and language from the perspective of Dickens's comic art. These aspects of the Dickensian comic modes – particularly character – are often seen as the most critically problematic and his least artistic, because least realist. These chapters argue that his methods reflect literary traditions that lie outside the narrow conceptualisations of nineteenth-century realism that have become valorised by the literary critical tradition and that they require more demanding reading strategies than we are often willing to accord them. In these chapters, for

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[140] The influence of Carlyle on Dickens is explored in William Oddie's study *Dickens and Carlyle The Question of Influence* (London, The Centenary Press, 1972). Oddie's focus is the ideological influence of Carlyle's ideas on Dickens. Carlyle identifies Richter's principle of humour as the 'inverse sublime', where the duality of human beings is presented so that both sublime and ridiculous potentialities are simultaneously observable. Thomas Carlyle, 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1827), *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays in Five Volumes* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), Vol. 1, p. 17.

instance, the Dickensian comic modes are shown through the application of Russian formalist theory to be both rooted in traditional non-realist forms and yet to be proleptic of fractured Modernist visions of alienation and the dissolution of language, form and character. Far from being a collection of embarrassing caricatures and exaggerated tropes, Dickensian character and language are presented as artistic achievements.

Chapter Five examines Dickens's satiric mode and the extent to which he was a consciously satiric artist who worked within a literary tradition of the satiric, including classical conceptions of the mode, but who also extended and developed that tradition in distinctive ways in an imaginative response to the particular conditions of nineteenth-century urbanised and industrialised capitalism. Dickensian satire is thereby demonstrated as both indicative of Dickens's sympathy with literary tradition and of his manipulation of that tradition to meet the artistic challenges of modernity.

A recognition of the role of comedy in Dickens's fiction is also a recognition of the dialogic nature of Dickens's novels as a focus of competing and complementary modes out of which emerges another distinctive strand of what we understand as Dickens. The voice of comedy must be asserted if we are to hear the full artistic possibilities of Dickensian fiction. This is Bradbury's point at the end of her analysis of the development of Dickensian novel structure,

> Bakhtinian dialogism offers an ideological as well as an aesthetic interpretation of such carnivalesque displacement of a single tone by obstreperous polyphony. Bakhtin indeed allows celebration of both Dickens's comedy and his sentiment: the great selling points to his early readers, which have since been obscured by solemn analyses.[141]

It is the purpose of this study to rediscover Dickensian comedy as a focus for critical discussion and to reinstate it as one of his 'great selling points' even to an academy that seems intent on buying only solemn analyses.

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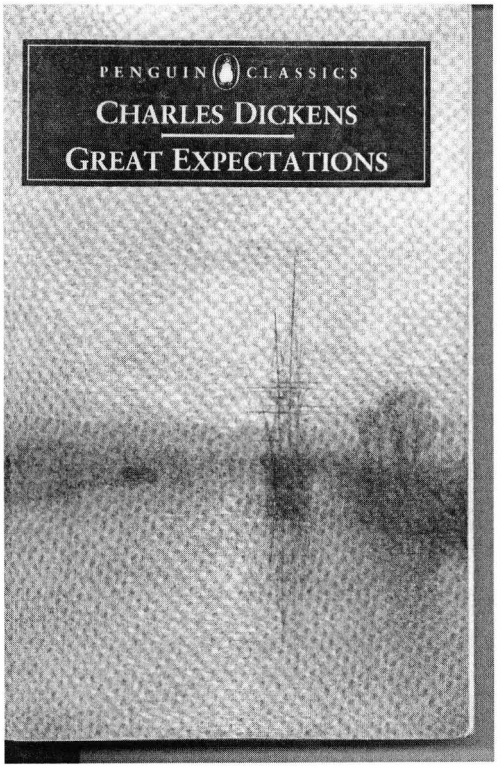
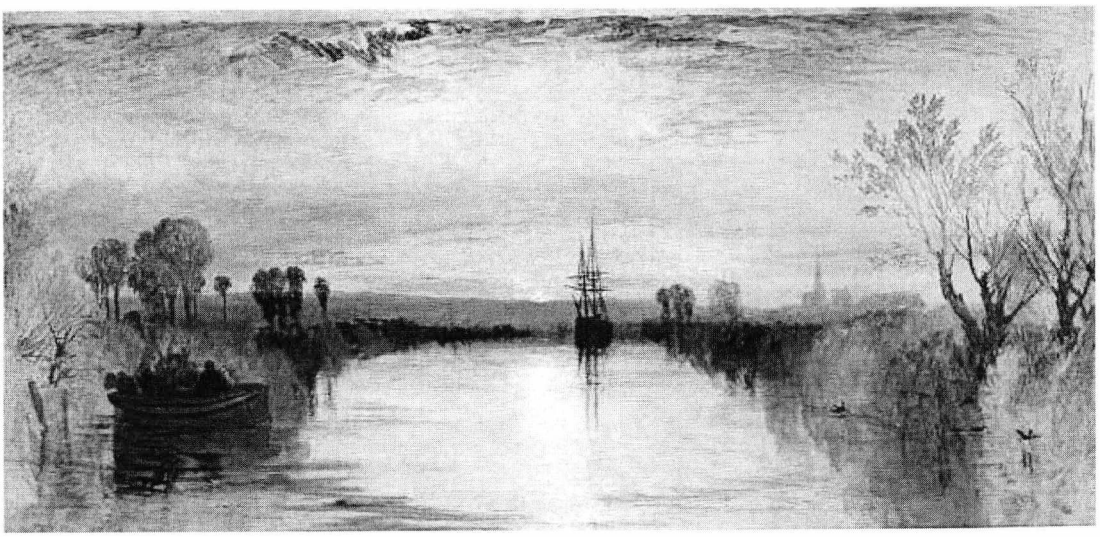
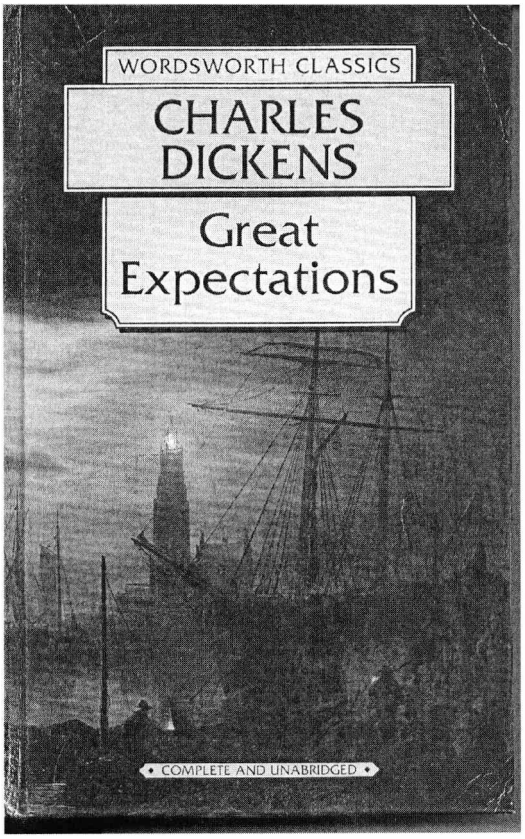
[141] Nicola Bradbury, 'Dickens and the form of the novel', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed., John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 152-66, p. 165. Bakhtin formulates heteroglossia as competing and complementary 'voices' in fiction in which '[t]he incorporated languages and socio-ideological belief systems [...] are unmasked and destroyed as something false, hypocritical greedy, limited narrowly rationalistic, indadequate to reality.' Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Heteroglossia in the Novel', from 'Discourse in the Novel'(1934-5), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed., Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1981), pp. 301-31, p. 311, pp. 311-12.



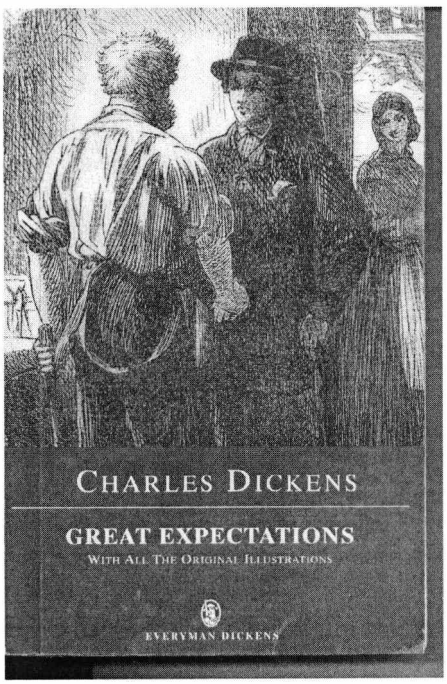
Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1860-1), ed., Charlotte Mitchell, (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1996), front cover.



Joseph Mallord Turner. *Chichester Canal* (c.1828)
Petworth House



Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, (Ware: Wordsworth, 1992), front cover. Original painting: 'A Harbour by Moonlight', by Hermann (or Herman) Herzog, b 1832; Mensing Art Gallery, Hamm-Rhynern, Germany.



Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed., Robin Gilmour, (London: Dent, 1994), front cover.

Chapter One

'The Cockney Quixote'[1]: Does Pickwickian mean Quixotic?

'bein' only eyes, you see, my wision's limited.'[2]

Dickens's fiction has roots that lie outside the Victorian period, and outside the pre-Victorian period in which it first appeared. Dickens's childhood reading exposed him to a tradition of comic writing and of thinking about comedy that goes back to Aristotle. His father's small library included, among other texts, comic novels by Smollett, Fielding, Goldsmith, Le Sage - in translation by Smollett - and Cervantes.[3] In 1847, in a passing account of his childhood reading, Dickens also adds Sterne, and concludes, 'no one read them younger than I, I think'.[4] The flavour of these novels is picaresque and quixotic: experience, travel, romantic adventure, calamity, moral error and retributive disaster, but also friendship, love, loyalty, moral rectitude and ultimate reward. They include a wide range of modes of writing: sentiment, melodrama, romance and adventure, but importantly include comic modes: satire, humour and farce, and the generic conventions of the comic: virtue rewarded, vice punished and a happy ending.

From its earliest reviews *The Pickwick Papers* was clearly identified as indebted to the quixotic, with one early reviewer referring to Pickwick as 'the cockney quixote'.[5] The anonymous reviewer of the first nine numbers of *Pickwick Papers* in the *Athenaeum* in December 1836 considered Dickens's comedy derivative, though equally the comment can be interpreted to indicate healthy indebtedness to the traditions of comic fiction, 'The *Pickwick Papers*, in fact, are made up of two pounds of Smollett, three ounces of Sterne'.[6]

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[1] 'From unsigned reviews of *Pickwick Papers*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, May 1836-May 1837', Phillip Collins, ed., *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 31. Quoted in Mercedes Potau. 'Notes on the Parallels between *The Pickwick Papers* and *Don Quixote*. *Dickens Quarterly* 10 No. 1 (March 1993): 105-110, p. 105. All subsequent references are to these editions.

[2] Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed., Robert L Patten (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 573. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[3] John Forster quotes Dickens's account of his childhood reading, '[m]y father had left a small collection of books in a little room [...] From that blessed little room, *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, the *Vicar of Wakefield*, *Don Quixote*, *Gil Blas*, and *Robinson Crusoe* came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time, - and did me no harm'. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-74), ed.., J. W. T. Ley (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928), p. 5. T. W. Hill gives a detailed account of Dickens's reading throughout his life. T. W. Hill. "Books that Dickens Read". *The Dickensian* 45 (1949): 81-90, 201-207.

[4] To John Forster, 5th September 1847, Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, eds *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (The Pilgrim Edition), 12 Vols., (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), Vol.5, pp. 158-9.

[5] Collins, p. 31.

[6] Collins, p. 32.

The comic quixotic was a key trope in the fiction that Dickens read as a child. Analysis of the comic quixotic and Dickens's deployment of it produces important new understandings of Dickens's artistic methods and purposes in the cultural context within which he wrote. There is a rich intertextuality between Dickens, *Don Quixote* and the eighteen-century comic novel.[7] Analysis of the intertextuality illuminates the ways in which Dickens deployed the modalities of the comic fiction of his childhood reading and for what purposes, as well as illuminates why Dickens saw those modalities and their aesthetic effects as meeting his artistic needs. A focus on Dickens's deployment of the comic modalities of the eighteenth-century comic novel and of *Don Quixote* demonstrates Dickens's 'Victorianisation' of eighteenth-century comic fiction.

The quixotic texts that Dickens read as a child and which he transformed into his own Dickensian comic quixotic were written at a time of transition in understanding of the quixotic, and *The Pickwick Papers* reflects that literary historical transition. In particular, the quixotic was moving from a focus on the 'madness' of the central character to an examination of society's vices and follies that were revealed by the quixotic character. Henry Fielding, as Raimund Borgmeier establishes, transformed what the quixotic means in precisely this way.[8] In his opera *Don Quixote in England* (1734), Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are deployed by Fielding to satirize English institutions, employing incidents and characterisation which are recognisable from the original.[9] In *Joseph Andrews*, despite the title of the novel including the statement that it is, 'Written in Imitation of The Manner of Cervantes, Author of Don Quixote', the quixotic elements are less prominent, and amount to what Borgmeier refers to as a 'basic paradigm', rather than the closer model Fielding used for his earlier opera.[10] There are two central characters, Joseph Andrews and Parson Adams, as there are two central characters in *Don Quixote*, but, '[i]t is not easy to assess, however, in what manner Fielding's protagonists exactly correspond to Cervantes' famous figures.'[11] Borgmeier regards the Cervantine elements in *Tom Jones* as 'still recognizable, yet transmuted even

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[7] Cervantes [Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra], *Don Quixote*, trans., intr. and notes John Rutherford, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[8] Raimund Borgmeier, 'Henry Fielding and his Spanish Model: 'Our English Cervantes'', *Cervantes in the English Speaking World: New Essays*, ed., Dario Fernandez-Morera and Michael Hanke, (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2005), pp. 43-64. Scott Paul Gordon also describes the 'Romantic' approach to *Don Quixote*, 'which increasingly deploys quixotes less to satirise them than to indict the society that mistreats them.' Scott Paul Gordon, 'Female Quixotism: Charlotte Lennox and Tabitha Tenney', *Cervantes in the English-Speaking World: New Essays*, ed., Dario Fernandez-Morera and Michael Hanke (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2005), pp. 127-41, p. 128. All subsequent references are to these editions.
[9] Henry Fielding, 'Don Quixote in England', *The Works of Henry Fielding*, ed., James P. Brown (London: Bickers and Son, H. Sothern and Col, 1871), Ten Volumes, Vol., III, pp. 55-128.
[10] Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, ed., A. R. Humphreys, (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1973), Title Page, p. x. Borgmeier, p. 53.
[11] Borgmeier, p. 54.

further,' with the most obvious Cervantine influence being Partridge's characterisation as a Sancho Panza figure.[12] For Fielding, Borgmeier argues, *Don Quixote* represented less a specific model, and, increasingly, an approach to comic fiction, a means to express an artistic approach to the world which enabled him to write in the comic mode: what Borgmeier refers to as, 'the basic comic technique and the artistic structure'.[13]

Tobias Smollett, too, muted satire at the expense of Don Quixote, in favour of the satire which can be produced by the quixotic at the expense of society's institutions and rituals. Launcelot Greaves is a character clearly modelled on Don Quixote, but he is seen as a heroic, rather than a comic figure.[14] His travels satirically expose the commercial amorality and immorality of his society as well as its corrupt politics and law. Matthew Bramble, in *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, is less obviously modelled on Don Quixote, and shares his quixotic features with other characters, such as Lismahago and Clinker himself.[15] Nevertheless, he travels with the same consequences of satiric exposure of his society and its morality.[16]

The original target of satire in *Don Quixote*, that of the chivalric romance, is replaced by these writers by a wider critique of society as it moves into the modern commercial, industrialised and urbanised era. In that process, the central quixotic character becomes more ambivalent and ambiguous, mutating from fool inspired by a literary genre into a noble, if misguided, hero. Furthermore, as Angus Easson and John Rutherford separately establish, the transformation of the Quixote from madman to benevolent idealist is a function of the Romantic reading of the quixotic which valued the mental world over the practical, and which saw Don Quixote as a moral hero battling the challenges of a materialist reality.[17] In addition, there was a softening of the comic mode throughout the eighteenth-century, moving away from the harshly satiric to the amiably eccentric and humorous, as Stuart Tave demonstrates.[18]

The relationship between Dickens's childhood reading and his own deployment of comic fiction has been critically under-examined. There are critics who have sought

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[12] Borgmeier, p. 43.
[13] Borgmeier, p. 64.
[14] Tobias Smollett, The *Life and Adventures of Sir Launcelot Greaves*, ed., David Evans, (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).
[15] Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker*, ed., Lewis M. Knapp, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).
[16] As Pedro Javier Pardo demonstrates. Pedro Javier Pardo, 'Tobias Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker* and the Cervantine Tradition in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction', *Cervantes in the English Speaking World: New Essays*, ed., Dario Fernandez-Morera and Michael Hanke (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2005), pp. 81-106. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[17] Angus Easson, 'Don Pickwick: Dickens and the Transformations of Cervantes', *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, ed., Alice Jenkins and Juliet John (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 173-188. *Don Quixote*, p. xv.
[18] Stuart Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

to analyse Dickens's deployment of the Cervantine, though with limitations of method that this chapter will address. Accounts of Dickens's deployment of quixotic and picaresque fiction tend to be assertions of undeveloped taxonomies of borrowed or shared surface features. This chapter pushes beyond the enumerative methodologies of such accounts and provide a searching examination of more profound intertextual indebtedness, using *The Pickwick Papers* as a novel with a clear debt to the quixotic and to Dickens's early reading as a case study.

Edgar Johnson's early account of the Dickensian quixotic in *The Pickwick Papers*, 'Knight of the Joyful Countenance' is representative of the approach to exploring this area.[19] He nods at the influences on Dickens from his childhood reading, but does not indicate its critical potential, 'we see again the seminal influence of Dickens's childhood reading new-minted into fresh creation [...] The great achievement of his predecessors in picaresque realism and comic epic Dickens blends with the magic of romance into a unique and novel triumph'.[20] David Skelton's account of the quixotic and the picaresque discusses *The Pickwick Papers* in passing but does not go beyond enumeration of features in common, or in contrast.[21] James Kinsley, in his introduction to *The Pickwick Papers* lists 'debts' to Smollett and Fielding, but sees them as surface features only, matters of costume, character, incident and elements of structure and mode.[22] Sister Mary Cipar, too, in her analysis of the picaresque, substitutes enumeration of comparisons and contrasts for critical insight.[23] Directed at *Nicholas Nickleby*, rather than *The Pickwick Papers*, her work typifies a critically directionless approach to establishing the relationship between Dickens and the tradition of comic fiction.

Mercedes Potau, in her account of *The Pickwick Papers* and *Don Quixote*, reinforces the impression of the lack of critical depth which is characteristic of the examination of Dickens's artistic indebtedness to the tradition of comic fiction. She compares and contrasts the novels, noting that the characters of Pickwick and Don Quixote are similar in age and temperament, though different in physical build. Sancho Panza and Sam Weller are similar in moral impact on their masters, while also differing

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[19] Edgar Johnson, 'Knight of the Joyful Countenance', *Charles Dickens: his Tragedy and Triumph*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[20] Johnson, p.174.
[21] David Skilton, 'Quixotic and Picaresque Fiction', *Defoe to the Victorians: Two Centuries of the English Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 32-44.
[22] Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), ed., James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. ix. Subsequent references to *The Pickwick Papers* are not from this edition.
[23] Sister Mary Cleopha Cipar, OSU. 'Picaresque Characteristics in *Nicholas Nickleby*'. *The Dickensian*, 84 (1988): 42-6.

in build. Mrs Bardell and Dulcinea are compared as female 'pseudo-protagonists.'[24] Potau concludes that Dickens is influenced by Cervantes, but limits her analysis of this influence to structure, narrative and tone and unexplored references to 'affectionate fun', 'high-sounding thoughts', 'resemblances', 'affinities' and 'parallels.'[25] There is no implication that our readings of and our reactions to Pickwick and Don Quixote may, at times, be ambiguous or ambivalent, or that awareness of *Don Quixote*, and how it has been transformed by Dickens's comedic imagination, may inform our reading of *The Pickwick Papers*, or even of *Don Quixote*.

Even Raimund Borgmeier's account of the Cervantine in the work of Henry Fielding, which is evidence earlier in this chapter to demonstrate the morphing of the quixotic in its transmission to Dickens, is a list of features in common which focuses on mechanics rather than artistic and imaginative purpose. There is no sense of why Fielding was attracted to *Don Quixote* as a narrative, of how and why Cervantes' comic concerns and methods became Fielding's also, or of what about this particular comic narrative made it ideal for Fielding's purposes and approach. At the end Borgmeier raises these more fundamental and more interesting concerns, though only through quotation from Andrew Wright, and with the effect of denying their relevance to Fielding, '*Don Quixote* contrasts appearance and reality in such a way as to betray multitudinous uncertainties. [...] Cervante's masterpiece dramatizes an ontological uncertainty, an ontological scepticism; Fielding's first novel depicts persons of incorruptible innocence in a corrupt but knowable and 'solid' world.'[26]

Paul Goetsch's approach goes beyond the taxonomical.[27] He sees *Don Quixote* in terms which inform Dickens's comic approach and artistic purposes, rather than merely as a source of character types and situations. He identifies what this study will seek to build on, that Dickens 'focused on how Pickwick misinterprets human relationships and social situations', because, Pickwick poses 'as a naturalist [...] and an eighteenth-century 'armchair rationalist''.[28] However, Goetsch does not take these potentialities further and demonstrate, as this study does, how the transformation of the quixotic into the Pickwickian profoundly questions Pickwick and his comically discordant relationship to his changing times, for instance on the significance of Pickwick's journey to Birmingham and the narrative silence in which the characters

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[24] Potau, p. 105.
[25] Potau, pp. 105-110.
[26] Andrew Wright, *Henry Fielding: Mask and Feast*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p. 29, quoted by Borgmeier, p. 57.
[27] Paul Goetsch, 'Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* and *Don Quixote*', *Cervantes in the English Speaking World: New Essays*, ed., Dario Fernandez-Morera and Michael Hanke (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 2005), pp. 143-157. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[28] Goetsch, p. 146.

experience it.[29] Goetsch's account becomes ultimately similar to Kinsley and Potau, an enumeration of contrasts, with limited exploration of the more profound questions, '[t]o conclude, Pickwick is quite unlike Don Quixote [...] If we wish to call him a quixotic character, we must focus on [...] their attitudes toward reality and the world of ideals and illusions.'[30] Goetsch is eventually reduced to enumerating the number of meals consumed in *The Pickwick Papers*.[31] Nevertheless, his approach reveals lines of critical enquiry which examine how eighteenth-century comic novelists transformed *Don Quixote* for their own artistic purposes and, by that route, informed Dickens's comic writing, and, in turn, how Dickens transformed the novel himself.

Alexander Welsh identifies a Pickwick who, though clearly the descendant of Don Quixote, nevertheless inhabits the new world of the early nineteenth century, where 'the age of status has given way to the age of contract', where Pickwick's difficulties are not imaginatively anachronistic, as Quixote's are, and where the novel is sufficiently contemporary in its moral concerns as to display the beginning of Dickens's 'troubled, lifelong uneasiness about institutions', particularly those institutions 'that the nineteenth century offered to substitute, in part, for divine Providence'.[32] Importantly, Welsh recognises that Dickens places Pickwick within the socio-historic context of the nineteenth century and within an emergent modernity. However, the focus of Welsh's discussion is quixotic character. Welsh does not place the novel within a wider critical context of its relationship to its age, of the cultural work done by the quixotic and how Dickens's sublimation of the quixotic informs his artistic purposes and methods. Nor, significantly, does Welsh engage with the comic nature of either *Don Quixote*, or *The Pickwick Papers*.

It is ironic that the further the critical discussion moves away from Dickens to the purely quixotic, the more relevant and exciting the ideas become in their potential application to his comic fiction. Adrienne Martin's analysis of the paradoxical

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[29] Goetsch states that *The Pickwick Papers* 'does not allow contemporary reality to invade and destroy Pickwick's idyllic circles. Symptomatic is the episode in which Pickwick and Sam travel by coach through the industrial area of Birmingham (Ch. L). In two short paragraphs Dickens's narrator gives an impressive account of the light and sound effects produced by the demonized factories. Significantly, both Pickwick and Sam remain silent.' Goetsch, p. 155.

[30] Goetsch, p.149.

[31] Goetsch, p.151.

[32] Alexander Welsh, *Reflections on the Hero as Quixote* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), excerpts in Michael Hollington, ed., *Charles Dickens Critical Assessments* Vols. I-IV (Robertsbridge, Sussex: Helm Information, 1995), Vol. II, pp. 101-12, p. 104, p. 105, p. 108. All subsequent references are to this edition. Welsh has written extensively on the Quixotic and the Cervantine and their relationship to Dickens. Alexander Welsh, 'The Influence of Cervantes', *The Cambridge Companion to Cervantes*, ed., Anthony J. Cascardi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 80-99. Alexander Welsh. 'Waverley, Pickwick, and Don Quixote'. *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 22, No. 1 (Jun. 1967): 19-30. Alexander Welsh, 'Realism as a Practical and Cosmic Joke'. *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 9 No. 1 (Autumn 1975): 22-39.

relationship between humour and violence in *Don Quixote* produces critical insight that accounts for the artistically transformed presence of the novel in Dickens's work.[33] Martin asserts the philosophical power of the novel alongside the role of humour, in terms which Borgmeier denies for Fielding, as she quotes Milan Kundera's introduction to the novel for the Oxford World's Classics, '[w]e laugh [...] because suddenly the world shows itself in its ambiguity, things lose their apparent meaning, people are revealed to be different from what they themselves thought they were.'[34] She concludes that, '*Don Quixote* is to a great extent a comment on the problematic nature of 'reason' in an age of social unreason', and that *Don Quixote* is a novel 'involved in a discourse of ironic, perhaps violent, opposition with the repressive sociohistoric conditions of Spain'.[35] Martin places the quixotic within a discourse that is social and cultural and also within a philosophical discourse of the epistemological.

Scott Paul Gordon's exploration within postmodern cultural theory of late eighteen- and early nineteenth-century quixotic texts by women writers echoes Martin's analysis of Cervantes' problematised approach to knowledge and reason.[36] Gordon identifies what he calls ''the quixotic trope', the depiction of another's deluded perception that implies the objectivity of one's own' and he demonstrates the varied work that this trope can do, including making epistemes appear to be 'other' because they are aberrant, or because political or cultural hegemonies wish them to appear aberrant.[37] In particular, he identifies 'orthodox quixote narratives', such as Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote, or The Adventures of Arabella* (1752) in which the Quixote accepts 'that their vision is aberrant and, cured of [...] the 'false representations' that had improperly interposed between them and reality, finally view the world precisely the way those around them have always viewed it'.[38] Gordon's concept of the 'quixotic

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[33] Adrienne L. Martin, 'Humour and violence in Cervantes', *The Cambridge Companion to Cervantes*, ed., Anthony J. Cascardi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 160-85.
[34] Martin, p. 161.
[35] Martin, p. 167, p. 181.
[36] Scott Paul Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism: Postmodern Theory and Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[37] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 1.
[38] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 41, p. 11. Gordon demonstrates at length the conservative effect of this orthodox quixote narrative in his earlier essay, 'Female Quixotism: Charlotte Lennox and Tabitha Tenney', fn. 8. Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote or The Adventures of Arabella*, ed., Margaret Dalziel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). Arabella, in *The Female Quixote*, reveals her clearly foolish infatuation with French Romances, and the novel is a series of social and romantic mishaps consequent on that infatuation. Arabella does not attain the sense of nobility which Don Quixote does because the focus of the narrative is Arabella's foolishness, with other characters becoming her victims, and there are no opportunities, as there are for Don Quixote, to display nobility and courage as well as foolishness. The novel is comic wholly at Arabella's expense, and the expense of Romantic conventions which are seen as potentially corrupting and socially disruptive, whereas *Don*

trope' and his analysis of the conventional 'Quixote cured' narrative, such as *Arabella*, in which the Quixote is corrected out of a false consciousness created by a misreading of literature for 'reality', are important critical tools in the analysis of the Dickensian quixotic.

Gordon's identification of the disciplinary function of the quixotic in correcting misreading is also an important critical tool, as is the connection between the quixotic and the corrective potential of comedy, which is not a feature of Gordon's discussion. The conventional quixote narrative is a process, Gordon argues, that reproduces 'the Enlightenment belief that if one could only remove the barriers that impede proper perception, each subject would be able to see things as they truly are.'[39] The quixotic, then, comes to apply to a wider cultural discourse of the particular, sometimes problematic, nature of knowledge and the interpretation of reality. What Gordon identifies as the conventional quixote narrative is essentially conservative. However, in contrast to these generically and thematically conservative texts, which 'prohibit epistemological uncertainty', Gordon identifies other quixotic narratives, such as Sarah Fielding's *David Simple* (1744) which explore a more problematised approach to knowledge and understanding, and which 'subvert a literary tradition; and [...] are epistemologically radical, too'.[40] Echoing Martin's analysis of *Don Quixote*, the latter are 'interested in the failure of 'reason' or 'rationality' to explain all it claims to explain'.[41] Gordon's analysis of both conventional and non-conventional quixote narratives, in which the relationship between a false quixotic understanding and a correct, consensually determined 'reality' can be made problematic, is applied to *The Pickwick Papers* in order to place the novel within the potential identified by Gordon that the comic quixotic has for profound epistemological scepticism.

Dickens, then, was informed not only by his own direct reading of Cervantes, but by the mutations of the Cervantine exposed in the writing of others, and by changes in the critical environment of the comic. The quixotic, in the fictions of these writers, was not unproblematic: it became a comic approach to an exploration of a troubling emergent modernity. The understanding in this chapter of the importance of the quixotic to Dickensian comic fiction, particularly *The Pickwick Papers*, can be

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Quixote is also comic at the expense of a vice-ridden society. The reader is expected to understand Arabella's foolish and destructive behaviour from a position of moral consensus, sharing the understandings of her victims, '*Arabella*, indeed, had been is such terrible Consternation, that it was some Time before she even reconciled Appearances to herself; but, as she had a most happy Facility in accommodating every Incident to her own Wishes and Conceptions [...] that she remained, at last, more than ever confirmed in the Opinion', p. 25.

[39] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 3

[40] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 5, p. 7.

[41] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 8.

informed, therefore, not only by important developments in our own critical understanding of the quixotic found in the work of critics such as Martin and Gordon, but in mutations of the quixotic contemporary with Dickens's environment. The key critical issues are concerned with the literary work the quixotic trope does in *The Pickwick Papers*, and what role the comedy plays in relation to it: to what extent is Pickwick a quixotic figure, what forms does his quixoticism take, what is its source, and to what extent is he 'cured'? Crucially, why did Dickens choose to transmute the quixotic in *The Pickwick Papers*: how does the quixotic enable him to address his artistic purposes and methods? In other words, how and why does the comically quixotic become the comically Pickwickian?

Pickwick the Monomaniac and the Misreading of Reality: why comic and why quixotic?

A key term in the examination of the Dickensian comic quixotic is defined by Pedro Javier Pardo, in his discussion of *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, who defines Matthew Bramble's 'epistemological monomania'.[42] This phrase describes the way Bramble interprets experience in terms of his ruling obsession: that of his own, and his society's, health. Pardo accounts for this monomania in the transition of the quixotic towards a 'quixotic consciousness.'[43] In this transition, the quixotic becomes less a series of comic behaviours that result from reading, and more an obsessive psychological state, an interpretative stance on the world and its networks of meaning. As Martin and Gordon imply, the quixotic is at heart an examination of the relationship between the human mind and the reality of the world, with the potential for showing how false and how problematic our understanding of the world can be. The quixotic becomes a complex comic trope: the distortion of the Quixote's perception reveals moral sickness at the heart of society. The Quixote becomes both subject of laughter and also the agent of laughter – perhaps unwittingly – at society's expense. *The Pickwick Papers* does expose folly and vice in traditional satirical vein: the pretensions of the Hunters' literary gathering, the nonsensical rivalries of the Eatanswill election, the social affectation of servants, and the brutality of imprisonment for debt. But Dickens's development of the quixotic is not simply satiric. The main preoccupation of *The Pickwick Papers* is an examination of the nature of the modern world, of how to read and understand it, or, rather of how to misread and fail to understand it, and the Dickensian quixotic and the Dickensian comic are at the heart of that examination of the failure of meaning.

[42] Pardo, p. 88.
[43] Pardo, p. 104.

Pardo's 'epistemological monomania' accounts for Pickwick's comic quixoticism. Pickwick creates in his own mind an interpretation of reality in which the world is benignly rational and ordered, and subject to the power of benevolence. He is the leading member of the society which bears his name with the intention to contribute to the 'cause of science', and his travels are seen as a mission to extend his contribution.[44] He is depicted as an explorer of the world and its mysteries, 'carrying the speculations [...] into a wider field [...] to the advancement of knowledge, and the diffusion of learning.'[45] Like Don Quixote, he imposes a monomaniacal quixotic consciousness, an individualised and idiosyncratic episteme on reality, which the quixotic trope shows to create a 'false' world, refracted through his own benign quixotic obsession. Where Don Quixote sets out to recast the world as a romance, the bourgeois Pickwick sets out to recast it as data, a subject which can be benignly investigated, scrutinised and controlled with his spectacles, his telescope and his notebook.

The opening chapters of *The Pickwick Papers* express the conventional quixotic narrative mode, in which there is an implied consensual reality against which Pickwick is judged and found to be absurd. This implied 'reality' is a function of comedy, particularly Dickens's narrator's comedic tone which establishes in the reader's mind a sense of the error of Pickwick's quixoticism. Dickens's presentation of Pickwick's scientific mission is comic, and the comedy functions to undercut Pickwick. The title of Pickwick's paper, 'Speculations on the Source of the Hampstead Ponds, with some Observations on the Theory of Tittlebats' is parodic of the scientific rhetoric of such papers, and Dickens further underscores the parody with his burlesque reference to Pickwick as, 'the man who had traced to their source the mighty ponds of Hampstead, and agitated the scientific world'.[46] Pickwick is a Quixote, and he is subject to the corrective power of laughter.

The Pickwick Club, itself, established to enact the Pickwickian scientific and philosophical mission, is a comically inadequate tool for understanding the world. The Club is a parody of philosophical societies, their petty rivalries, linguistic formulations and hierarchies. Each member of the travelling group, 'The Corresponding Society', is a Quixote: Tupman, the no longer youthful and increasingly tubby, lover; Snodgrass the poet, who never produces poetry; Winkle, the sportsman without sporting competence. Pickwick's scientific mission seems comparable to the comparable delusions of his companions.

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[44] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 67.
[45] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 67.
[46] *The Pickwick Papers*, pp. 67-68.

The episode with the pugnacious cabman demonstrates the comic failure of Pickwick's attempt to find ordered rationality in the world. In the cab to meet his companions, he encounters what seems ideal raw data, in the shape of the waterman and the man who becomes the pugnacious cabman. The waterman already fits the description of the evidence of which Pickwick is in quest. He is described, in language which is reminiscent of the language of scientific categorisation, as 'a strange specimen.'[47] He is also, like a specimen, labelled and numbered, 'as if he were catalogued in some collection of rarities.'[48] This particular description is strongly indicative of the enlightenment mission to scientific taxonomy. Julian Thomas, in his discussion of the history and philosophy of archaeology, discusses the importance of the catalogued collection in the development of the scientific capacity to determine the relationships between, for instance, historical objects, or species of animals.[49] From this, to Pickwick's mind, promising start, Pickwick seeks to learn a great deal more about the world. During his journey he questions the cabman closely about his horse, constantly 'searching for further information.'[50] He learns the horse's advanced age, and how it is only able to keep pulling the cab because the cabman never takes it out of the harness. All the while, Pickwick is working hard on his scientific mission, as he 'entered every word of this statement in his notebook,' and he begins to draw his scientific conclusions about the 'tenacity of life in horses.'[51]

On Pickwick's arrival, however, Dickensian comedy draws attention to how the world suddenly loses certainty of meaning. Pickwick expects, no doubt, that the fare will be paid, he will join his friends, and they will be able to discuss his findings so far, and then they will move on, in a logical and orderly way, to the next stage of their journey and to new discoveries. Instead, the cabman offers to fight him. Far from a world which enables calm drawing of orderly conclusions from observed data, Pickwick and his friends find an incomprehensible and a threatening world and data which seems to follow no logic or order. It is also one in which they receive physical harm, as Pickwick's spectacles, the symbolic means of his scientific scrutiny, are knocked off, he is punched in the chest, Snodgrass is punched in the eye and Winkle winded. All four of the Pickwickians misunderstand the situation, because they can only see it from their own delusive misreading of the evidence, and as punishment they are subject to a beating, derisive carnivalesque laughter from the crowd and laughter from the reader.

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[47] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 73.
[48] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 73.
[49] Julian Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).
[50] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 73.
[51] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 74.

This incident is emblematic of all his journeys. Pickwick travels, he gathers information, he constructs hypotheses and draws conclusions, but, invariably, he finds them to be wrong across a range of areas of enquiry. Dickens uses comedy throughout the novel as a corrective and disciplinary force exposing Pickwick to ridicule as punishment for his mistaken beliefs about the world. Pickwick's quest is for comprehension, but what he frequently finds is the opposite of comprehension: comic astonishment, perplexity and bewilderment. He is constantly faced with situations which refuse to succumb to rational enquiry and which, on the contrary, seem wholly to defy the rational and the logical. He is reduced to static, perturbed passivity, and uncomprehending, comic impotence. During the army officers' challenge to the Pickwickians after the duel, Pickwick is reduced to 'extreme bewilderment', and he stands 'gazing on vacancy.'[52] Following the sudden arrival of his friends, who find him with Mrs Bardell in his arms, Pickwick is 'astonished' and 'gazing vacantly [...] without the slightest attempt at recognition or explanation.'[53] In the Pound, he 'gazed with indescribable astonishment.'[54] The words used to describe Pickwick's disappearance from the shooting party, and his waking in the pound, indicate the failure of the Pickwickian episteme to account for events, and the sense of disorientation which results, '[i]nexpressible was the astonishment [...] the most mysterious and unaccountable thing [...] indescribable astonishment.'[55] Pickwick himself often expresses his own failures of understanding, 'I don't understand,'[56] 'I never knew that before.'[57] Don Quixote, too, is reduced to a state of Pickwickian, uncomprehending, and impotent, astonishment, 'he couldn't move or do anything other than gaze in bewilderment.'[58]

The power of Dickens's comedy as corrective of the quixotic and its assertion of the epistemologically conservative conventional cure of the Quixote extends to a series of comic, and, ultimately, less comic, imprisonments for Pickwick. Pardo describes quixotic characters as, 'trapped in their worldviews, in their monomanias and obsessions, in the prison houses of mind and language.'[59] The consequence for Pickwick, and for Don Quixote, as Pardo's interpretation of the quixotic episteme suggests, is punishing comic confinement. Pickwick experiences a succession of comic confinements, and even confinements within confinements and all of these confinements

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[52] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 114.
[53] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 232.
[54] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 340.
[55] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 340.
[56] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 383.
[57] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 384.
[58] *Don Quixote*, p. 431.
[59] Pardo, p. 104.

are the consequence of his insistence on maintaining his individualised bourgeois episteme of order and benevolence. Pickwick becomes ludicrously trapped between two lines of soldiers in his enthusiasm for the virtues of military service. In the school garden, Pickwick is variously confined, not only in the garden as a whole, but also in an angle of the wall, behind the outward opening door, and, following his discovery, within the closet used for sandwich bags. His objective was to protect female virtue. Pickwick is confined to the pound in Ipswich as a consequence of his desire to practise good fellowship by indulging freely in refreshment. In Ipswich, too, he finds himself trapped behind bed curtains as he discovers he is in the wrong bedroom. Once escaped from the bedroom, he cowers in 'a little recess in the wall,' and, as a consequence of his refusal to compromise the virtue of the middle-aged lady, he is arrested and carried to Nupkins, squeezed into the sedan chair, and surrounded by the Ipswich mob.[60] Pickwick's final confinement of the novel, in the Fleet, is the longest, the most significant and the least comic. He refuses to accept the verdict of Bardell against Pickwick, refuses to pay damages, and he accepts the consequences. His motivation is representative of his system of thought throughout the novel. He knows that Dodson and Fogg are charlatans. He knows, as does the reader, that he is innocent. Above all, he believes, as a trusting, rational, bourgeois, that the trial, and the legal system, should have identified truth.

He is, of course, innocent, in the sense that he did not propose to Mrs Bardell. But he is also innocent in a much more profound way. He is innocent in the sense that he fails to understand the true nature of the world around him. Because he reads and interprets the world in a particular way, informed by benevolence and rationality, he assumes that both it, and, indeed, he, is seen in the same way by others. However, others refuse to comply, and the consequence for Pickwick, is imprisonment. He is mistaken, in error, and his punishment is confinement and laughter at his expense. Don Quixote, too, is imprisoned, on an ox cart, by the barber and the priest, in order to return him to La Mancha. Like Pickwick's, his confinement is both punishment for, and emblematic of, a confined system of thought. The canon's verdict on the chivalric romances and their influence on Don Quixote confirms the confinement to which 'epistemological monomania' condemns both him and Pickwick, 'they've reduced you to such a state that it has proved necessary to shut you up in a cage.'[61] For both characters, imprisonment becomes emblematic of the isolation and alienation, the sense of being 'other', that 'epistemological monomania' brings, and that the comic

[60] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 394, pp. 415-21.
[61] *Don Quixote*, p. 451.

representation of it, expresses. Both novels become disturbing dramas of the comic failure of thought and the laughter that punishes and corrects failure.

Dickens deploys the comic quixotic, then, in apparently conventional ways. However, Dickens uses comedy in ways which extend well beyond the power of laughter as a corrective and disciplinary force. Comedy is not just the conservative force which disciplines the aberrant Quixote. In Dickens's hands it becomes, paradoxically, the radical power which makes the world incomprehensible, irrational and mad. The reader enjoys comedy at the expense of Pickwick, but we also enjoy the comedy of the comic forces which challenge him. Pickwick is the subject of comedy because he is foolishly mistaken in his reading of the world, but Dickens's presentation of the world in which Pickwick moves reveals it to be chaotic, confused and impossible to read. Comedy itself, anarchic, disruptive and chaotic, comes to stand in place of the rational order that Pickwick seeks. Comedy is the essence of the world.

Like Don Quixote, Pickwick is challenged by characters who expose his failure to read them correctly. In the conversation with Alfred Jingle on the coach to Rochester, Pickwick informs Jingle that he is ''[a]n observer of human nature'', to which Jingle replies, ''[a]h, so am I. Most people are when they've little to do and less to get.''[62] Jingle is not afraid to deflate Pickwick's pretensions, and his role as the comic deflator of Pickwick's quixotism, and that of his companions, continues and develops. Having deflated Pickwick, he goes on to outdo all of the Pickwickians in their own quixotic area of delusion. He outdoes Snodgrass by claiming to have written an epic of ten thousand lines while fighting, anachronistically, in the July Revolution; Winkle by owning a hunting dog that could read warning signs; and Tupman by the extent of his female Spanish conquests, and, particularly, that of Donna Christina.[63] The reader suspects Jingle's credibility from early on, but the Pickwickians do not, and he is not discovered as a villain by them until he flees with Rachael Wardle in Chapter 9.

For much of the novel Jingle is 'unreadable' and 'unknowable', and therefore a direct epistemological challenge to Pickwick and to Pickwick's quest to know and to understand and, thereby, to control. For the first 100 pages or so, he is, 'the stranger', an appellation which points to a role as an outsider, unnamed and unknown, a surprising 'other', given the polite conventions of nineteenth-century society. At the ball in Rochester he declines to give his name, and when, eventually, he does name himself, at the end of the Muggleton cricket match, he refers to himself as of 'No Hall, Nowhere'.[64]

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[62] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 79.
[63] *The Pickwick Papers,* pp. 79, 81.
[64] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 167.

Dickens makes Jingle a far from nebulous character, however. Jingle is a constant, and for a large part of the novel, a dynamic, presence. He appears, reappears, and mutates: he breaks the borders and boundaries of social systems; he disrupts the lives of those he encounters; he changes appearance and social role, though identifiable throughout by his singular method of speaking which, like him, defies logic, order and convention, but is hugely entertaining. Jingle, like much of the world which Pickwick explores, resists analysis: he is changeable, disordered, discordant, chaotic and threatening. He has the ability to manipulate and control others, an ability which Pickwick lacks. He steps in to calm the crowd and rescue the Pickwickians from the pugnacious cabman, by adopting a commanding middle-class authority, which the Pickwickians, ironically, do not possess. At the Muggleton cricket match he appears as a commanding social presence, organising others amid the bustle of the event. He provokes the duel with Dr Slammer, and the consequent confusion at the Bull Inn. In addition to his temporary, but profitable, elopement with Rachael Wardle, he successfully insinuates himself as an admired companion with Mrs Leo Hunter at her public breakfast, and as a prospective marriage partner with the Nupkins family, in both cases with a false identity.[65] He is a disruptor of what Pickwick would like to be an ordered, knowable and comprehensible, existence. He is disorder, chaos and anarchy.

He is also very enjoyable. We delight in his ability comically to subvert the control and order which Pickwick seeks not only to find, but has pretensions to impose. Jingle manipulates events and people, and even language itself in his style of speech, for his own comically chaotic ends with much more success than Pickwick does for his own orderly ends. He is energetic, vigorous and entertaining. He mocks Pickwick and his friends, revelling in the ambiguous and ambivalent world which reduces Pickwick to astonishment and confinement. He is an actor and a storyteller, able to recount what his auditors want to hear, whether tales of romance, sport, poetry or cricketing prowess, and able to take on whatever identity most suits him. His motivation is simple and nakedly material: money and food. As the chase of Jingle and Rachael by Wardle and Pickwick ends, temporarily, when the latter's vehicle overturns, Jingle's reference to, 'elderly gentlemen – no lightweights,' and his cheery, 'love to Tuppy,' as he drives off, are genuinely delightful deflations of Wardle's, and, especially, Pickwick's, ineffectual bourgeois attempt to regulate and control him.[66]

Jingle has to be a comic character. For Dickens, he represents the potency of the comic to challenge and disrupt what the bourgeois, rational and comfortable Pickwick believes he knows and understands. Jingle is not a cosy comic presence. He

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[65] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 187, p. 286, p. 428.
[66] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 195.

is anarchic, polymorphous and mutable. He is a threatening, uncontrollable and challenging potency. He embodies the world that Pickwick encounters on his travels. He is the force that makes Pickwick's quixoticism unworkable and that seeks his defeat.

Where Pickwick is the subject of comedy, Jingle is the Dickensian agent of comedy. He is the equivalent of Quixote's imaginary 'enchanter', who, Quixote believes, is responsible for giving the world its unromantic and unchivalric normality. Quixote's monomania creates castles instead of inns, and armies instead of sheep, but when they seem only to be inns and sheep, he explains the discrepancy through the enchanter, who conjures a reality which Quixote regards as false, but which all the other characters, as well as the reader, however regretfully, know to be the truth. For Don Quixote, this enchanter is the true enemy, the falsifier of reality, who not only accounts for the strange and terrible events of Don Quixote's life, but against whom the Don is truly battling. The imaginary enchanter is a threatening and alienating force.

Jingle, not imaginary, represents – with his polymorphous comic qualities, actually embodies – a similar unwelcome reality for Pickwick. It is a reality of greed, selfishness, disguise, deceit and an unstable and ambiguous materiality that characterises much of Pickwick's experience of the world. Jingle is a threatening and alienating reality, embodied as a comic reality, about which Pickwick is largely innocent, against which he must battle, Quixote-like, and about which he must learn. Comedy plays the corrective, disciplinary function, in the sense that Pickwick's quixoticism early in the novel is exposed to corrective ironising force, but comedy is also used to disrupt the world, as the radical epistemological uncertainty which Pickwick battles. Pickwick is in combat with comedy itself.

Pickwick is a Quixote, but the nature of his delusion is complex: it is not that he simply misreads the world, but that the world seems actively to resist him and his attempts to understand it. Dickens wrote in the tradition of the eighteenth-century comic novel, in the empirical tradition of Locke, and in that strand of thinking on comedy that goes back to Aristotle, where the physical is the means by which we can reason about, and understand, our world. The materiality of the human form holds moral lessons, as Jingle illustrates, and so, too, does the material topography of Dickens's comic world. Rather than Pickwick simply misreading the world, the world seems actively to deceive Pickwick. The very materiality of the world is comically in flux.

The worlds of the eighteenth-century comic novels of Dickens's childhood reading are worlds read through materiality. They are densely and vividly physical, and painstakingly detailed in both topographical and human terms, with moral significance given to the physical. These fictional worlds express an enlightenment concept of a universe that is open to investigation through picaresque exploration of its materiality,

through its bodily forms and shapes, through its sensual experiences, and through its geographies of travel, class and occupation. They express an empiricist reading of the world as the basis of rational understanding. This tradition of fiction is an exploration of the comic which is based on an empirical reading of the world and of morality and moral judgement. John Locke wrote, '[*e*]*xternal objects* furnish the mind with the ideas of sensible qualities, which are all those different perceptions they produce in us'.[67] For Locke, it is important to know the world from the evidence provided by its physicality and from the evidence which it presents to our senses, rather than to impose our ideas on the world, in the manner of a Quixote or a Pickwick, '[h]e that will suffer himself to be informed by observation and experience, and not make his own hypothesis the rule of nature'.[68]

Aristotle wrote about the comic as a function of the physical. He regarded the 'ridiculous', as, 'some form of error or ugliness', where, 'the comic mask [...] is distorted and ugly'.[69] Aristotle saw the comic as an aberration or a deviation, expressed as a physical deviation from a norm, though from a norm which is merely implied by Aristotle, rather than defined. It might be that we interpret Aristotle's remarks metaphorically, that the 'ugliness' of which he writes is a social or behavioural ugliness, an attitude of mind or a function of relationships: the mask might be ugly because it conceals, or distorts, truth. Nevertheless, he imagines it in starkly physical terms, and in a direct and uncomplicated fashion: ugly is comic. It is a severely judgemental explanation for what we find laughable and for why we laugh. We laugh at the aberrant because it is aberrant, and the purpose of our laughter must be, in some way, to correct that aberration, or, since the physical will not be changed by laughter, to isolate it, limit its significance, or diminish it. The Aristotelian tradition of comic theory, then, finds agreement with wider eighteenth-century thought.

Dickens's comedy is paradoxical. It is supportive of the Aristotelian concept of the comic as a functional corrective of aberration. But it is also subversive of that disciplinary concept. The material is no longer a clear basis for moral understanding. As Gordon argues in his reading of texts, such as *David Simple*, which oppose what he terms 'orthodox quixote narratives', and as Gordon and Martin argue in their placing of *Don Quixote* within problematised epistemology, the comic quixotic is capable of

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[67] John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed., Maurice Cranston (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 62. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[68] Locke, p. 67.
[69] Aristotle, 'On the Art of Poetry', *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T. S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 37.

profound epistemological challenge.[70] In the Dickensian comic world of *The Pickwick Papers*, it is not just Jingle who is representative of the radical threat to ordered understanding and rational thought. Far from the uncomplicated, consensually recognised 'reality' of the conventional quixote narrative, expressive of enlightenment empiricism around which characters other than the Quixote can cohere and to which the Quixote can return on their cure, there is only a shifting, unstable, aggressive and confusing comic world.

This is demonstrated in Pickwick's misadventure with the middle-aged lady in the doubled-bedded room at The Great White Horse in Ipswich in which Dickens emphasises the physical correlative of the confusion to which Pickwick becomes victim.[71] Significantly, Pickwick is not a victim here of his own quixotic delusion. There is comedy at his expense, but it is from a different source. Pickwick does not misread the evidence before him. Rather, on this occasion, the world deceives him through a material complexity that proves impossible for him to decode. Each corridor, room or stairway looks the same, and that failure, not of reading, but of useful meaning in what he reads, is what deceives him. The signifiers in this situation deny their signification.

This episode draws comedy from material confusion, from misplaced bodies, and from moral confusion, from the sexually innocent Pickwick in a compromising situation that derives from a deceptive physical, moral and political arrangement of the world. Dickens stresses the labyrinthine options and multiple errors caused by the internal layout of the inn: the stairs, the passages and the rooms. It is an environment that echoes the unstable materiality of Jingle: nowhere leads to a clear end, Pickwick could be anywhere, he understands nothing, and there seems no escape from physical confinement and social humiliation. As Jingle embodied deceptive materiality, so too, does the inn. It, like Jingle, embodies comedy. He fails to navigate the inn safely, as he fails to read Jingle accurately for much of the novel. Having eventually extracted himself from the room, he decides to wait out the night in the corridor in case the world, already confusingly hostile, becomes even more physically threatening, 'he stood every chance of being shot at, and, perhaps killed'.[72] This comedy highlights that the world

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[70] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 67. 'The quixote narratives on which this study focuses, however, disrupt this project, often by featuring innovative formal strategies that prevent readers from using the quixote figure, as these orthodox narratives encourage, to reaffirm their own epistemological superiority. Instead of allowing readers to differentiate themselves from an evidently deluded quixote figure, these narratives trick readers into seeing things as the quixote does [...] They leave readers unable to choose among alternatives; instead of offering readers a vantage point from which they can confidently know the 'real,' they deny readers any reliable ground from which to gain clear sight.' Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 6.

[71] *The Pickwick Papers*, Ch. 22, pp. 378-95.

[72] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 394.

Pickwick has set out to explore is a deceptive, confusing and hostile place, even to one of his extreme benevolence, a world in which, despite his respectable and charitable efforts, he can be thought a 'wretch', a sexual libertine, a breacher of promise and a drunk.[73] As Pickwick is battling comedy in the form of Jingle, so he is battling comedy in the form of a deceptive and unknowable materiality that comically betrays him from being what he is – benevolent and rational – to the appearance of what he is not – a sexual threat.

Dickens's exploration, then, of the material sense Pickwick can make of the world, goes beyond the eighteenth-century comic novel, and makes the relationship between the physical and the moral comically problematic. Dickens presents a comic world that is not just one of epistemological error, but of epistemological uncertainty, doubt and threat. And this comic world is a manifestation of a troubling emergent modernity: as that modern world is uncertain and threatening, so, too, is the comedy that characterises the world that Pickwick inhabits. Modernity was changing the world, and the physical world was where those changes were most apparent, even if the physical world was not where the most fundamental changes were taking place.

The physical world of *The Pickwick Papers* has been seen as an idyllic and nostalgic one, asserting an essentially conservative vision of England. Goetsch asserts that '*The Pickwick Papers* [...] is not firmly set in the nineteenth century', and that '*The Pickwick Papers* is a backward-looking novel [...] it largely evades the pressures and problems of contemporary society and leads its readers into a pre-industrial age'.[74] He contends that, with some minor exceptions, Dickens 'does not allow contemporary reality to invade and destroy Pickwick's idyllic circles.'[75] This study demonstrates that the novel engages adeptly with the contemporary reality of the early nineteenth century and its traumatic potencies and argues that Goetsch's view limits the potential for the novel to be seen as concerned with emergent modernity.

Dickens set the opening of *The Pickwick Papers* in the year 1827.[76] It was a different world from the troubled modernity that was to figure in his later fiction: a comic world of coaches, horses, public eating, inns, and picaresque travel, recognisably the world of the eighteenth-century novel of Dickens's childhood reading, rather than the heavily urbanised and commercialised Victorian world of his later novels. It is also recognisably the predominantly rural world of *Don Quixote*, of travel by horse and coach and accommodation in inns, not the Victorian world of railways, factories and

[73] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 393.
[74] Goetsch, p. 155, p. 156.
[75] Goetsch, p. 155.
[76] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 67.

slums. And yet, into this apparently nostalgic, conservative, pre-industrial world, an idyll appropriate for an innocent protagonist, modernity emerges, with its destructive potencies. In the early nineteenth century the physical, material world was being transformed by the powers of commerce, industrialisation and urbanisation, and those powers transformed the humanity that inhabited that physical world.

The landscape of Pickwick's journey to Birmingham is a powerful contrast to the pleasantly rural, or gently urbanised, landscape of much of *The Pickwick Papers.*[77] The description is brief, but it is a powerfully physical one. It describes a noisy, dirty and frightening landscape that is 'dingy', and 'murky', with 'dense smoke', which is 'blackening and obscuring everything around.'[78] The fires of furnaces have a 'lurid, sullen light' which 'blazed fiercely'; human beings are absent, present only by implication, in their, 'straggling cottages', or they are an urban mass, '[t]he streets thronged with working people', and, '[t]he hum of labour.'[79] The activity is mechanical and noisy: 'the whirl of wheels and the noise of machinery [...] the great works and factories [...] the din of hammers [...] the dead heavy clanking of engines'.[80] Pickwick meets Mr Winkle Senior, the 'man of business', who seems to embody the new commercial and industrial realities.[81] He is as obdurate as the 'clashing rods of iron' of his town, and he expresses disdain for the marriage between his son and Arabella Allen in commercial terms, 'I never bargained for this.'[82]

These streets represent the physical changes, and Mr Winkle senior the wider social and cultural changes, that industrialised capitalism was bringing to Britain. Throughout the country, places were bending and warping, their streets and buildings transformed from the scattered and rural, into the physical forms of a modern, heavily industrialised and urbanised capitalist economy. Although this description is not comic, it points to an important relationship between Dickens's comic writing and his imaginative response to the world of the nineteenth century. Dickens writes of the physical, of objects, people, animals, and, even, of abstractions given metaphorical physical form; he writes of towns, buildings, streets, rivers and of the means of travelling between them: coaches, carts and boats; he writes of clothes and food, bodies, fat and thin, young and old, the living and the dying and the dead. The physical world Dickens portrays is distorted, mutated and misshapen. It is a physical world which is often ambiguous, ambivalent or subversive. He writes of a physicality that, often as a

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[77] *The Pickwick Papers*, Ch. 50, pp. 793-808.
[78] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 801.
[79] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 801.
[80] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 801.
[81] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 808.
[82] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 808.

consequence of his distortion of it, is comic, and which, whether comic or not, bears a moral weight.

Goetsch asserts that '[t]he worlds in which Cervantes' and Dickens's characters move differ considerably from one another.'[83] This assertion is only superficially correct. Despite the separation of the times of their composition by over two hundred years, the social, economic and cultural contexts of *Don Quixote* and *The Pickwick Papers* are close. Both novels are about conflict with emergent industry and commerce. Many of Don Quixote's most memorable encounters are with the material manifestations of commerce, transformed, in his imagination, into monsters. He encounters windmills, which, to him become monsters, and the fearful noise of the hammers of the fulling mill at night becomes, similarly, the noise of a monster.[84]

Pickwick's encounters with business are more human than mechanical. Pickwick seeks to persuade Mr Winkle senior of the rightness of his son's marriage to Arabella Allen, and finds a resistance, initially, from this self-described, 'man of business.'[85] Pickwick's main problem, however, is his relationship with Dodson and Fogg, Mrs Bardell's solicitors, who are referred to constantly as excellent, though hard, men of business, for instance by Lowton, who describes 'sharp practice their's – capital men of business,' and whose threat to Pickwick is not finally concluded until he settles their 'statement of profit and loss.'[86] His battle with Dodson and Fogg, ineffectual and self-defeating as it is in many ways, is similar to Don Quixote's own battle with the windmills. As Quixote transforms windmills into monsters, Pickwick transforms Dodson and Fogg into social monsters, what he terms 'great scoundrels,' and 'mean, rascally, pettifogging robbers,' whereas they are merely agents of a vigorous, professional, capitalism.[87] Pickwick and Don Quixote see agents of commerce as monstrous, and in both cases their battles are in vain.

Here, then, is an indication that Dickens's absorption of the comic world of *Don Quixote*, encapsulates, as that novel does for Cervantes, a comic artistic response to contemporary concerns. B. W. Ife notes that Cervantes was writing at a time of enormous social change brought about by the growth of early modern capitalism.[88] He describes the impact of a growing international empire, cultural diversity, reform of a corrupt church, the growth of universities, the impact of centuries of civil conflict, and

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[83] Goetsch, p. 154
[84] *Don Quixote*, p. 63, p. 162.
[85] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 807.
[86] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 358, p. 845.
[87] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 512, p. 847.
[88] B. W. Ife, 'The Historical and Social Context', *The Cambridge Companion to Cervantes*, ed., Anthony J. Cascardi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 11-31, p. 11, pp. 26-7. All subsequent references are to this edition.

the emergence of an urban underclass as Cervantes's society, largely rural, became increasingly urbanised.[89]

Elliot Engel and Margaret King point out that Dickens's early writing, too, is placed at a time of economic and social turmoil, as capitalism became increasingly industrialised and urbanised.[90] The troubled character of emerging modernity was expressed throughout the 1820s and 1830s in uprisings, riots and repression, political dissent, pressure for reform, fear of revolution and gradual concessions, such as the 1832 Reform Acts.[91] The period in which Dickens's early fiction was composed and set was a dynamic and troubled one and *The Pickwick Papers* and *Don Quixote* deal with attempts by the eponymous characters to investigate and rationalise troubled and changing worlds. While *The Pickwick Papers* is not a searching examination of emergent capitalism, in the sense that *Dombey and Son* was to be later a searching examination of established capitalism, nevertheless, emergent capitalism is the context for the world of the novel. The nature of the transition to modern commercial and industrial reality is figured as a transformation of material reality, demonstrated by the description of Birmingham: the transformation of country towns into smoky cities.

Dickens scrutinises the world of the eighteenth-century comic novel from the perspective of new uncertainties and complexities, and the consequence is Pickwick's comic failure of understanding across a range of knowledge, including the language in which that knowledge is expressed. The tools at his disposal with which to scrutinise the material, the physical and the empirical, his spectacles, telescope and his notebook, seem comically inadequate as means to explore the complicated, deceptive and unsettling world that he finds around him. Sam Weller seems to grasp this fact. In response to a question at the trial, Sam points out the failure of the human scale, by implication Pickwick's spectacles and his telescope, in comparison to the new realities ushered in by industrial advance,

> 'Yes, I have a pair of eyes,' replied Sam, 'and that's just it. If they wos a pair o' patent double million magnifyin' gas microscopes of hextra power, p'raps I might be able to see through a flight o' stairs and a deal door; but bein' only eyes, you see, my wision's limited.'[92]

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[89] Ife, p. 25, p. 28.

[90] Elliot Engel and Margaret F. King, *The Victorian Novel Before Victoria: British Fiction During the Reign of William IV 1830-1837* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984). All subsequent references are to this edition.

[91] Engel and King, pp. 2-4. John Bowen also explores the relationship between *The Pickwick Papers* and its economic and political context and concludes 'the book seems to for the most part to be indifferent to politics, concerned to create a discursive space above and beyond them.' However, he goes on to conclude, '[t]he possibility of political change haunts the fringes of the novel, however, and the novel shares with its Romantic precursors an interest in radical social change.' John Bowen, *Other Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 76-7.

[92] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 573.

The transformation of the quixotic into the Pickwickian leads to a further fundamental comic interrogation of reality. Quixoticism is essentially an act of reading, and language lies at its heart. The conventional Quixote misreads a reality that is otherwise agreed, but in the Dickensian comic quixotic, language itself develops into a key site of misreading, a linguistic reality that is far from stable and reliable but which is shifting and threatening. The series of episodes consequent on his supposed proposal of marriage to Mrs Bardell consists of a range of mutual misunderstandings and misreading of linguistic evidence, some deliberate and contrived, some innocent, in which what he says, what Mrs Bardell hears, and how her collapse into his arms is interpreted, are the elements in an absurd comic drama of failed linguistic interpretation. At the core of the trial of Bardell against Pickwick is the failure of language to convey true meaning without ambiguity. Language, like the comic topography of the inn at Ipswich, or like the comic character Jingle, becomes shifting, unstable and unreliable and again it is not Pickwick's quixoticism which is a threat to the world around him, but the world around him which is a threat to him.

The law, in theory, has a mission which is similar to Pickwick's own scientific mission, of gathering data and interpreting it. Serjeant Buzfuz, for instance, refers to his wish to tell the jury about the, 'facts and circumstances,' of the case.[93] Pickwick finds that the law, a social institution which, like science, should be most concerned with the correct interpretation of empirical evidence, and the identification of moral truth, serves only to complicate and multiply the confusions and misunderstandings which already characterise his failures. The opposition lawyers, Dodson and Fogg, and Serjeant Buzfuz, deliberately contrive to ensure that the jury misread the evidence that is presented to them. Trickery and deceit, acting and disguise, can create potent meanings just as effectively, if not more so, than honesty, benevolence and moral rectitude.

Welsh asserts that *The Pickwick Papers* demonstrates the beginning of Dickens's lifelong obsession with the inadequacy of human institutions, but the key aspect of the law is that it operates, as most institutions do, through language.[94] The key evidence, and the most extreme case of the manipulation of evidence during the trial, is linguistic. Serjeant Buzfuz's interpretation of Pickwick's notes to Mrs Bardell is profoundly, though comically, unbalanced. These notes have a simple surface meaning, relating to Pickwick's domestic arrangements. Serjeant Buzfuz creates an imaginary set of double meanings, which are comically surreal, from the flimsiest of evidence,

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[93] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 559.
[94] Welsh, *Reflections on the Hero as Quixote*, p. 108.

> 'Chops! Gracious heavens! and Tomata sauce! Gentlemen, is the happiness of a sensitive and confiding female to be trifled away, by such shallow artifices'.[95]

In another note, a warming pan becomes, 'a mere cover for a hidden fire.'[96] Serjeant Buzfuz, unlike Pickwick, is aware of the nature of evidence: that it does not have a fixed meaning which can be easily determined through the calm application of reason. His rhetorical question to the jury about the notes, 'Gentlemen, what does this mean?', can only lead us to conclude that evidence, in the hands of a lawyer, at least, means whatever he wants it to mean, however false or absurd that meaning may be.[97]

Again, Pickwick is not a quixotic misreader, but a victim of the misreading of others. He does not exercise a quixotic ability to manipulate meaning in the world, but is the subject of others' ability to manipulate meaning. Pickwick is attacked by the ideological control of meaning by powerful others, and the result is comic at his expense. Crucially, and paradoxically, it is his own language which is comically in the power of others, whether his domestic notes to Mrs Bardell, or his musings about whether to engage a man servant. Again, he is battling comedy itself, as he was with Jingle and as he was in the inn, this time comedy figured in the unstable meanings of his own words.

Paradoxically, Dickens also comically celebrates that unstable and threatening reality. Pickwick, the quixotic misreader and victim of misreading, becomes also the promoter of misreading. The inscribed stone which Pickwick finds in Cobham is a further demonstration of his failure to read, literally, the evidence which the world presents to him. It is a modern artefact but Pickwick imposes on it an antiquarian past. The stone has what he believes to be 'a strange and curious inscription of unquestionable antiquity,' and he regards it as a 'treasure.'[98] He asserts the need for a proper examination of the stone, the application of orderly procedures, and to rational scientific conclusions, '[t]his treasure must be at once deposited where it can be thoroughly investigated, and properly understood.'[99] Pickwick is oblivious in his enthusiasm to the fact that the stone was carved in an idle moment by the cottager who sold it to him, and that its meaning is actually inscribed on it, for all to see: 'BIL STUMPS HIS MARK'.[100]

Nor is this misreading benign in its implications, as so much of the misreading of the novel is not benign. We learn of the comically vast complications that follow

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[95] *The Pickwick Papers*, pp. 562-3.
[96] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 563.
[97] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 562.
[98] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 217.
[99] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 217.
[100] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 217.

Pickwick's presentation of the stone to the Pickwick Club, his theories on the origin of the stone, and the consequent debate surrounding its meaning, which lead to international correspondence, three disinherited sons, a suicide, and the 'celebrated scientific discussion so well known to all men, as the Pickwick controversy.'[101] Pickwick blinds himself, comically, to the obvious in his pursuit of the obscure and loses his understanding of the present in a futile pursuit of a false past, 'Mr Pickwick himself wrote a Pamphlet, containing ninety-six pages of very small print, and twenty-seven different readings.'[102]

The stone is a comic signifier of failed signification. And yet this episode is not simply the application of corrective laughter at the expense of the Quixote's delusional misreading. In fact, it is the false reading which is asserted, the failed signification which Dickens allows to triumph, and it is the conveyer of the truth who is defeated. Dickens's narrator champions and celebrates the absurd misreading because it celebrates 'the mysterious and the sublime'.[103] Mr Blotton, who plays the role of those in the Quixote narrative who combat the delusional reality, expresses 'the doubt and cavilling peculiar to vulgar minds', has a 'mean desire to tarnish' Pickwick's reputation, and is 'presumptuous and ill-conditioned'.[104] Mr Blotton unpleasantly asserts a utilitarian and quotidian reality, though there can be no doubt that he is correct in his reading, and Pickwick mistaken. There is undoubtedly comedy at Pickwick's expense. But Dickens uses the Cobham stone not as a comic corrective of Pickwick's false reading, but as a comic assertion of the false reading, as a celebration of error. Far from being simply a disciplinary imperative, Dickens's conceptualisation of comedy asserts an epistemological vision of misreading as inevitable, with the potential to be harmful, but also with the potential to celebrate something more important than mere quotidian factuality: romance, idealism and the joy of discovery. There is a truth towards which the conventional quixotic drives, but Dickens celebrates an alternative comic truth in which Pickwick seems the victor. Mr Blotton discovers the truth that we think of as 'reality' and he presents it to the Pickwick Club in the manner expected of the enlightened scientist, but he is presented as the lesser man despite, in fact because of, his discovery. The stone that should signify truth signifies an alternative more positive than truth, paradoxically the outcome of failed meaning, 'to this day the stone remains an illegible monument of Mr Pickwick's greatness, and a lasting trophy of the littleness of his enemies.'[105]

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[101] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 229.
[102] *The Pickwick Papers*, pp. 227-8.
[103] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 228.
[104] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 228.
[105] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 229.

The Pickwick Papers, then, is not a simple story of a Quixote cured. It ridicules not Pickwick, but Pickwick's trust in the Enlightenment; it parodies not the quixotic, but the conventionally quixotic attempt to assert that misreading the world is aberrant, where, as the world moves into a troubled and troubling modernity, misreading is inevitable. The novel explores the way that the world of the eighteenth-century comic novel is giving way to a more troubling and more nightmarish nineteenth-century world, where reality itself does not submit to rational examination and does not offer us evidence on which we can reliably formulate our understandings. While there is laughter at the expense of the Pickwickian Quixote, the deployment of comedy is much more than a simple corrective. In the Dickensian comic formulation, the delusions of the Quixote are shown to be desirable.

In contrast to Pardo's vision of confinement, Pickwick's vision of his quixotic quest at the start of the novel is an attractive one of freedom and exploration, both physical and philosophical, in which travel, the opposite of confinement, results in expansion of the mind, of understanding and of learning, 'extending his travels and consequently enlarging his sphere of observation, to the advancement of knowledge and the diffusion of learning.'[106] Pickwick sets out with an endearing enthusiasm and ambition to extend knowledge and he characterises his quest in terms of release from mental confinement. On the morning that he departs on his travels, he views the limits of Goswell Street and reflects on the, 'narrow views of those philosophers,' who fail to explore widely, in contrast with his own intentions to, 'penetrate the hidden countries.'[107]

We recognise Pickwick's delusional quixoticism, but we are drawn into complicity with it. We admire it and we wish his ideals were true. Dickens's deployment of comedy draws us into a complex relationship with Pickwick. We laugh at Pickwick, but the comedy draws us also to defend him from the forces that cause him to be laughed at. In an appropriately Dickensian comic inversion, it is as if the 'real' world is wrong, and the quixotic Pickwick right. Significantly, by the end, Jingle loses his comedic potency in the face of Pickwick's benignity: the embodiment of comedy is subdued by Pickwick. We enjoyed the vitality of Jingle's anarchic role, but he is ultimately conquered by Pickwick's values, even if those other falsifiers of Pickwickian values, Dodson and Fogg are not.

We do not sympathise with Don Quixote in the same way that we sympathise with Pickwick by the end of the novel. While *Don Quixote* ends in finality, and with a sense of loss, *The Pickwick Papers* ends, if not with victory for Pickwick, and a new

[106] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 67.
[107] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 73.

dispensation forged on his ideals, at least with a sense of his values and aspirations to benevolence, friendship, family and celebration intact, and even thriving. Pickwick's great enemies, the most profound and systematised falsifiers of true meaning in Pickwick's world, Dodson and Fogg, are still in robust business health. On the other hand, there are several generic comic happy endings: the restitution of Winkle to the favour of his father, the marriages of Sam and Mary, and of Winkle and Arabella, the appearance of children, and the moral reform of Bob Sawyer, Benjamin Allen, Jingle and Trotter. In an ironic, but wholly appropriate and positive, way, the 'immortal' subject of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* is still alive at the end.[108]

We know that the world is not a medieval romance, but we do wish, like Pickwick perhaps, that it were benign and rational. By the end of the novel we do not regard him as a fool, even if we were tempted to think of him as one initially. He wants – expected to find – a world governed by rationality and benevolence. Who would not? We are sorry that it is not so ordered, and while we laugh at this sad truth we are implicated willingly by our laughter in his quixotism. *The Pickwick Papers* seems to be a 'Quixote-cured' narrative, but the comic mode deployed by Dickens makes it much more. We have an ambivalent attitude to Pickwick: we feel that his quixoticism, even while we may laugh at it and enjoy its deflation, is an ideal in a murky world. As Jingle is the enjoyably comedic challenge to Pickwick, the corrective and often punitive force who represents the nature of the truth of the world, yet he is wrong, and Pickwick is right, for all the mockery at his expense. Comedy does not allow us an easy choice.

Reading and misreading are at the heart of the quixotic.[109] They are the cause of quixoticism and they are the effects. As Gordon points out, the quixotic is a result of the Quixote's misreading of works of literature, in which he, or she, mistakes the literary for the real.[110] Don Quixote mistakes medieval chivalric romances and Arabella, in *The Female Quixote*, mistakes French romances, for what the characters who surround them regard as the 'correct' reading of the world. Reading is the process by which the quixotic comes to be, but it is also the process which manifests the quixotic when the Quixote's mistaken reading is applied to what other characters, and the reader, regard as reality. Gordon argues, in his discussion of non-orthodox quixote narratives, such as Sarah Fielding's *David Simple*, that the quixotic extends beyond relatively

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[108] *The Pickwick Papers,* p. 67.

[109] Gordon also identifies 'over-readers' who, in the context of literary criticism 'like quixotes – misrecognize things they have themselves created (patterns, paradoxes, parallels, coherences) as actually present in the reality'. Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 1.

[110] 'Viewing the world through a generic lens that their reading has deposited in their heads, quixotes see what is not really there: they mistake their imagination's own products as real phenomena [...] quixotes think they simply *find* the world that, as others can see, their quixotic imagination *makes* or calls into existence.' Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 1.

straightforward epistemologically conservative 'Quixote cured' narratives which suppose a simple understanding of a mistaken Quixote and an agreed reality.[111] The quixotic, then, lies at the heart of our relationship with our understanding of the world.

The Pickwick Papers is a meta-narrative about reading and misreading. Pickwick is a foolishly mistaken misreader of the world. However, others misread Pickwick, too: as a fool, a breacher of promise, a drunk and a sexual libertine. Those who read Pickwick are as mistaken about him as he is about them. Like Pickwick, they, too, are foolishly in error. If the quixotic is a function of reading and misreading, then *The Pickwick Papers* is an act of mutual misreading. Dickens transforms the quixotic in the way that Gordon identifies, moving beyond an epistemological conservatism to a radical epistemological discourse where knowledge and understanding of reality are far from unproblematic. Pickwick becomes an artefact that is misread, a Cobham stone in others' misreading, accidental or deliberate. A failed reader of evidence, Pickwick becomes evidence which others then misread. He misunderstands. In turn, he is misunderstood by others. The Dickensian comic world becomes almost surreal in the comic interplay between false readings, faulty comprehension, failed rationality and the collapse of meaning. And it is the nature of the comic that makes it ideal for the exploration of that problematic knowledge and understanding.

Dickens's comedy, rooted in the comic fictional tradition, but, also, looking ahead, and responding to the new demands of a rapidly changing world, was the ideal mode in which to carry out that interrogation. For Dickens, comedy is a flexible mode, in which the nature of objects, places and people, their forms and their behaviour, are most easily shaped, reformulated or manipulated to comic effect. It is a mode which Dickens used to question fundamental aspects of how the nineteenth century was emerging and to probe the new cultural, moral and political realities which were being forged.

The quixotic is a comic meta-narrative about reading and understanding the world. In its conventional form it is a process of discipline that regulates the reading and interpretation of reality to the epistemologically sanctioned. *The Pickwick Papers* is a riposte to the moral dynamic that asserts a true 'reality' from which the Quixote has foolishly deviated. Dickens asserts a comic mode that is not just a regulatory, satiric force, but is also expressive of the world that the Quixote seeks to understand. The world is not a sensible, rational reality that the Pickwickian Quixote has misread, and

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[111] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 13. Gordon concludes that 'we cannot help but view the world through presuppositions but also that we are better off when we do so.' p. 67. Writing of *David Simple*, Gordon asserts, '[t]he novel shows that while experiencing, none of these characters recognize the preconstructed nature of their experiences. Indeed the figure of the quixote [...] challenges the capacity for clear sight'. p. 81.

then, when disciplined, has begun to read correctly. It is a chaotic, irrational world, misread as ordered and rational by a Quixote who is moral, noble and benign. The comic truth is that such misreading, in which the Quixote sees the world as ordered and rational, is not only desirable but essential to the health of society and the individual. His quixoticism appears neither sensible nor supportable, but that is because of the nature of the world, not the nature of the Quixote. The Quixote is as much a victim of the manipulation of meaning by others for their own selfish purposes, as he is a foolish imposer of meaning himself. Reality is not a neutral space in which we act, and which the Quixote foolishly mistakes. It is at the command of those with the power – ideological, political, cultural – to determine what it means.

The comedy of *The Pickwick Papers* sets the agenda for Dickens's subsequent comic writing. It looks back to a tradition of comic fiction, and forward to the modern context in which that tradition now finds itself. It is, therefore, both conservative and radical in a distinctively Dickensian way. *The Pickwick Papers* is a novel in which the comic mode is used to interrogate a disturbing modernity, to indicate the inadequate modes of thought used for that interrogation, and to transform the modalities of the eighteenth-century picaresque and quixotic novel. Rationality, meaning and language itself collapse into the false, the faulty and the failed. In that process it becomes a comic meta-narrative about failed reading.

Comedy is not merely what results from comic fiction: comedy is what makes the fiction powerful. Comedy interrogates and challenges. It points to what we must overcome. Comedy is like Jingle, moving and manifesting, changing and disappearing and reappearing. Dickens challenges and problematises the material and the moral and thus transforms the comic worlds of his childhood reading. In Dickens's hands, the comedy of the eighteenth-century comic novel responds to emergent modernity: it becomes a mode of dissociation, contrast, incongruity and alienation. Dickensian comedy succeeds in redirecting eighteenth-century comic fiction, discharging 'the quixotic trope against the very value of rationality it commonly serves'.[112]

[112] Gordon, *The Practice of Quixotism*, p. 168.

Chapter Two

Dickens and the Nineteenth-Century Comic Response to the Machine.

'His doing it for profit is no excuse.'[1]

It is a lamentable truth that almost all theoreticians about comedy, wit, and humour wind up holding views that a majority of people would fail totally to recognize as having anything to do with what they had always assumed those words meant.[2]

Dickens and the Criticism of Nineteenth-Century Comic Theory

The first chapter of this study demonstrated a Dickensian comic mode that is disturbing, alienating and questioning and that placed it within a radical approach to our ability to know and understand our world. Dickens recast his literary inheritance into an exploration and a paradoxical celebration of a loss of the potency of reason in the material, empirical world, and a consequent weakening of the means to rationalise and to understand the world. He showed that the world was more complex and more resistant than Pickwick's means to understand and control it and that comedy was the appropriate mode to enact and to embody that complexity and resistance. This chapter continues the key ideas of the paradoxical nature of Dickensian laughter: that it can be a conservative and disciplinary force, corrective of aberration, but that it can also be a force with a radical power to agitate and unsettle.

This chapter also develops the position formulated in Chapter 1: that Dickens's comic fiction is responsive to emergent modernity, by placing it within a nineteenth-century theoretical context of comedy, comparing and contrasting with other formulations of comedy from leading theorists of his age. Thomas Carlyle, George Meredith, Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud all responded in comparable ways, largely hostile, to the particular nature of emergent nineteenth-century industrialised capitalism, and their responses informed their writing on humour and comedy. Bergson and Freud are key figures in this debate because of their prominent place in the cultural history of thought on the comic, Meredith for the formulation of comic theory by a comic writer who was a near contemporary and Carlyle as a theorist of the comic and also a comic writer who is recognised as an important influence on Dickens.[3] This process of critical

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[1] Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, (1841), ed., Gordon Spence, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 158. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[2] Robert Bernard Martin, *The Triumph of Wit: A Study of Victorian Comic Theory*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 57. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[3] The influence of Carlyle on Dickens is explored in William Oddie's study *Dickens and Carlyle The Question of Influence*, (London, The Centenary Press, 1972). Oddie's focus is the ideological influence of Carlyle rather than a critical examination of aesthetic method, such as

investigation of the Dickensian comic alongside others who not only shared the context of emergent nineteenth-century modernity but who also thought about the response of comedy to that modernity, will produce new ways of understanding Dickens's comedy and why he chose it as a fictional mode among his other modes.

Dickens's comedy has been misplaced by critics who have ignored the importance of the nineteenth-century cultural context of the comic. The nature of the comic, and how it responded to the changing nature of the troubled and troubling world that was emerging in the nineteenth century, was an important subject of contemporary critical discourse. An important feature of that discourse was the concept of comedy as a corrective to the distortions, moral, social, psychological, physical and cultural, which those writers saw as characteristic of the era. The nineteenth century, as Stuart Tave and Bernard Martin show, was a period which contested the nature and purpose of the comic.[4] Taken together, their texts narrate a transition from a witty, intellectual and satirical role for the comic during the eighteenth century, to a genial, gentle humour in the early to mid nineteenth century, and back again by the late nineteenth century. Tave summarises the argument of his exploration,

> [i]n Restoration theory of comedy [...] it was a commonplace that the function of comedy is to copy the foolish and knavish originals of the age, and to expose, ridicule, satirize them. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it was commonplace that the best comic works present amiable originals, often models of good nature, whose little peculiarities are not satirically instructive, but objects of delight and love.[5]

Martin examines the wide range of texts published during the nineteenth century which theorised the comic, and he uses them to support his thesis about the ultimate 'triumph of wit':

> the general late-Victorian acceptance of the propriety of a comedy that is basically intellectual, witty, incongruous [...] springing from the totally engaged processes of the mind,

a triumph which he advocates,

> if comedy was to pull itself out of the sentiment in which it had been wallowing, and if it was to represent anything like the totality of man's nature.[6]

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style, characterisation or the deployment of the comic mode. His discussion of Harthouse, for instance, does not raise the issue of the character's comedic role and what that brings to our understanding of Dickens's purposes. p. 59.

[4] Stuart Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). All subsequent references are to this edition.

[5] Tave, p. viii. Quoted Martin, p. 26.

[6] Martin, p. 98, p. 100.

Both Tave's and Martin's analyses are dated but both represent, through their comprehensive coverage, important contributions to understanding the cultural pressures at work on the comic during the period of Dickens's fiction. However, Martin's thesis is weakened by the limitation of his terms of reference to the ground contested by the majority of the theorists he examines: that of the balance, or the battle, between, 'wit' and 'humour', and also by his clear advocacy of the superiority of 'wit' as the basis of comic fiction. It also ignores the profound changes which the nineteenth century brought to the context in which the comedy was produced, as if the theoretical debates he follows happened in isolation from the culture which they express, and from a culture in a process of change. Furthermore, Martin's account is curiously text free, and argues almost exclusively from a theoretical position based on the theoretical positions of others. He does not, as this study does, test theory against actual comic texts.

This study does not seek to engage in the debate between 'wit' and 'humour', which Martin demonstrates that the Victorians exhausted. However, the biggest problem with the debate is that Dickens was all too easily, and incorrectly, positioned within Martin's framework of 'wit' and 'humour'. Martin highlights in turn Leigh Hunt's characterisation of Dickens's comedy as 'the vein of tenderness', Thackeray's citation of Dickens as one of the writers who, 'confer benefit by their sermons' and Martin sneers at Thackeray's characterisation of Dickens's fiction as 'the feast of love and kindness which this gentle, and generous, and charitable soul has contributed to the happiness of the world'.[7] Both the contemporary nineteenth-century framework and the critical framework articulated by Martin, express a formulation of a Dickensian genial humour and shows it to contrast poorly with clear-eyed intellectual wit which Martin champions. This study demonstrates that characterisations of Dickens's comedy as benign and genial are mistaken because they severely limit the actual impact of his comic mode.

A modern study of nineteenth-century comedy, edited by Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, *The Victorian Comic Spirit*, explores comedy as expressive of class, gender, race and nationalist tensions within nineteenth-century society.[8] Wagner-Lawlor's collection asserts the important ideological role that comedy plays within culture, the

> dynamic of opposing voices [...] a dialogic interchange between the humorous text and its culture [...] humorous and comic representations function politically by revealing contradictions in ideological discourses, by exposing repressed illogicalities and prejudices.[9]

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[7] Martin, p. 75, p. 80, p. 81.
[8] Jennifer A.Wagner-Lawlor, 'Introduction', *The Victorian Comic Spirit: New Perspectives*, ed., Jennifer A.Wagner-Lawlor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. xiii-xx, p. xvi. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[9] Wagner-Lawlor, p. xvi.

This study builds on the recognition that Wagner-Lawlor's collection makes of 'Victorian humour as [...] politically and ideologically engaged', based on the principle that Wagner-Lawlor recognises in her quotation of Umberto Eco, of 'humor as a 'form of social criticism' by means of its challenging of cultural codes.'[10] While the texts analysed in Wagner-Lawlor's collection are from the nineteenth century, including one study of *Hard Times*, the theoretical framework is a twentieth-century one, particularly Bakhtinian and Derridean.[11] In particular Wagner-Lawlor's collection does not recognise that comedy may have a range of paradoxical and contradictory cultural forms and purposes. It may be socially engaged and politically radical, but it may equally function as a socially conservative, disciplinary and corrective force against social and cultural tensions which are being created by emergent modernity.

What this study does, in contrast to those studies by Tave and Martin and the study edited by Wagner-Lawlor, is to place the study of Dickensian comedy within an analytical framework of the nineteenth-century theories of comedy. Tave and Martin do this, but they do not apply that analytical framework to Dickensian texts in detail, and they are also focused on 'wit' and 'humour'. Wagner-Lawlor's collection does focus on texts, one of which is Dickensian, but applies twentieth-century ideological concerns to the discussion.

Monstrous Pleasures: Why Did Dickens Write Comedy?

Dickensian comedy is intimately connected with the nature of modernity, and his attitude towards it coincides with the other contemporary thinkers on comedy discussed in this chapter. The dominant force in that modernity was the establishment of an urbanised and industrialised capitalism. Capitalism is a set of processes which function to transform the world. It takes raw materials – iron, coal, water, human labour – and changes their form. It forces them through processes in which they may, for instance, be hammered, heated, cut, twisted, pressured, stressed or warped, processes which may be repeated or combined, as the raw materials are built into something new, whether a spoon or a steam engine. The originating materials may, almost certainly will, be changed out of all recognition, forced into new shapes, new functions, new combinations and new modes of being. Their destruction may be part of the process.

Capitalism also functions in less physically manipulative processes, such as letting accommodation or lending money at interest but in these cases, too, it is,

[10] Wagner-Lawlor, p. xiv.
[11] Wagner-Lawlor, p. xvi.

primarily, distinguished by its transformative power, the ability it possesses to turn something into something else, if only at its most basic level, to turn 'capital' into 'profit.' These transformative processes are also processes of commodification, of the production of objects for the purposes of commerce or trade, whether spoon or steam engine, shelter or profit. The raw materials lose their original identity and become subsumed into newness: they become an object or part of an object; they also lose their distinctiveness and they become different to what they were. We call these processes industry, manufacturing, commerce and trade. They are all economies of transformation.

Within both processes, of transformation and commodification, are living human beings, who both function inside them, and, yet, are also subject to them. Human beings, as owners of capital, may oversee or control the processes and systems; as managers or workers, they may operate them; as consumers of goods and services, they may be the subjects of them. People function as part of the processes of transformation and commodification, but they are also subject to those processes, becoming materials which are themselves transformed, and themselves commodified, by the potencies of industrial capitalism. Like the other raw materials, they may lose their original identity and become subsumed into something new, something different or something 'other.' They, too, may become like an object or part of an object and they may, too, lose their distinctiveness and become something else.

In Dickens's fiction, human beings, one of the raw materials of the capitalist process, are shown, like the other raw materials, to be subject to the transformative compulsions, the brute force, the necessities and the imperatives, of capitalism. Like them, too, they are warped, stressed, damaged, malformed, and deformed. There are many Dickensian characters who are physically damaged, having suffered the loss, for instance, of legs or eyes.[12] However, it is his exploration of the mental scars, malformations and deformations and his interrogation of the damage done to the psyche, of which the physical damage is often emblematic, that become increasingly important. His characters become subjected to, but also implicated in, the social, political and economic realities of increasingly powerful economies of transformation and commodification, and their bodies, but also, importantly their minds, bear the scars.

Dickens is not an industrial novelist of the factory and the shop floor, as Elizabeth Gaskell can be. He is not a novelist of the urban proletariat, of the broad mass

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[12] Squeers is one-eyed, Wegg is one-legged, and Captain Cuttle has a hook in place of a missing hand. Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), ed., Michael Slater (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 90. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed., Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 87-8. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed., Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 45. All subsequent references are to these editions.

of industrial workers, although he does depict urban, working-class crowds vividly in *Barnaby Rudge*, *The Pickwick Papers* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. He is a novelist of the financial and commercial rather than the industrial; the capitalism of the banker, the money lender, the landlord, the small entrepreneur, and the innkeeper. His workers are clerks, small tradesmen and women, apprentices and servants. His characters earn, borrow, or lend money; they have it and are at risk of losing it, or they need it. Capitalism in Dickens has no single locus of operation but ranges widely across small workshops, offices, shops and counting houses to include its operation within the family and the home and thereby to its impact on the individual mind. Dickens's comic imagination responds to the decentred nature of these forms of nineteenth-century capitalism. For Dickens capitalism is as much a system of thought as it is a system of exchange, an episteme as much as a proletarian crowd.

This is demonstrated by *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) which is set in the 1770s, before the Victorian era of industrial capitalism.[13] Varden's workshop is, on a small scale, a site of capitalism, although of craft, rather than of mass, production, and therefore can be seen as an emblem of emergent capitalism, and of the small scale capitalism often depicted by Dickens. Varden's craft is lock making, a craft emblematic of the need within capitalist societies for securing control over access, particularly to wealth and, as becomes significant later in the novel, for securing control over access to people and property.[14] In *Barnaby Rudge*, there are two comic characters who are economically dependent on the capitalism of the Varden household: Simon Tappertit, Varden's apprentice, and Miss Miggs, the servant.

Tappertit ironically acknowledges, and thus consciously expresses, his economic dependence on the Varden household in the exaggerated pomposity of his overly subservient reply to Varden's information that breakfast is ready, ''I shall attend you immediately,'' which he delivers with, 'amazing politeness, and a peculiar little bow.'[15] The extent of his dependence is indicated by the breakfast which Varden calls him to. Varden, by no means an exploitative capitalist, and his daughter, Dolly, preside over the food and drink, and while there is plenty of it, Tappertit is entitled to enjoy it only because he is Varden's apprentice. Significantly, there is no indication that Tappertit eats during the meal, while there is a vivid passage which describes Varden's enjoyment of both food and drink. The control of sustenance is a feature of the

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[13] Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), ed., Gordon Spence (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[14] John Bowen explores the importance of keys and locks in the novel. John Bowen, *Other Dickens*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 169. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[15] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 79.

economic relationships in Dickens's novels and it is one means by which bodily forms are shaped, whether healthily or not, by economic relationships.

Tappertit is not physically malformed or impaired by his subjection to the capitalist processes of transformation and commodification – his figure is grudgingly described as 'well enough formed' – but he is unprepossessing, perhaps rather ugly, being 'thin-faced, sleek-haired, sharp-nosed, small-eyed.'[16] The distortions of his appearance parallel, however, a comically distorted perception of the power of his own physical attractiveness: he seems to suffer from a form of comically inverted bodily dysmorphia. Tappertit is a small man, who bizarrely believes himself to be tall; he has short and thin legs which, equally bizarrely, he believes to be worthy of great admiration. He frequently preens himself and dresses fashionably. He believes that his eye has the power to subdue, in a curious duality, both women and rabid animals. The nature of his comic misunderstanding of his own physicality is emblematic of his ambitions, both personal and political. He believes himself capable of not only winning his master's daughter, but of leading the London apprentices to rise up and take power. The former ambition he expresses during breakfast by his comic attempt to deploy his seductive eye, which appears only as 'extraordinary, hideous, and unparalleled contortions.'[17]

There is a link between his inner ambitions, his psychology of ambition and power, both personal and political, and his body, which is made explicit in the extended metaphor used by the narrator, an image based on a commercial process of transformation,

> in the small body of Mr Tappertit there was locked up an ambitious and aspiring soul. As certain liquors, confined in casks too cramped in their dimensions, will ferment, and fret and chafe in their imprisonment, so the spiritual essence or soul of Mr Tappertit would sometimes fume within that precious cask, his body.[18]

The raw materials in the cask are transformed, and in that transformation develop stresses, tensions and frustrations that distort and malform. There is a strong figurative and thematic link, therefore, between Tappertit's economic subservience, his physicality and his psychology. The context of the distorted perceptions he entertains of himself is his economic subjection, both within the Varden household and within the wider structures of British civil society. There is a mismatch between his ambition and the weakness of his personal and political power, as there is a mismatch also between his

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[16] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 79.
[17] *Barnaby Rudge*, 84.
[18] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 80.

perception of his physical attractions, and the reality. He is distorted psychologically, and to some extent physically, and these distortions are emblematic of his cramped and frustrated ambitions, and the limitations to which his life within industrial capitalism is subject. It is a paradox, of course, appropriate to the paradoxical nature of Dickens's relationship to his age, that it is Varden, the craftsman capitalist, who is the sympathetic character, and Tappertit, the subservient apprentice, who is the initially comic, and, subsequently, unsympathetic, character.

Mrs Varden's servant, Miggs, is also economically dependent on them. Her economic relationship with the Vardens is underlined by images of finance and commerce which illuminate her actions and her position in the household. Her tears, in the language of an advertisement, 'were always ready, for large or small parties, on the shortest notice and the most reasonable terms.'[19] Similarly, the house-shaped box in which she makes small donations for the Protestant Association, gains her so much goodwill from Mrs Varden that it returns interest, 'at the rate of seven or eight per cent. in money, and fifty at least in personal repute and credit.'[20] When manipulatively threatening to leave, she says that she would refuse to stay in the household if it caused division, even if she was offered, 'a annual gold mine, and found in tea and sugar,' the scale of the latter comically contrasting with that of the former, though the latter is probably an undercover bid for a realisable benefit within Mrs Varden's gift.[21]

Like Tappertit, she is ambitious, and, like Tappertit, her ambitions are frustrated. She is ambitious for male attention, particularly the attention of Tappertit himself, and the frustration of her ambition, as well as the ambiguity of her position in the household, both as Mrs Varden's, 'chief aider and abettor,' but also as, 'her principal victim and object of wrath,' distorts her.[22] While, like Tappertit, she is not physically deformed, 'not absolutely ill-looking,' she is, like him, unprepossessing, with 'a rather uncomfortable figure [...] a sharp and acid visage,' and Tappertit refers to her as 'scraggy.'[23]

She is distorted inside and out. Her economic dependence in the household, the lack of power that such dependence confers, her sexual jealousy of Dolly Varden, and her thwarted social ambition, place her at the whim of the circumstances which dominate her life. She becomes, like Tappertit, malformed under pressure, comically, an embodiment of her motivations, '[e]very little bone in Miggs's throat and neck

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[19] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 105.
[20] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 388.
[21] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 388.
[22] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 102.
[23] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 103, p. 121.

developed itself with a spitefulness quite alarming'.[24] Like Tappertit, Miggs is described by a key image, and, in fact, a very similar image to that used of Tappertit, that links the physical body and the mind. As she waits for Tappertit to return from what the reader knows to be a meeting of the apprentices, but what to her is a mysterious and, probably, illicit, nocturnal expedition, her mind becomes a dizzy mixture of competing psychological raw materials. These raw materials swirl together under the impetus of her resentment, like the transformative pressure in Tappertit's psychological cask, where a human mind is subject to what almost seems an industrial or chemical process of transformation,

> with an expression of face in which a great number of opposite ingredients, such as mischief, cunning, malice, triumph, and patient expectation, were all mixed up together in a kind of physiognomical punch.[25]

As she waits for his return, she is, again, a comic compound of competing qualities, an absurd contradiction, 'some fair ogress.'[26]

It is impossible to locate the 'true' Miggs. She is constantly false in her presentation of herself to the world and to herself. Tappertit comments, '[w]hat a slippery figure she is! There's no holding her, comfortably.'[27] She has a 'peculiar physical conformation,' and as he carries her upstairs she loses all sense of being a living human, becoming not only inanimate, but, to some extent, transforms herself into a manufactured object, 'a walking-stick or umbrella.'[28] The distorting capacity of economic dependence and frustrated ambition as psychological and physical processes is indicated by an industrial image for the hold she now has over Tappertit which indicates the duplicative capacity of industrial processes, 'I'm in his confidence and he can't help himself, nor couldn't if he was twenty Simmunses!'[29]

These characters display the scars of emergent modern capitalism. They are monsters: monstrous in form, in mind and in relationships. And yet we enjoy reading them. They yield pleasure to us, despite, or because, of their monstrosity.

Dickens, Carlyle, Meredith, Bergson and Freud.

While Dickens was writing his comic fiction Carlyle and Meredith were also writing and thinking about comedy. Freud and Bergson were not contemporaries of

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[24] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 104.
[25] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 121.
[26] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 123.
[27] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 124.
[28] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 125.
[29] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 125.

Dickens as Carlyle and Meredith were, but in their subsequent thinking and writing about the nature of comedy they reflected on the cultural, political and ideological context in which Dickensian comedy had been created and on the implications of that context for the life of the mind. All four comic theorists and practitioners of the comic were critical of emergent modernity. They responded to the nature of industrialised capitalism and analysed the impacts that it had on the human raw material of its processes, on ways of thinking, social relationships, modes of being and the relationship between the health of the body and the health of the mind. Importantly, they saw comedy as a response.

Thomas Carlyle was critical of the modernity that was being shaped in the nineteenth century, in terms which foreshadowed not only Dickens but later theorists of the comic. Carlyle saw that people and society were being transformed by economic processes. In *Signs of the Times*, he defined, 'the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word'.[30] Carlyle, in words which are echoed in the later ideas of Bergson and Freud, is explicit about his view of the impact of the development of industrial capitalism, and the troubling modernity which it was bringing into being, '[t]hese things [...] indicate a mighty change in our whole manner of existence. For the same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand.'[31] In other words, the emergence of industrial capitalism, in Carlyle's view, had an impact upon not only the processes and economic systems that regulate and support society, but also on the mental and spiritual 'systems' which regulate and support human thoughts, feelings and spiritual values, 'the primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a truly vital and *infinite* character'.[32] The physical forms of human experience, bodies and work, were mechanised but equally, if not more significantly for the healthy life of the mind, so too were the systems which operate on the mind: education, religion, scientific enquiry and literature. He expresses the distortions that commercial life brings in 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1830),

> we must hold it a remarkable thing that every Englishman should be a 'gentleman;' that in so democratic a country, our common title of honour [...] should be one which professedly depends on station, on accidents rather than on qualities [...] We suppose it must be the commercial genius of the nation [...] what a hollow, windy vacuity of internal character this indicates; how in place of a rightly-ordered heart, we strive only to exhibit a full purse

[30] Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times' (1829), *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings*, ed., Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 59-85, p. 64. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[31] Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', p. 67.
[32] Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', p. 72.

> [...] instead of Faith, Hope and Charity, we have Neediness, Greediness and Vainglory.[33]

Meredith, too, was critical of the nineteenth century and the growth of industrial capitalism. Like Carlyle he saw that the characteristics of the machine age were coming to dominate human existence: society, the individual personality, and the life of the mind. In the Prelude to *The Egoist* (1879), Meredith identifies the repetitive capacity of the industrial process as the dominant transformative force in modern culture, 'the malady of sameness, our modern malady,' which results in '[m]onstrous sameness' and which has created 'a land of fog-horns.'[34] Meredith's figuration of his age is imagined as machine-like automatism and comedy is an impulse that stands against the processes of industrial capitalism. As a theorist of the comic, as well as a comic novelist himself, Meredith, like Carlyle, saw comedy playing an important role in countering the machine age.

Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud, though born later in the century than Carlyle, Dickens and Meredith, nevertheless lived until middle age in the nineteenth century. Bergson and Freud expressed hostility to the impacts that industrialism had on the living body and on the life of the mind of both the individual and of society. Echoing Carlyle and Meredith, both identified the capitalist industrial imperative for human beings to become, or to become like, machines, transformed from the natural into the artificial, turned into an object, and losing human identity. Bergson and Freud are critical of what can become mechanical and automatic in human behaviour, of what seeks to control, to repress and to hide. Furthermore, they both see comedy and its physical manifestation, laughter, as a corrective, an unruly force which socially and psychologically normalises, and which restores what has become mechanical and automatic to the natural, the living and the healthy.

It is significant that Freud's paradigm of the comic is the financial, the commercial and the economic. In his discussion of jokes, the process of producing humour is made analogous to an economic or industrial transformation. The mechanism – itself a relevant term for the industrial age – of the comic expressed in a joke is termed 'work'; its consequence is the 'production' of pleasure; it results in a 'yield' of pleasure expressed in laughter; the effectiveness of jokes is judged as their 'efficiency;' one of the techniques in jokes identified by Freud is the contrast between 'economical' expression and 'expenditure' of intellectual effort, in which he wonders who 'saves' and

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[33] Thomas Carlyle, 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1830), *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* Vol., III [Vol., II on preceding title page], (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), pp. 33-4.
[34] George Meredith, *The Egoist* (New York: The New American Library, 1963), p. 10, p. 11. All subsequent references are to this edition.

who 'gains;' he regards puns as the 'cheapest' of verbal jokes.[35] Subsequently, Freud embarked on an extended analogy between 'psychical economy and a business enterprise.'[36] Freud indicates that the language of capitalist economics is the dominant paradigm of analysis, even when the object of the analysis is the impact of capitalist economics on comedy and the human mind.

Within this diagnosis shared with Carlyle and Meredith of the ills of modernity, Bergson and Freud went further. Both sought to understand the essential basis of the comic and to explore its nature, attempting, as Bergson puts it, to identify 'the basal element [...] [the] common ground [...] the same essence.'[37] Freud, too, sought 'the determining condition that is valid for the comic'.[38] Bergson's key analysis of the comic is that of the tension between 'elasticity' and 'rigidity'. He regards people who show elasticity as able to adapt to social norms, displaying the awareness and flexibility which enables their behaviour and thinking to be constantly adjusted, thus reinforcing social cohesion. On the other hand, those unable to show this elasticity display rigidity and the observer finds this comic. Bergson identifies rigidity in terms of physical rigidity, initially, with his example of a man who trips in the street. In Bergson's analysis the man fails to display the flexibility of body necessary to cope with physical imperfections in the road. From this unpromising beginning Bergson moves on to psychological manifestations of rigidity, where people are 'stuck' in one mode of thought, whether relatively benignly in his examples of a man who is absent minded, or a man who is obsessively romantic, or, less benignly, in the example of someone in the grip of vice. Their mode is mechanical, machine-like, automated: '[s]omething mechanical encrusted on the living'.[39] Man becomes a comic machine.

Freud, like Bergson, accounts for the comic in terms of a perceived difference between the mechanistically comic subject and the observer. In Freud's case the difference is that of 'expenditure', either of physical energy, or of mental, emotional or libidinal energy. Freud, like Bergson, initially illustrates his idea by reference to physical comedy, his example being a clown at whom we laugh because 'the clown's movements [...] seem to us extravagant and inexpedient. We are laughing at an expenditure that is too large.'[40] He extends this analysis of the physical to the mental in

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[35] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. & ed., J. Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 198, p. 151, p. 139, p. 61, p. 84, p. 80. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[36] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 210.
[37] Henri Bergson, *Le Rire* (1899), tr., F. Rothwell, in *Comedy*, ed., Wylie Sypher (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp. 61-190, p. 61. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[38] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 249.
[39] Bergson, p. 84.
[40] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 249.

two ways, firstly by referring to the comedy of one who 'makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones,' and secondly by commenting on the comedy that reveals what he describes as, 'monotonous psychic automatism,' where the dominating mode of thought of a character is constantly being revealed in unconscious ways.[41] Again, man becomes comic machine.

Bergson and Freud also examined comedy's moral purpose. They saw it as a social and psychological force to correct aberration. Freud says, '[t]he comic arises [...] as an unintended discovery of human social relations. It is found in people', and he describes the social power of laughter to identify and attack those outside the social norm, '[o]ne can make a person comic in order to make him become contemptible, to deprive him of his claim to dignity and authority.'[42] Bergson says, '[l]aughter must be [...] a sort of *social gesture*. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity [...] it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement.'[43] Bergson sees the comic as a factor in social cohesion, locating laughter within self-recognising social groups whose social bonds are strengthened by laughter at what lies outside the group, at what may constitute, or may be believed to constitute, a threat, '[o]ur laughter is always the laughter of a group [...] laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry'.[44] Comedy is a disciplinary principle: '[t]his rigidity is the comic, and laughter is the corrective.'[45] Freud refers to laughter expressing 'a pleasurable sense of superiority'.[46] Importantly, neither of these theorists is writing as a literary critic or literary theorist, but there is a clear genealogy in these ideas of the moral benefit of laughter in their echo of Aristotle and other writers on comedy who followed Aristotle, for instance Henry Fielding, who wrote of comedy's moral purpose to correct reprehensible behaviour such as vanity and hypocrisy.[47]

Dickens, too, was concerned about the nature of the social, political, ideological, psychological and cultural realities that were coming into being around him. For Dickens the forces were the same as for Carlyle and Meredith, and as they were later to be for Bergson and Freud: capitalism, industrialisation and urbanisation which make society a machine, the human body a machine, and the mind a machine. Capitalism and

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[41] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 256, p. 263.
[42] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 248, p. 249.
[43] Bergson, p. 73.
[44] Bergson, p. 64.
[45] Bergson, p. 74.
[46] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 256.
[47] Fielding sees himself as writing within the Aristotelian tradition, both as theorist and as novelist, 'it may seem remarkable, that Aristotle, who is so fond and free of definitions, hath not thought proper to define the Ridiculous [...] The only source of the true Ridiculous (as it appears to me) is affectation [...] affectation proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy'. Henry Fielding, 'Author's Preface', *Joseph Andrews* (1742), *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, ed., A.R. Humphreys (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1973), pp. i-vi, p. iv.

industrialisation were not, of course, new in the nineteenth century. However, their emergence as major forces which were to shape a new and perplexing modernity, and the political, cultural, psychological, physical and moral implications of that new shaping, for society and for the individual, were major concerns of Dickens's comic purposes. The impact of these changes on Dickens's fictional characters, their relationships, and the narratives in which they take part, are key to understanding Dickens's imaginative response to his age, as well as his artistic aims and methods in the deployment of the comic mode.

In Dickens's comedy, there is a range of characters who display the inflexibility of mind, action and language that illustrate Bergsonian rigidity as well as Freudian 'psychic automatism' and excess of psychic expenditure: Mrs Nickleby's garrulous inconsequentiality, the Fat Boy, Joe's, alternate bouts of feeding and sleeping, Mr Micawber's loquacious shabbiness and Mrs Gummidge's perceived domestic impotence. While these figures are not obvious representatives of a capitalist system, they are all subject to and victims of pervasive economic imperatives which distort and malform. It is Mrs Nickleby's poor financial advice which leads to her husband's death and her family's impoverishment and to her obsession with her children's financial recovery through a variety of comically unrealistic schemes. Joe is a servant of Wardle's and a comically obsessed consumer. Mr Micawber is comically obsessed by a search for financial security. Mrs Gummidge is a dependant on Peggotty's hospitality and financial security. These characters take their comic power from their rigidity, their automatism and their excessive, obsessive, emotional expenditure on a single mode of thought and behaviour, which is often, though not exclusively, made comically apparent by mechanically repetitious forms of language, such as Micawber's 'in short' or Mrs Gummidge's being 'a lone, lorn creetur'.[48]

Mrs Nickleby's dominating characteristic is her rigid vanity, her obsession with her past degree of respectable social status and her plans for the future status of herself and her family. Her mental rigidity and psychic automatism are manifest in her speech and forms of language: her inconsequential verbosity, her absurd deviations of subject and her non-sequiturs. Within two speeches she passes from the warmth of the day, to roast pork, to partridge, to a drunken accident, to a parrot, via an image of horror – pigs looking like babies – a previous dining engagement and the geography of a town.[49] Her modes of thought and expression are entirely self-centred: her family's status, which she has done so much to damage, her own importance and the importance of all her

[48] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1849-50), intr. and notes, Jeremy Tambling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004), p. 51.
[49] *Nicholas Nickleby*, pp. 616-7.

concerns. She is blind to the realities around her: the way Ralph plays so cleverly on her unjustified sense of resentment at her husband's failure, the danger of Kate's invitation to Ralph's dinner party contrasted with her hope that it could result in a favourable marriage, or the unlikely hope that Kate's employment at Mrs Mantalini's workshop would result in a business partnership. Freud's analysis reveals her as one who expends too much energy on the bodily – talking – and too little on the mental – thinking.

The extent of Mrs Nickleby's Bergsonian comic rigidity is seen in the comic way she believes that the old man from the next garden, with absurd protestations of love, gifts of flying vegetables and sight of his 'small clothes', is a respectable suitor. That interpretation accords with Mrs Nickleby's egotistically rigid view of herself and of her relationship to the world despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, including the explicit evidence of the old man's keeper that he is, indeed mad.[50] Bergson would suggest we laugh at her because of her rigidity of character, Freud because of her psychic automatism – how her obsessive view of herself is constantly revealed to us – and because we perceive a difference in expenditure between her talking and her thinking which is much greater than we would deem desirable. As she confesses, 'I don't know what to think, one way or other'.[51]

Micawber is also a case of rigidity, psychic automatism and profligate expenditure of energy. His characteristic rigidity, his excessive expenditure, is his ability to be optimistic, to believe that, however bad his immediate circumstances have become, the future holds the promise of glory. Even Micawber's bouts of despair serve only to accentuate his often speedy and joyous return to good spirits. Micawber's attempts to maintain the façade of gentility in the face of recurrent and persistent penury are characteristic of the rigidity and automatism which Bergson and Freud see in comic characters. Like Mrs Nickleby, Micawber is a bourgeois ego aggrandising his own status in the face of, what to most people, would be overwhelming and demeaning opposition – hiding from creditors, pawning meagre family possessions, constant failure in commercial endeavour, and frequent moves of establishment to chase another opportunity or avoid the consequences of the most recent failure.

Bergson and Freud conclude that the comic results from a perception of a difference between the subject of the comic and the observer of the comic, where the observer observes from the position of the social norm. Bergson's and Freud's concept of the social norm against which Mrs Nickleby's thought and behaviour are judged, namely the observer's perception of desirable social elasticity, or of normal expenditure, is provided in the scenes with Mrs Nickleby by those characters who share those scenes,

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[50] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 626.
[51] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 326.

and by the narrator. For instance, in the scenes with the mad suitor, it is Kate's 'normality', her exasperation at her mother's quixotic reluctance to retire to the house, and to accept the obvious explanation of madness, that helps the reader to recognise the norms against which Mrs Nickleby becomes enjoyably comic. During Mrs Nickleby's long speeches of inconsequentiality both Kate and the narrator commentate drily. Kate says, '[t]hat's a curious association of ideas, is it not, mama?' and the narrator refers to Mrs Nickleby replying 'with as much gravity as if it were a question of the most imminent and thrilling interest.'[52] Freud defines the implicit social norm against which we judge the excess of expenditure, such as that of Mrs Nickleby's, as 'the difference between our psychical expenditure and the other person's.'[53] It is our perception of this difference, indicated by both the narrator and by Kate, which Freud believes results in the comic pleasure.

It is significant for the analysis of Bergson's and Freud's ideas that the degree to which these characters change or do not change reveals whether they remain comic or not. Mrs Nickleby is rigid throughout. She never loses the psychological automatism that has characterised her and consequently never loses her essentially comedic character. Micawber, however, does change. Having spent much of the novel in comically futile pursuit of bourgeois success, he finally achieves it by unmasking the villainy of Uriah Heep and by finding the rewards of hard physical work and municipal participation as a colonial magistrate. As a comic character, Micawber is regrettably diminished by bourgeois achievement and is ultimately described tamely as 'diligent and esteemed'.[54] When the rigidity is less apparent, so too, is the yield of comic pleasure. As laughter corrects aberration it also diminishes comic pleasure. We enjoy rectitude less than error.

Evidence for the Bergsonian and Freudian social and moral corrective model of laughter is identifiable here. Mrs Nickleby and Micawber are threats to their families and to the good order of society. Mrs Nickleby's poor financial judgement and her dominating position within her marriage impoverished and disempowered her and her children. Micawber's actions have the same consequence for his own family, also because of financial ineptitude and he is a wider threat to commercial society, if only to his debtors. Both characters are comic and the comedy at their expense is an Aristotelian morally disciplinary and corrective imperative, as it is in the conventional quixote narrative discussed in Chapter 1. In both cases laughter acts as moral

[52] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 616, p. 617.
[53] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 256.
[54] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 878.

compulsion to isolate and punish the social threat. The Dickensian comic mode here acts as what Bergson identifies as 'the utilitarian aim of general improvement.'[55]

And yet, Dickensian laughter is again more complex than this relatively simple moral analysis would indicate, as it was also in his deployment of the quixotic trope. Dickensian laughter, here, is at the expense of these victims of the mechanical age, or, at least at the expense of those who are incompetent in the nascent commercial realities of the time. Mrs Nickleby and Micawber are failures, particularly failures as creators or managers of money. Laughter is directed at those who cannot successfully negotiate the commercial paradigm, which would make that laughter essentially conservative in its moral force.

Our experience of the laughter is actually very different. While we undoubtedly laugh at Mrs Nickleby and Mr Micawber and many others, the degree to which we find them 'contemptible', to use Freud's term, is debateable.[56] Many Dickensian eccentrics are reasonably amiable, and the degree of contempt with which we view them is at most mild. Dickens's attitude throughout *Nicholas Nickleby* towards Mrs Nickleby, for instance, is of amusement. Mr Micawber, too, is regarded throughout *David Copperfield* with warmth and affection. His ability to bounce back from setbacks is attractive and in its own way is a positive force. Mr Micawber is a repository of important values, particularly those associated with a loving home life.[57] The Micawber family is productive both of love and children, it is a site of loyalty, resilience and good companionship and David learns a great deal about the benefits of family life from the Micawbers. We see a clear example of Mr Micawber's power to create domestic harmony at David's dinner party in Chapter 28, when his landlady's failures are rescued by Mr Micawber's busy and capable good cheer. At most, Dickens treats Micawber with a benevolent, wry amusement at his weaknesses and his eccentric foibles, rather than, for instance, a more devastating satirical attack.

Our experience as reader of these comic characters, then, is more complicated than laughter acting simply as a disciplinary force. If the comedy at the expense of Mrs Nickleby and Micawber were only corrective, they would be little more than satirised caricatures. The yield of pleasure which we receive from them as comic characters is in excess of that which is required to see them as aberrant and the nature of that pleasure is different in kind to that required to discipline and correct. Far from merely using comedy to expose them to ridicule, Dickens is able to deploy a comic mode that

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[55] Bergson, p. 73.
[56] Freud, *Jokes*, p. 249.
[57] J. R. Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p. 163, p. 165, pp. 177-181.

certainly does expose them to ridicule but also enjoys them as vivid and wild, and in the case of Micawber, as potentially beneficial. Dickens seems to undercut or to subvert the moral force of his own laughter.

It is an irony at the expense of Freud and Bergson that the reader positively welcomes the comedy directed at these characters who, according to their view of comedy, should be loathed. We know that they are a threat, but Dickens seems to celebrate their existence and it is the morally upright heroes and heroines, such as Nicholas, or Kate in the role of the 'social norm', who appear colourless in contrast. While these comic characters can be accounted for within the analyses of Bergson and Freud, as well as the wider social analyses of Carlyle and Meredith as behaving in mechanistic ways, the nature of their mechanism is not imaginatively limiting as the term might imply. In many respects their behaviour and language are both enjoyably liberating and anarchic, rather than circumscribed, as could be expected from an analysis that sees them as representative of a mechanistic mode of thought. As Dickens celebrated the epistemological uncertainties of the quixotic, he celebrates, too, the malformed and the aberrant, while pointing to their malformations and their aberrations. He benefits from the reader's yield of pleasure at his deployment of a comedy that paradoxically reinforces and also subverts – or, in view of the following discussion of Carlyle's comic theories, perhaps the better word is inverts – moral boundaries.

Abigail Burnham Bloom's investigation of the importance that Carlyle attributed to humour asserts that for him, too, comedy had a moral mission, 'Carlyle used humour to attempt to change the world. He wanted to force his readers to re-examine themselves and their assumptions, and for this purpose developed a unique form of humour.'[58] While Carlyle's diagnosis of the ills of emergent modernity echo the other theorists under consideration, his theorisation of the comic as a response to modernity was markedly different to those of Bergson and Freud. Like them he saw humour as didactic, functioning as a moral imperative and possessing important social implications.

However, Carlyle's understanding of the moral force of the comic was not Aristotelian in the sense that it was a corrective to aberration. Carlyle's conceptualisation of the comic is a spiritually transcendent one informed by the German Romantic philosopher, Jean Paul Friedrich Richter. Richter saw comedy as expressive of a transcendental understanding of the world and of society. The humorist enjoys the lofty perspective of a superhuman distance in which the extremes, the high and the low,

[58] Abigail Burnham Bloom, 'Transcendence through Incongruity: The Background of Humor in Carlyle's Sartor Resartus', *The Victorian Comic Spirit: New Perspectives*, ed., Jennifer A. Wagner Lawlor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 153-172, p. 153.

can be seen together in the contrast between the view of our world both as we see it from our narrow, everyday perspective, and as we would see it from a great distance. The perspective makes the world, our lives and their concerns appear unimportant compared with the vast scale of the distant view, '[h]umour thus annihilates both great and small, because before infinity everything is equal and nothing.'[59] Carlyle translates Richter's principle of humour as the 'inverse sublime', in which the duality of human beings is presented in such a way that both the sublime and the ridiculous potentialities of man are simultaneously observable, as Bloom states, '[m]an partakes of these two extremes simultaneously; he does not exist between them.'[60] This principle is key to recognising how his understanding of comedy's response to modernity is echoed in Dickens's comic fictional practices.

For Carlyle, then, humour is a levelling process that eliminates the perception of division that marks human society. In his first essay on Richter, Carlyle makes this process clear, '[i]t is a sort of inverse sublimity; exalting, as it were, into our affections what is below us, while sublimity draws down into our affections what is above us.'[61] For Carlyle, the humorist is alive to our capacity both for nobility and for absurdity and therefore to the dual nature of the world and of human beings. Bloom goes on to say that Carlyle understands the purpose of his humour to be an ennobling one, that he, 'wanted a humor composed of earnestness and wisdom, a humor with an ability to raise the lowly - to show the world as better than it is,' and that 'the humor forwards his didactic goal by shocking his readers and by providing a transcendent vision of the ludicrous and the sublime.'[62]

Carlyle's concept of the 'inverse sublime,' the structural and narrative principle of bringing down the mighty and ennobling the humble, and the capacity for both nobility and absurdity, are characteristic of Dickensian comedy. It accounts for the morally problematised approach to the comedic which has been discussed in Chapter 1 and in the discussion of comic characters such as Mrs Nickleby and Micawber. Comedy

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[59] Bloom, p. 162, quoting Margaret R. Hale, 'Jean Paul Richter's *Vorschule der Aesthetik: Fulcrum for its Period*, Dissertation, Yale, 1970.
[60] Bloom, p. 154.
[61] Thomas Carlyle, 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1827), *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays in Five Volumes* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), Volume 1, p. 17. All subsequent references to the 1827 essay are to this edition. John Forster refers to Carlyle and the term 'a sort of inverse sublimity' to describe aspects of Dickens's style, particularly his application of comic analogy, as Max Keith Sutton points out, revealing the moral force what Forster calls 'the affinities between high and the low, the attractive and the repulsive, the rarest things and the things of everyday which bring us all upon the level of a common humanity. It is this which gives humour an immortal touch'. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-74), ed., J.W.T. Ley (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928), p. 721. Max Keith Sutton, "'Inverse Sublimity' in Victorian Humor." *Victorian Studies*. X (1966/7): 177-192, p. 177. This study interprets the 'inverse sublime' more widely than Forster, seeing it as a comedic structural principle.
[62] Bloom, p. 165, p. 170.

is both a morally corrective force, and a morally liberating one. It can both correct epistemological aberration and celebrate it. It can discipline and punish those who fail, and it can celebrate them as failures. It is only comedy, with its paradoxes and contradictions, which has the potential to do that: the vision of it as both ludicrous and sublime.

Comedy in the Carlylean conceptualisation is a commendatory, rather than a disciplinary, impetus. When comedy functions as the inverse sublime, it is the ability of comedy to raise its subject which constitutes the 'inverse' operation. This is the contrast to the operation to lower or to diminish the subject which is the effect of Aristotelian, morally corrective, comedy. In contrast to characters such as Mrs Nickleby and Micawber who are morally lowered or diminished by corrective comedy, there are other characters who, while comic, are also seen as commendable, even noble, by virtue of their moral values and who, therefore, embody Carlyle's concept of the 'inverse sublime.'

Characters such as Mark Tapley in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers* are the cause of laughter, of varying kinds, both for other characters within the narrative and for the reader. They are comic characters but in a very different sense to Mrs Nickleby and Micawber in that they embody robust moral virtues and perceptive moral insights which play into the moral dynamic of the novels as a whole. Their humour – what they are able to deploy and how the reader regards them – is a marker of moral virtue rather than a marker of moral reprehensibility. We laugh at them, but in a different way to how we laugh at Mrs Nickleby and Micawber.

Tapley and Weller are comic but it is a comedy that is a positive moral strength, rather than a cause for ridicule. It is a comedy that points to a resilient, optimistic and selfless virtue, in contrast to the selfishness, weakness and folly which the characters encounter. It is an aspirational comedy, each character ennobled by the comic qualities they embody, whether the enthusiastic resilience in the face of difficulties that Tapley shows, or the determined loyalty of Weller. They are, therefore, distinguishable from those comic characters whose folly and vice are satirised and for whom laughter is a moral condemnation. They are characters for whom laughter is a celebration.

These characters, significantly, are servants and, despite their virtues, they never lose their subordinate positions within the social structures. They are paradoxically humble and yet noble, subject to the prevailing economic forces of the nineteenth century as servants and yet resistant to them. Unlike, for instance, Micawber, at whom, however benignly, laughter is directed and whose comic behaviour is unconscious, characters such as Tapley and Weller consciously deploy humour themselves in the service of a comic resistance. There is a vivifying comic exuberance in Tapley and

Weller, a healthy and creative transformation of the comic mode that builds, forms and shapes, and which stands in contrast to the transformations that distort and malform, and against which Dickens also deploys corrective laughter. It is these characters who seem to reflect most clearly Carlyle's concept of the 'inverse sublime.'

The oppositional moral values that Weller expounds are deployed in contrast to what he sees as Pickwick's apparent insistence on self-destruction. His image of the man who ate so many muffins that he died in order to contradict the doctor who said he would die of a bullet is a comic assertion of a healthy moral order against Pickwick's unhealthy misapprehension of the world. If Pickwick is a Quixote, then Weller is Panza, but one who is wise, noble and, in a moral sense, commanding. The character with whom Tapley is paired, young Martin Chuzzlewit, becomes malformed and distorted in his behaviour, attitudes and relationships, under the transformative pressure of the economic processes of inheritance, wealth creation and exploitation by becoming selfish, grasping and greedy. Martin is obsessed with his own concerns, both financial and personal. When he does appear to act for others he is actually concerned only for the impact any actions have on himself. Martin does not understand others, or the values they have, or the worth of their actions, unless there is, for him, some selfish dimension. Furthermore, he is unconscious of his own selfishness.

Tapley, while acting as servant, embodies a powerful comic opposition. The values Tapley represents - selflessness and consideration for others in even the most trying circumstances - contrast vividly, not only with Martin, but with a wide range of other characters representative of the novel's theme of selfishness. Tapley, though lacking the social status Martin enjoys, nevertheless has an ennobling wisdom and moral understanding of human affairs which elevates him in the mind of the reader, not in spite of his comic vitality, but because of it. During the voyage to America, and the subsequent journey to Eden, Martin's comic ability to value the need to "come out strong' under disadvantageous circumstances,' for jollity, becomes a touchstone of the difficult circumstances into which he and young Martin have been led.[63] On board the ship, while Martin withdraws petulantly from the miserable conditions around him, Tapley engages fully with the other passengers, spreading good cheer and a generally practical benevolence, in which others, too, are ennobled,

> old men awkwardly engaged in little household offices, wherein they would have been ridiculous but for their good-will and kind purpose; and here were swarthy fellows [...] doing such little acts of tenderness. [64]

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[63] Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), ed., P. N. Furbank (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 313. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[64] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 311.

Following the parting of Martin and Mary Graham, before Martin and Tapley have left for America, Mary gives Martin a ring, sent via Tapley. Martin assumes that it is a gift that has been given to her in turn by his grandfather. The narrator, however, indicates Tapley's complete understanding, not only of the true nature of the gift, but of both Mary's and Martin's characters. Martin has a 'strange obtuseness,' that indicates, 'the real cause and root' of his personality, and which the reader can take to be his obsessive self-regard, his capacity to understand all events and people only from his own perspective.[65] Tapley, however, with sympathetic perception, understands that the ring represents Mary's complete savings, turned into portable property for the support of Martin.[66] Martin's concluding comment, ''[s]he is worthy of the sacrifices I have made,'' is, unconsciously, a bitter, satiric commentary on his selfishness and her selflessness and Tapley's comment, ''[j]olly!'' indicates, in a repetition of his comic verbal tag, his own comprehension of the moral dynamic that motivates his new master, and the challenge to his own good-humour that Martin will afford.[67] Ultimately, it is Martin himself who becomes the greatest challenge to Tapley's determination to be optimistic. Tapley is ennobled by his values and by his comic resistance to the moral ciphers around him. He is ultimately the moral redemption of Martin Chuzzlewit and the embodiment of the power of comedy to ennoble through Carlyle's concept of the inverse sublime.

Tom Pinch, too, is an 'inversely sublime' character, ennobled by comedy, though for different reasons. He does not have the same robust comic command as Tapley and Weller and he lacks Tapley's clear-sighted moral understanding, particularly of Pecksniff. Pinch is a subject of comedy himself which often takes the form of a gentle narratorial ironising, for instance, in the polite hyperbole exchanged with Pecksniff in Chapter Two, as he tries to engineer a reconciliation between Westlock and Pecksniff before the former's departure. He is a comic character in the sense that he is the subject of laughter at his expense as Mrs Nickleby and Micawber are, but he is also noble and commendable as Weller and Tapley are. He, like Tapley, is determined to see the best in others and to do his best under difficult circumstances. He stands, as Tapley does, for positive moral virtues and a powerful comic resistance to the prevailing selfishness. While his comprehension of Pecksniff is lamentable, he does perceive the worth of other characters, such as Westlock, or the potential worth of characters such as young Martin. On his journey to meet young Martin, the narrator describes Pinch's clothes, and Pinch's risible belief in the ferocity of Pecksniff's horse, with a comically

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[65] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 307.
[66] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 307.
[67] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 307.

archaic rhetoric, that gently amuses the reader at the expense of Pinch, but without ridiculing, indeed actually underlining, his sensitive innocence,

> [b]lessings on thy simple heart, Tom Pinch, how proudly dost thou button up thy scanty coat, called by a sad misnomer, for these many years, a 'great one' [...] Who could repress a smile – of love for thee, Tom Pinch, and not in jest at thy expense.[68]

Pinch's comic essence is, in contrast to Tapley's clear understanding, a failure to understand the world correctly. He fails to read Pecksniff, and his comic misreading makes Pecksniff seem better than he is. He interprets Charity and Mercy's snide giggling at his sister's expense as cheerful regard. He fails, too, to read the city of Salisbury, and his misreading makes the city seem comically worse than it is. However, paradoxically, it is Pinch's failure to understand, initially at least, the true nature of the selfish economic drives of Pecksniff and his household, as well as so much else of the world, which provides the force of his goodness and of his ennobling comic resistance. Despite, or, perhaps, because of, his failure to understand, Pinch, like Tapley, displays an admirable comic resilience to the more emotionally challenging aspects of his life, to the forces that would otherwise malform and distort him, and he seems always cheerful. When contemplating, sadly, his separation from his sister, 'he found comfort very soon,' when he considers 'his 'extraordinary good luck,' in his situation at the Pecksniffs.'[69] The narrator always refers to Pinch as Mr., or as Tom, which guides the reader to a protective and respectful stance towards the character, in spite of the collateral potential for ridicule.

Despite Pinch's often crucial failures of comprehension, his comic role serves, as Tapley's does from a more consciously analytical position, innocently to provide a comically instinctive commentary on other characters. For instance, when Martin is describing his argument with his grandfather over Mary, he seems to search for a word to describe his inability to compromise. Pinch's perceptive suggestion of 'obstinacy,' becomes a comic one when Martin is piqued at Pinch's use of the word and substitutes the rather more commendable, 'most determined firmness.'[70] It is the function of the inverse sublime, as agent of the novel's morality, to provide illumination of the characters at whom criticism is directed, as much as exempla of the virtues of those who are to be commended.

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[68] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 118.
[69] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 145.
[70] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 152.

Pinch's role in the novel, and that of other 'inverse sublime' characters, is emblematic of another implication for Dickens of Carlyle's theorisations of the comic that may also account for our paradoxical reading of characters such as Mrs Nickleby and Micawber, who should be, but are not, more clearly the subject of simple comic discipline. Carlyle championed what Bloom calls 'a humor based on health and positive fellow-feeling', in which humour becomes 'a powerful force for portraying the world in a positive light.'[71] Carlyle's biographer, J. Anthony Froude, quoted Carlyle's own definition of humour as, 'a genial sympathy with the under side' which Froude goes on to say 'was the definition also of his own feeling about all things and all persons'.[72] Carlyle's instinct, then, was to see humour as a wholly positive force, in contrast to the potentially destructive capacities of other applications of laughter. In his 1827 essay he praises Richter, '[t]he essence of humour is sensibility; warm, tender fellow-feeling with all forms of existence', and he goes on to depict the moral force of the inverse sublime, '[t]rue humour springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love [...] the purest effluence of a deep, fine and loving nature; a nature in harmony with itself, reconciled to the world and its stintedness and contradiction, nay, finding in this very contradiction new elements of beauty as well as goodness.'[73] Dickens's depiction of characters such as Weller, Tapley and Pinch is clearly the result of this Romantic conception of the moral force of comedy and its raising of the humbly human into the noble. But so, too, are characters such as Mrs Nickleby and Micawber, who may be lowered and corrected by the comic, but are not humiliated by it.

However, in their vision of humour, Carlyle and Richter explore a dimension that goes beyond these social and moral concerns. The ability of humorous writing to link the sublime and the ludicrous potentialities of human existence, is described as 'providing a transcendent vision.'[74] It is difficult to see this almost religious transcendence as a characteristic of Dickensian humour, which is rooted firmly in the stark physical and moral realities of an often harsh material existence and the attempts, successful or otherwise, to escape from, or to alleviate, that existence. The Dickensian comic mode asserts a defiantly humanistic comic world. When lowly comic characters are ennobled in the Carlylean, and in the Dickensian, it is in recognition of qualities of

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[71] Bloom, p. 156.
[72] J. Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle The History of The First Forty Years of His Life* (London: Longmans, Green, 1882), p. 383. Froude goes on to describe how Carlyle's 'laugh was from his whole nature, voice, eyes, and even his whole body. And there was never any malice in it', p. 383. Bloom quotes Froude and develops his interpretation of Carlyle's approach, '[h]umor is, therefore, a powerful force for portraying the world in a positive light' and 'Froude indicates Carlyle's ability to raise his subject to a higher level through humor'. Bloom, p. 154-6.
[73] Carlyle, 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter' (1827), p. 16, p. 17. Bloom pp. 162-3.
[74] Bloom, p. 170.

mind and personality: loyalty, sympathy with the experience of others, empathy, kindness, innocence and love. They are the qualities which are ennobled as the ideals with which to conduct oneself and with which to regulate personal and social relationships. They are not especially heroic or sublime characteristics.

Meredith, like Carlyle and Richter, has a transcendent vision of the comic. In an image which is reminiscent of Carlyle's comedically transcendent perspective by which all differences are obliterated through humour, Meredith figures comedy as a 'spirit', rational, numinous, and omniscient.[75] When comedy perceives human folly and vice, 'the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter.'[76] The spirit of comedy is above humanity, looking down, detached, superior, observing, emotionally unengaged, and, above all, not one of us, or, even, among us. It is indulgent yet punitive, scornful yet understanding, judicial yet tolerant. There is no right of appeal. Meredith constructs a figure which is outside and beyond society and the mind, a metaphysical figure who exists on a plane where distance shrinks direct moral involvement, and with a perspective that diminishes the significance of man and his actions into a comic miniaturisation that is reminiscent of Carlyle's transcendently distant comic perspective that mocks the human scale. Even the phrase 'silvery laughter' emphasises the lack of earthy humanity in comedy's existence: it is something rich, elegant, bright and clear.

Unlike Carlyle's and Richter's comic transcendence, where comedy elevates and ennobles, Meredith asserts a moral mission of the comic which is in the disciplinary Aristotelian tradition. Meredith indicates the didactic mission of comedy and its potency as moral correction to aberrant behaviour, 'it is unwholesome for men and women to see themselves as they are, if they are no better than they should be,' which is a consequence of 'realism in the comic art.'[77] The implied figuration in this image is of comedy as a mirror, in which we see and recognise ourselves and, if we see ourselves to be aberrant in some way, for us to take the necessary corrective actions. Like the comic spirit who observes from above, this image is one of distance, and of the artistic representation being at one remove from reality. Meredith refers to, 'the calm, curious eye of the Comic Spirit,' and how people are 'probed,' by it.[78] The word 'probed' indicates observation from outside, a dispassionate, almost experimental, examination from the point of view of a scientist or a doctor. There is a coldness that results from

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[75] Meredith, *The Egoist*, p. 10.
[76] George Meredith, 'Essay on Comedy' (1877), *Comedy*, ed, Wylie Sypher (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp. 1-57, p. 48. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[77] Meredith, 'Essay on Comedy', p. 9.
[78] Meredith, 'Essay on Comedy', p. 14.

distance, a detachment that enables judgement and which disables emotional involvement in the conception of the overseeing spirit of comedy, that is reminiscent of Bergson's 'momentary anaesthesia of the heart.'[79]

While Meredith figures comedy as a spirit, it is a 'spirit born of our united social intelligence'.[80] It is, in fact, socially determined. It is formulation of a social, rational, consensus, which combats the prevailing imperatives of the time, measured against standards which are both established by, and which inform, a shared social understanding of moral, social and political rectitude, though it is directed by apparent timelessness and independence. This rational consensus foreshadows Bergson's and Freud's sense of the social norm against which aberration is judged and in defence of which comedy acts. In Meredith's configuration, comedy acts to achieve, 'the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dullness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness,' or as he puts it at greater length in *The Essay on Comedy*, when describing the power of comedy to act against the follies and vices of men,

> whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually or in the bulk. [81]

Those aspects of life which Meredith lists, and against which comedy can act, are symptoms of a humanity exhibiting false and distorted values in social relationships and the individual personality, which stem from the unsettling modernity which Meredith sees around him. The image sees those aspects of modern life which he details as aberrations from an ideal or, at least, as aberrations from a norm. They are offences against civilization, and comedy is, therefore, 'the ultimate civilizer'.[82]

Meredith's use of the phrase, 'united social intelligence', is, of course, problematic. The idea that there can be consensus on the social values that make aberration comic is highly aspirational for the comic theorist, to say the least, even if such an objective were desirable. His use of the phrase indicates his own political and social standing within male dominated, literary, hegemonic middle-class society, a pool of opinion, circumscribed by class and education, in which consensus arises between literary gentlemen. Meredith would like to see comedy as an expression of a consensual

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[79] Bergson, p. 64.
[80] Meredith, *The Egoist*, p. 10.
[81] Meredith, *The Egoist*, p. 11. Meredith, 'Essay on Comedy', p. 48.
[82] Meredith, *The Egoist*, p. 11.

and rational formulation: a social force, a liberal political impetus towards social progress, but it is actually grounded on the biases of a gendered political and cultural elite. Where Bergson depicts a man falling in the street, or Freud explores the comic movement of a pantomime clown, they show comedy enacted in a real world, among real humans who laugh or who are laughed at.[83] Meredith sees comedy as an elite activity enjoyed only by the loftily intelligent. This is not our experience of reading Dickensian comic fiction.

Meredith's theory of comedy as from the perspective of a contemporary, illuminates Dickens's own comic writing in some important, though often problematic, respects. Dickensian comedy is very different from Meredith's formulation, and from the transcendence of Carlyle and Richter. Where Meredith says that 'you must [...] believe that our state of society is founded on common sense,' we can sense something much darker as the basis of Dickens's conception of the state and of society.[84] Where Meredith seems loftily detached from the society that comedy depicts, Dickens seems deeply immersed in it. The Dickensian world is dark or comic, or, frequently, darkly comic: it subverts and unnerves.

Mrs Gamp from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for instance, is a character whose very creation challenges the idea that common sense is the foundation of society. Her language is disordered and deranged, her words tortured distortions. Her personality is an absurdity, 'Gamp is my name, and Gamp my nater,' her clothes are bizarre, 'a yellow night-cap, of prodigious size, in shape resembling a cabbage;' and her physical form is monstrously deformed, 'she produced a watchman's coat, which she tied round her neck by the sleeves, so that she became two people; and looked, behind, as if she were in the act of being embraced.'[85] Mrs Gamp lives in the uneasy night, watching sickness and death, which are desirable sources of revenue, ''[w]ishin you lots of sickness, my darling creetur,'' and where death is beauty, 'he'd make a lovely corpse.'[86] Her own food and drink become regulated like the medicines she dispenses and she constructs her own fictional double, Mrs Harris, who shares her talk. In Mrs Gamp, Dickens has constructed a comic character who is of both death and life, a watcher at both ends of existence. She is a mad, bustling, dirty and drunken creature at whom we laugh, as we laugh at Pinch, Tapley and Weller but whom we also, a little, fear, as we do not fear them. Nor do we admire her as we admire them.

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[83] Bergson, p. 66. Freud, p. 249.
[84] Meredith, 'Essay on Comedy', p. 48.
[85] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 492, p. 481.
[86] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 538, p. 479.

Quilp, too, seems difficult to accommodate in Meredith's comic formulation, in the same way as Mrs Gamp is. He, like Mrs Gamp, is a comic, yet, frightening character, though unlike her, more of a direct threat to those around him. He is grotesque in form, dwarfish, half human and half simian, possessed of shocking powers of consumption – he can drink scalding liquids and he eats eggs whole, including their shells – and he has terrible potencies, financial and personal, over those who are vulnerable to him including clearly implied grotesque sexual desires for the young child Nell. Quilp is so transformed by his economic and other drives that he is an affront to the concept of a rational basis for society. His existence, like the existence of Mrs Gamp, is a challenge to Meredith's nineteenth-century consensus, a shocking provocation to the concept that a little elite humour will guide society towards a bright future. Their sheer imaginative presence, the complexity of our reactions to them, our ambivalence of repulsion and enjoyment, fascination and, to varying degrees, fear, are distinctively Dickensian. They represent darkness, a transformation of laughter into trauma and alienation. There is nothing of common sense in them, or in the worlds which they inhabit. Far from contributing to a consensus on the relationship between the comic mode and the life which comedy observes, Dickensian comedy is a complicating presence which acts against such consensus.

It has to be comedy. Only the Dickensian comic mode, with its assertion of the dark pleasure to be found in incongruity and irrationality, exploits the impossibility of consensually agreed social and psychological norms. Or, rather, it exploits the comic possibility that the collapse of norms and what results from that collapse, the aberrant, the darkly comic and the comically horrific, are more pleasurable than the merely morally correct. Dickens subverts consensus through comic pleasure. In contrast to Meredith's ethereal clarity, Dickens provides something which is shifting, at times amorphous and, at other times, polymorphous. Dickensian comedy is diverse, unstable and dark, even when at its apparently lightest. Dickens's comedy is human in its scale, humane, rather than divine, in its perspectives, and humanistic, rather than metaphysical, in its artistic vision.

It would be wrong to argue that Dickens is without any regard for moral, social or psychological norms: Micawber becomes respectable, Pickwick returns home, Squeers is punished, and generic comic happy endings are often, though far from exclusively, asserted. Perhaps the total absence of social and psychological norms was to be left to comic absurd of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Meredith's conception of comedy as an overseeing 'spirit' which asserts moral norms fails adequately to account for our experience of Dickens's comedy. Does the image of a mirror adequately indicate the representation of the Dickensian world to the reader? Do we really see

ourselves coldly and dispassionately reflected when we read of Quilp, or Squeers, or Mrs Gamp, or even Tom Pinch? Even Bergson's and Freud's conceptualisation of the moral and social corrective power of comedy seems to be defeated by Dickens's comic mode as the discussion of Mrs Nickleby and Micawber above demonstrates. There is no sense in Meredith of the reader's pleasure in comedy, a pleasure that is complex and disturbing. Meredith's spirit enjoys, with his silvery laugh, but we humans are the objects of the spirit's enjoyment, not laughers ourselves.

However, Meredith acknowledges that the comic is not as straightforward as his own work suggests. In an ironic complication, if not an implied refutation, of his image of the detached comic spirit, he recognises that we cannot be clear-sighted about life and about the comic, '[l]ife, we know too well, is not a comedy, but something strangely mixed.'[87] This formulation, of the opposition between 'life' and 'comedy', where the former is a compound constituted, perhaps, of materials unknown, in combinations inexplicable, implies that there is a distinction between the relatively simple generic formulations of the stage comedies of which Meredith is writing, and the inextricably and increasingly complex nature of the modern reality that comedy seeks to represent. For Meredith, the impulses of the comic are fluid shapes, forms and disguises, changing compulsions, diseases and those who pretend to provide the cure, '[y]ou see Folly perpetually sliding into new shapes [...] with many whims, many strange ailments and strange doctors,' and '[f]olly is the natural prey of the Comic, known to it in all her transformations, in every disguise.'[88] Meredith presents these impulses in terms which reflect our experience of Dickensian comedy. Meredith recognises that his attempts at formulation of the comic do not adequately describe the many manifestations and purposes that it can take in response to shifting realities. Dickensian comedy is a fuller representation of the 'something strangely mixed,' than Meredith's ethereal formulation.

Evidence from contemporary comic theory demonstrates the relationship between Dickensian comic writing and emergent modernity. The same conditions that produced the comic theories of Freud, Carlyle, Bergson and Meredith also produced Dickensian comedy. Dickens depicts the troubling alienation of the machine age but comedy enables him to articulate a paradoxical relationship to it: uneasy at the monstrosity it creates but also seditiously celebrating that monstrosity. Comedy articulates paradoxical duality. Comedy is 'something strangely mixed'.[89]

Our understanding of Dickensian comedy is informed in key ways by the theorisations of the comic which were born in the special circumstances of the

[87] Meredith, 'Essay on Comedy', p. 16.
[88] Meredith, 'Essay on Comedy', p. 33, p. 34.
[89] Meredith, 'Essay on Comedy', p. 16.

nineteenth century. Carlyle, Bergson, Freud and Meredith saw that comedy and its physical response, laughter, reveal the mechanisms of the mind and relationships between the mind and society. These four writers and Dickens responded to an age of urbanised bourgeois societies characterised by mechanisation, industrialisation and automatism. They identified the harmful psychological and social effects of modernity. Human beings were raw materials in processes that manufactured and processed minds, bodies and relationships. They also saw that comedy had a moral purpose. Comedy revealed the trauma of the processed human. It could begin to heal the trauma.

Dickens cannot stand outside the processes of which he writes: the industrial and commercial processes which result in malformation, both physical and psychological. Dickens is an agent in the capitalist economies of transformation. Through his imaginative processes he transforms and malforms humans and turns them into hybrids, chimeras, grotesques and monsters. They become materials to be squashed or stretched, pierced, scalded or starved, for Dickens's own professional, for which we may read privately capitalist, profit. Dickens is implicated in those transformations which the economies of the nineteenth century inflict. His imagination figures, but also implements, the impacts and the consequences of the market place. He is a player in that same market place, an ambivalent trader in the grotesque and the comically monstrous, at once moralising at and, at the same time, revelling in, the transgressive. He comically observes distortion and falsity and yet connives with the reader in the secret pleasures which they afford. He makes us enjoy monstrosity by yielding us our dividend of laughter. We become willing stakeholders in his enterprise.

Chapter Three

'Bounds to Absurdity'[1]: Dickens and Comic Character

Edith Simcox, writing as 'H. Lawrenny', in *The Academy* in October 1870, a few months after Dickens's death, expresses unease at the effects of Dickens's fiction. She commented on Dickens in the following terms,

> [t]he first thing that strikes a reader is the absence of all familiar boundaries and landmarks: class distinctions are ignored or obliterated; different ages and sexes assume the prerogative of their opposites; people transact incongruous business in impossible places; and with it there is no apparent consciousness that the social order is confused and inverted.[2]

Simcox identifies a transgressive potency in Dickens. He 'ignores', 'obliterates', 'confuses' and 'inverts'. The social and even the biological distinctions by which we categorise the world lose their power. Dickens problematises the real. Simcox implies that the fictional depiction of the real should show it as stable, uncomplicated and comprehensible. Fiction is a comforting solution to, or a harmonising gloss over, the problems and contradictions of emergent modernity and Dickens is a seditious antagonist against that benign literary mission. For Simcox reading the world is an orderly and consensual process. For Dickens reading the world is unsettling and alienating. While she laments loss of order, hierarchy and system expressed through the socially, culturally and politically stabilising mission of fiction, Dickens creates a fictional world that encourages the socially and conceptually unstable.

Simcox focuses on character. The strands of disruption all lead to the individual and to identity. She is correct to identify character as a locus of distinctive fictional treatment by Dickens, but she misses the aesthetic point that Dickens's characters are aberrant by design and with the artistic effect of problematising representations of the real. What Simcox sees as worthy of censure, the blurring of boundary and the loss of landmark, Dickens revels in and celebrates. While her focus is not the comic, Simcox's definition of an unsettling and reprehensible fault becomes a definition of Dickensian comic character in action: 'incongruous business in impossible places.'

Dickens's contemporaries, and many subsequent critics, experienced ambivalent responses to his characterisation. From the earliest reviews of Dickens's

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[1] Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), ed., P. N. Furbank (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 399. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[2] 'H. Lawrenny' [Edith Simcox], 'from a review in the *Academy*, 22nd October 1870, ii, 1-3', *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed., Phillip Collins (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 545-7, p. 546. All subsequent references are to this edition. Quoted and discussed in John Bowen, *Other Dickens*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 29.

earliest books, commentators took contrasting positions on the nature of his characters, including his comic characters. A central issue for them was the realism, or otherwise, of his characterisation. Commentators divided between those who saw his characters as wholly representational of a real and recognisable humanity, and those for whom the same characters were strained, poorly written, or over-written, caricatures. Leo Tolstoy, for instance, said of Dickens's characters, 'I am constantly comparing them with living persons, and living persons with them, and what a spirit there was in all he wrote.'[3] An early unsigned review of *Sketches by Boz* refers to the 'startling fidelity' of his survey of English society, while an unsigned review of *The Pickwick Papers* refers to the humour of the novel being 'of nature.'[4] Similarly, an unsigned review of contemporary humorous writing describes Boz's contributions, and how, 'their verisimilitude is undisputable. They reflect the manners to which they are addressed with a felicity that is inseparable from truth [...] What he gives you is literally true.'[5] John Forster, in a review of *The Pickwick Papers* from July 1837, is in agreement, '[a]ll of it is real life and human nature [...] it is a succession of actual scenes.'[6]

These reviewers emphasise the 'realism' of his fiction in what they implicitly define as the strong correlation between his fiction and 'real life', and in their emphasis on qualities such as 'fidelity' and 'verisimilitude'. By contrast, other commentators from the same period deny this sense of realism. An unsigned review of the first number of *The Pickwick Papers* states that Boz, 'has but one shoal to beware of – extravagance.'[7] Forster, only two years after his review of *The Pickwick Papers*, adopts a more nuanced and marginally more hostile position than he did in the earlier review in a generally benign, even enthusiastic, review of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9).[8] While recognising Dickens's 'strong power of reality,' and, 'the truth of life as it is,' he recognises also, as does the writer of the unsigned review of *The Pickwick Papers*, 'some faults of occasional exaggeration,' which later in the review, and in startling contrast to his earlier assertions, grow into Dickens's inability to 'subdue his tendencies of exaggeration, to which, though we observe it infinitely less in this work than in the

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[3] Collins, p. 1.
[4] 'From an unsigned review of *Sketches by Boz*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, March 1836, xv,77', Collins, p. 30, 'from unsigned reviews of *Pickwick Papers*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, May 1836-May 1837', Collins, pp. 30-2, p. 31.
[5] 'From an unsigned article, 'Some Thoughts on Arch-Waggery, and in especial, on the Genius of 'Boz'', *Court Magazine*, April 1837, x,184-7', Collins, pp. 33-5, p. 34.
[6] [John Forster], 'from an unsigned review of *Pickwick Papers*, No. XV, *Examiner*', Collins, pp. 36-7, p. 37.
[7] 'From unsigned reviews of *Pickwick Papers*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, May 1836-May 1837', Collins, p. 30.
[8] [John Forster], 'from an unsigned review of *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Examiner*, 27 October 1839, 677-8', Collins, pp. 47-51.

Pickwick Papers, he is still too prone'.[9] Emphasising the same theme, Forster goes on to identify, 'the occasional sins against verisimilitude on the side of exaggeration.'[10] By 1853, an unsigned review of *Bleak House* referred to characters which are 'exaggerated exceptions, and represent nothing which we have ever seen, or heard, or dreamt of,' and goes on to ask whether it is 'within the rightful domain of true art to make the unnatural in character thus predominate over the natural?'[11] It is interesting that the terms of the controversy remain the same, but that the judgement of them is in flux. The critical ground is well defined, but it is interpretation which is in doubt, and not in nuanced doubt, but in opposing terms.

The use of the word 'unnatural' by this reviewer is echoed in a striking instance of this strand of criticism of Dickensian characterisation. In George Eliot's essay 'The Natural History of German Life,' in 1856, she criticises Dickens's inability to render the psychological truth of his characters with the same verisimilitude with which he successfully renders for humorous purposes their physical forms, language and behaviours.[12] Eliot argues that Dickens's depiction of comic character is 'true' in his delineation of the humorous external features, particularly of speech and gesture, but that he cannot depict psychological truth, whether of those same comic characters or, indeed, of characters she defines as the 'preternaturally virtuous' or the 'melodramatic'.[13] For Eliot, Dickens is a paradoxical mix of 'artistic truthfulness' and 'frequently false psychology' with a capacity to become 'transcendent in his unreality'.[14]

The essence of this critical dichotomy, particularly highlighted, in view of her own subsequent career as a novelist, by Eliot's own intervention, is the issue of realism. There is unease in the critical debate between those who read Dickensian character as 'truth,' as possessing some sort of fidelity to life, and those like Simcox who do not or cannot or those who, like Forster, sense that the issue is a troubling one and one not easily settled. Eliot's use of the word 'unreality' and the reviewer of *Bleak House*'s use of the word 'unnatural' are clearly significant here. Both identify in Dickens a distinctive quality that contradicts what both feel is the purpose and method of fiction to represent the real in a recognisable way, or in a way that corresponds to their

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[9] Collins, p. 48, p. 50.
[10] Collins, p. 50.
[11] 'Unsigned Review of *Bleak House*, *Bentley's Miscellany* October 1853, xxxiv, 372-4', Collins, p. 287, p. 288.
[12] George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), *Selected Critical Writings*, ed., Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 260-95, p. 264. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[13] Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', p. 264.
[14] Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', p. 264.

ideological and aesthetic conception of it. They are expecting to find something to correspond with their understanding of realism, and they do not find it.

Their unease reflects a fundamental issue. An apparently limited, though in practice potent, debate about whether Dickensian characters are, or are not, 'realistic,' and therefore should be read within the emerging mainstream of the nineteenth-century realist novel demonstrates powerfully the nature of Dickens's fiction and how we are led to read it. Eliot may not have found what she was looking for in Dickens, but she found something distinct and distinctive. Far from being a weakness, what Eliot found in Dickens as 'transcendent unreality' is a strength and a consequence of his artistic method, the particular formulation of his imagination and his fictional purposes. However, this chapter is not primarily about realism. Its purpose is to delineate the special nature of Dickensian comic character, its purposes and effects, the reading practices which it requires and to explore its significance within the range of Dickensian comic fictional modes.

The Critical Context of Dickensian Comic Representation

Dickens has often been placed in uneasy contrast to the realist tradition. Harry Stone examines the most defiantly non-realist Dickensian fictional mode, namely his use of fairy tale and fantasies.[15] Stone narrates an artistic struggle for Dickens to 'give satisfactory and harmonious expression to the two generative nodes of his imagination – the realistic and the fanciful.'[16] Stone's uneasiness is indicated by his account of Dickens's aesthetic struggle: 'in his early writings Dickens tried over and over again to find a form that would accommodate the ordinary and the marvellous'.[17] His defensive posture is explicable given the traumatic entry of Dickens into the canon only a few years before on the basis of psychological and social realism as discussed in the introduction to this study.[18] Stone is divided between recognition of the power of fanciful narration and a need to assert a sense of realism. He describes the powerful melodrama of Ralph Nickleby's death in *Nicholas Nickleby*, as 'this kind of fanciful enhancement' and he refers to 'other scattered storybook touches that filter into the

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[15] Harry Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and Novel-Making* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[16] Stone, p. 81.
[17] Stone, p. 81.
[18] The key texts discussed in the introduction to this study were: T. A. Jackson, *Charles Dickens: The Progress of a Radical* (1937), (New York: Haskell House, 1971); Barbara Nathan Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948); F. R. Leavis and Q. D Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970); J Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (1958), (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1969).

central realism of the novel', and 'wand waving' which is 'often at odds with [...] the satirical realism, however stylized or caricatured, that dominates the main text.'[19]

Stone's apparent ambivalence is expressed in the generic confusion in this quotation which is dominated by his need to reassure us that realism is in the Dickensian mix somewhere. In his account of *Barnaby Rudge* he asserts that 'Dickens has here brought the wildest sort of fancifulness into the realistic mainstream of the novel. He has, for the moment, fully domesticated the extravagant power of the fairy story.'[20] While he asserts the importance of non-realist modes of character, for Stone non-realism is a contentious area and one in the context of which he feels the obligation to nod apologetically to Eliot and other realist critics. By the end of his study Stone is able to portray the Dickensian deployment of the fairy tale as sanctioned by its aesthetic combination with realism, '[i]n the hands of a master, this heightening and concentration are fused with realism'.[21]

Other critics take a less apologetic stance. Michael Hollington, in his work on the Dickensian grotesque, examined the nature of Dickensian fiction in relation to realism.[22] Hollington suggests an alternative to 'classical realism', a Bakhtinian tradition of 'grotesque realism' which challenges realism and which looks ahead to modernism.[23] He identifies this tradition from Mikhail Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and concludes,

> the term 'classic realism' as a slogan for the dominant or characteristic style of the nineteenth century [*sic*] novel may be inappropriate, and that an equally important tradition of 'fantastic' or 'romantic' realism, [...] its influence unmistakeably felt in the modernist period, must be taken into any serious account of the history of the novel.[24]

Hollington sees the Dickensian fictional mode as part of a tradition which is distinct from the nineteenth-century realist mainstream. Rather than an attempt to depict the world, the grotesque is 'a mode of indirection, designed to elicit fresh perception and evaluation of the 'normal' world and its values.'[25] Hollington's Dickensian grotesque asserts that Dickens acts in aesthetic and ideological opposition through his modes of representation, as Simcox noted in disgust. While Hollington does not deal with comedy in extended discussion, his analysis of the grotesque as a

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[19] Stone, p. 85.
[20] Stone, p. 87.
[21] Stone, p. 339.
[22] Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London: Croom Helm, 1984). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[23] Hollington, pp. 5-6.
[24] Hollington, p. 6, p. 25. Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), tr., Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
[25] Hollington, p. 63.

hybrid, heterogeneous form with the comic as one of its constituents contributes in this chapter to an account of the nature of Dickensian comic characterisation.[26]

Like Hollington, but unlike Stone, Nicola Bradbury distances Dickensian fiction from realism.[27] Her argument, like Hollington's, identifies multiplicity and heterogeneity in Dickens, though in Bradbury's case it is of narrative structure and novelistic technique rather than characterisation, in which in *Dombey and Son*, '[f]airy tale displaces realism', and 'fairy tale, myth, and legend rhetorically assert a fictional world'.[28] Bradbury recognises, as Hollington does, the importance of Bakhtin's study of Rabelais, and for the same reason. The mode of non-realist comic characterisation is as much an ideological choice as it is aesthetic: 'we need generic recognition of the various modes in the Victorian novel beside realism' because,

> Bakhtinian dialogism offers an ideological as well as an aesthetic interpretation of such carnivalesque displacement of a single tone by obstreperous polyphony.[29]

This chapter, then, builds on Stone's, Hollington's and Bradbury's accounts of Dickensian fiction and the complex relationship it has with realism. In all three cases, whether tacitly or explicitly, the relationship centres on the Bakhtinian nature of Dickensian fiction as dialogic and heteroglossic, whether the focus is modes of narration, novelistic structure, or the examination of a single mode, the grotesque, which is argued to be diverse and heterogeneous in form.[30] These critics do not foreground the comic or comic character but the comic is integral to the methods and the effects they examine. This chapter explores how comic character and the diverse reading practices that we bring to it contribute to the heteroglossia of the Dickensian novel. Stone, Hollington and Bradbury assert that comedy is integral to Dickensian modes of representation. However, their focii lie elsewhere than the comic and so the aesthetic and ideological contribution of the comic to the heteroglossic mix remains

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[26] Hollington, p. 1.
[27] Nicola Bradbury, 'Dickens and the form of the novel', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed., John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 152-66. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[28] Bradbury, p. 165.
[29] Bradbury, p. 165.
[30] Bakhtin, in his formulation of heteroglossia, describes how the novel, especially the comic novel, deploys competing and complementary 'voices', of characters, modes and languages of 'verbal-ideological belief systems – generic, professional, class-and-interest group' in which '[t]he incorporated languages and socio-ideological belief systems [...] are unmasked and destroyed as something false, hypocritical greedy, limited narrowly rationalistic, inadequate to reality.' He argues that '[*i*]*t is precisely the diversity of speech , and not the unity of normative shared language, that is the ground of style*.' Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Heteroglossia in the Novel', from 'Discourse in the Novel'(1934-5), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed., Michael Holquist, transl., Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1981), pp. 301-31, p. 311, pp. 311-12, p. 308.

underexplored. This chapter demonstrates the key role played by the modes of comic characterisation in Dickens's aesthetic and ideological methods and effects.

Evidence of the important insights that result from this approach can be found, for instance, in the way that Hollington identifies Wackford Squeers, the malignly entrepreneurial schoolmaster, as a grotesque, but does not consider the contribution made by the comic to our reading of him.[31] In early episodes Squeers is a powerful moral figure, though powerful for a commercial and self-centred morality that exercises aggressive and injurious control over the lives of Nicholas and the vulnerable children at Dotheboys Hall. Squeers is reminiscent of a stock character villain whose automatic mode of thought, rigid and blatantly cruel hypocrisy, is apparent from the moment of his introduction. Squeers is a caricature: he is physically ugly, with a solitary eye that scans the world from the perspective of greed and brutality. He is a stupid bully whose instinct is physical assault and whose teaching methods and philosophy are parodically utilitarian, a human monster malformed by economic imperatives, selfishness for himself and his family and by his fierce drive to exploit financially the weak and the vulnerable. He is, defiantly, a grotesque.

The comic is one constituent in Hollington's formulation of the heterogeneous grotesque. The comic mode should, therefore, contribute to our understanding of Squeers as much as his physical malformation and his status as a stock character. However, Hollington does not explore the role of the comic in Dickens's depiction of this grotesque character. And yet, it is crucial to do so, because, in a typically Dickensian comic paradox, it is clear that the reader derives comic pleasure from Squeers. Shockingly, we enjoy his appearances in the narrative, though such a vile character should provoke only our disdain.

In one sense we exercise corrective laughter in the Aristotelian tradition, and the pleasure we derive is from our sense of moral superiority at the expense of vicious hypocrisy. Squeers is at his comic peak in the early episodes, when he is at his most cruelly potent, and it is understandable, therefore, that we seem to derive most pleasure from him when he is at his most unpleasant. However, the Aristotelian tradition alone does not explain the pleasure which we derive from Squeers. He may be the subject of corrective laughter but, as this study will show in Chapter 5, the Dickensian satiric mode is not applied to Squeers in the same way that it is applied, for instance, to the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), or to Mrs Gowan in *Little Dorrit* (1855-7).[32] Furthermore, Squeers is able to demonstrate his continued destructive potency far

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[31] Hollington, p. 68.

[32] Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), ed., Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), Ch. 2, pp. 48-59. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), ed., Harvey Peter Sucksmith

into the novel through his kidnapping of Smike, but he also loses comic power during this phase and evolves a more conventional melodramatic villainy which is not the subject of corrective laughter. The link between the comic mode and Aristotelian corrective laughter is clearly not straightforward.

The grotesque truth is that we enjoy Squeers. Dickens makes us enjoy him through our pleasure in the comedy with which he is characterised. The physical and moral malformations that derive from his selfish commercialism are refracted through the dry ironising of the narrator, and that narrative tone leads us to pleasure. Squeers's single eye, for instance, focuses an implicit comic contrast between physical and moral ugliness and a formulation of mock-gentlemanly politeness in which, 'Mr Squeers's appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two.'[33] He is not made sympathetic by the narrator. Our enjoyment does not rehabilitate him. The grotesque is not alleviated by the comedy of his depiction. On the contrary, the comedy is integral to his depiction as a grotesque. Without it he would be – indeed he is, in the novel's closing stages – a melodramatic villain like Ralph Nickleby, who lacks the physical malformation and the blundering cruelty of Squeers, but who also lacks his comic dimension. However horribly malformed Squeers may be, however closely that physical malformation maps his moral malformation, he would not be as clearly a grotesque character if Dickens had not also made him a comic character.

We never sympathise, or empathise, with Squeers, we never see the world as he does, but Dickens does give us pleasure in him, with him and in his world view. This does not mean that Squeers loses his position as a disreputable character: what is more shocking is that it means we take pleasure in his disreputable character, we are led to enjoy it, to take pleasure in it, and to welcome it in action, even at the expense of the weak and the vulnerable. It is disturbing for us to be in this grotesque position. That is the effect of the comedy: the Dickensian grotesque is not grotesque solely because of the physical and moral distortions with which it is depicted but also because of the comic pleasure we derive from it. In view of Hollington's exploration of Dickens's formulation of 'the attraction of repulsion', it is comedy that attracts us to the repulsive Squeers.[34]

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 261-7, pp. 435-40. All subsequent references are to these editions.

[33] Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), ed., Michael Slater (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 90. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[34] Hollington refers to this phrase throughout his study of the Dickensian grotesque, for instance p. 143. Dickens used the phrase as editor of *The Daily News* 28th February 1846 in discussion of public executions. Phillip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 248. It is a phrase used twice by John Forster in his *Life*. Forster describes the young Dickens's 'profound

Hollington does not analyse the contribution that the element of comic representation makes to Squeers as a grotesque. This discussion demonstrates the critical potential of such analysis. Comic character not only informs the heteroglossia of the novel, but is a heteroglossic form itself, in which polyphony is both the cause, and the consequence, of laughter. It has both aesthetic and ideological dimensions. It creates readerly pleasure and thereby it enacts the hypocrisy of a society in which Squeers and his 'real' equivalents prospered. It reveals a society secretly drawn to, but also seeking to expel through laughter, the cruel figures who service its sordid edges.

This discussion of the comic mode of character in the context of Hollington's conceptualisation of the grotesque reveals evidence of the problematising affective ambiguity of Dickensian comedy and the reading practices that reveal it. This chapter is not about the grotesque but about the ways in which Dickensian comic character should be read. By providing close critical attention to comic character it provides evidence of Dickens's artistic and imaginative purposes and methods that reveal problematic models of comic character and of the reading strategies required to decode them. Dickensian comic representation has ideological and aesthetic purposes and effects which are in opposition to realist fiction and, thereby, in opposition to the social, historical and ideological context in which his fiction appeared. This oppositional representation can be seen in his treatment of the psychological representation of comic character. It is this that Eliot targets most in her critique of Dickensian comic character, and in her formulation of 'transcendent unreality.'

Simon Tappertit, the apprentice and aspiring revolutionary leader of *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), is an enjoyably comic creation.[35] Yet his strength as a comic character does not rely on our reading of him from a psychologically realist perspective. In fact, if we do read him from that point of view, we will lose, as perhaps some critics do, the full comic impact of his character.

Tappertit's seditious tendencies are manifest from the early scene in which he seeks to subvert the authority of Varden at the breakfast table. However, there is another strand to his personality which is equally comic and equally important to his

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attraction of repulsion to St Giles's' where 'wild visions of prodigies of wickedness, want, and beggary arose'. Much later on a visit to Paris where he describes Dickens's reaction to a poor version of *Orestes* by Dumas '[o]n another night, even at the Porte St. Martin, drawn there doubtless by the attraction of repulsion, he supped full with the horrors of classicality'. Forster quotes Dickens's reaction to the experience which emphasises, even in this jocular instance, the role that humour plays in the formulation, '[i]t really is so bad as to be almost good. Some of the Frenchified classical anguish struck me as so unspeakably ridiculous that it puts me on the broad grin as I write.' John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-74), ed., J.W.T. Ley (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928) p. 11, p. 608.

[35] Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), ed., Gordon Spence (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). All subsequent references are to this edition.

subsequent career: his vanity. Dickens makes an oblique satirical attack on those who seek to be popular demagogues through his portrayal of Tappertit's arrogant, but comic, self-regard. Tappertit's self-regard is comically misplaced, in an emblematic parallel to his regard for his own, in practice, rather poor, leadership abilities. He is particularly proud of his legs, which he sees as his most attractive and masculine feature, 'his perfect legs, the pride and glory of his life, the comfort of his existence.'[36] He believes himself to be, 'rather tall,' though, in fact he is only just over five feet tall.[37] His legs are 'perfect curiosities of littleness,' despite Tappertit being 'enraptured' with them, 'to a degree amounting to enthusiasm.'[38] As he prepares for breakfast, he practises a dance step, indicating a smug belief in the potency of his legs, 'two extraordinary steps, something between skating and minuet dancing [...] practising the same step all the time with the utmost gravity.'[39]

And yet, Tappertit's absurd obsession is comically undermined from the start. When attending to his clothes in anticipation of breakfast, he admires his legs in a fragment of mirror propped on a bench and looked at, awkwardly, over his shoulder. The mirror shows only part of his legs, as if to emphasise their shortness, which, however, does not deter his 'complacency and satisfaction.'[40] This corporeal fragmentation anticipates Tappertit's ultimate defeat and humiliation which are also figured in terms of the physical, rather than merely visual, fragmentation of his legs. At the point of his utter defeat, captured and able only to watch his desired Dolly exit rescued from captivity by the heroic Joe Willet, he is revealed to have legs which have been, 'crushed into shapeless ugliness,' during the riots.[41] On his release from prison, he is literally and metaphorically reduced: reduced to acknowledging a stature which he has always denied, reduced to Varden's protection and support, and reduced to shining shoes, an ironic obligation to recognise that other men's legs, in particular those of the guards officers who form his clientele, are healthily intact. His false legs are liable to confiscation by his wife, and, therefore, rather than being the erroneous emblem of his masculine attraction and political aspirations, they have become the grotesquely comic sign of the loss of that masculinity and the failure of those aspirations: castration and impotence, political, moral, social, marital and sexual.

The focus of our reading of Tappertit's character is, clearly, not his psychological processes. We would be disappointed if we tried to read him in a way

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[36] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 647. Carey discusses Dickens's obsession with the comic potential of legs. Carey, p. 61-2
[37] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 79.
[38] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 79.
[39] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 79.
[40] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 79.
[41] *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 647.

that was based on Eliot's conception of psychological truth within realist fiction, as, perhaps, she was disappointed. That is not to say, however, that Tappertit is a character whose psychological processes are in any way false. In fact, they are entirely consistent throughout the novel with a character who is an emblem of the personal vanity that leads to the arrogant self-belief of the aspirant demagogue. Much of the comedy of his character is the result of his consistent psychological impulses coming into contact, usually comic conflict, with a range of other characters: Miggs, Varden, Dennis, Hugh, Dolly. Nor is he a simple character, in the sense that his roles in the novel do not bear critical scrutiny. He plays a number of key roles and he bears significantly on the action and on our understanding of Dickens's artistic purposes in the novel. Within the overall structure of relationships and themes in *Barnaby Rudge,* he is a 'victim' of benign capitalist oppression, a focus of political discontent for the social class he represents, a satirist of his domestic life, an ironiser of Miggs, and a leader of the riots. We are less interested in his existence as representing, in some way, a real human mind, as we are interested in our understanding of the roles he plays in the overall texture of the novel. The focus of Tappertit's character and the roles he plays in the novel are, simply, not validated by reference to standard realist psychological readings. Tappertit's drama is not one of psychology, but of legs.[42]

Forms of Comic Representation

Comedy, as a genre of literature, as a mode of narration, and as the basis of character type and characterisation, pre-dates, of course, the realist novel. Dickens uses the customary realist principle that character can be read through the physical body and that psychological states, and the changes to those states, are made manifest in physical forms. However, his distortions of physical form in both comic and non-comic, usually unsympathetic, characters, is indebted to older, traditional and theatrical forms of characterisation. The degree of physical abnormality of comic characters such as Cuttle, Squeers, Bagstock, and many others, echoes forms of dramatic physical, rather than literary, representation, such as pantomime, circus, or *commedia dell' arte*, where there is no attempt to embody comic character in anything approaching a physically, socially or psychologically realist mode.[43] Clowns, with their distinctive clothes and

[42] John Bowen explores the role of Tappertit's legs in the encounter with Stagg. John Bowen, *Other Dickens*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 179-80. *Barnaby Rudge*, p. 111.
[43] Robert Garis analyses Dickens as performance, '[t]he kind of art Dickens practises I propose to call 'theatrical art.'' However, like many critics of his time, Garis is keen for this approach not to lead to Dickens being seen as outside the intellectually validated mode of realism, 'I do not mean [...] that Dickens's art is merely a non-realistic art.' Garis's use of the word 'merely'

strong facial make-up, the pantomime dame, the ugly sisters, Harlequin and Pantaloon, are the modes of representation that influenced Dickens in his representation of comic characters. Hollington explores within the context of the grotesque the deployment by Dickens of pantomime and *commedia dell'arte* characters.[44] Crucially Hollington asserts, as this chapter will also assert, that Dickens's deployment of traditional and popular modes of character representation delineate not a comedy that is old fashioned, or irrelevant to modernity, but one that is the reverse, where Dickens is 'a writer comparable to Gogol, a link between Romantic irony and modernism'.[45] But again, the interplay of the comic within this grotesque heterogeneity is not given due weight, as this chapter seeks to do. Bradbury's discussion of multiple narrative modes points to similar effects in the Dickensian novel,

> the diverse possibilities of the form: melodrama, oppression, pantomime, romance [...] his work evolves in a dialogic sequence [...] Dickens's powers in creation of character and as satirist of social evils have always been acknowledged but often supposed to be superficial, a matter of an eye and an ear for idiosyncracies [*sic*]. It is his formal development of chaotic and productive tensions in the novel through what may be diagnosed as sympathetic, inductive, corrective, and affective structures that harness such immediate effects to deeper understanding.[46]

However, here, too, there is no development of the specific role that comedy takes in this narrative heterogeneity. This chapter argues that within the context of Bradbury's 'chaotic and productive tensions', a phrase that might apply similarly to Hollington and the grotesque, that there is a clear area for the critical examination of Dickensian forms of comic representation.

Dickens's deployment of comic character, then, is rooted in older, popular traditions of characterisation that can be found in theatrical modes, such as melodrama and farce, to which he was drawn both as a child and as an adult, to novels of sentiment of the eighteenth century, to romance and fairy tale, and ultimately to Renaissance and

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is telling in this context. Garis goes on to see character within the context of Dickens's fiction as theatre, 'Dickens is a performing artist [...] [h]is characters are performers too.' Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 24, p. 25, p. 63. Edwin Eigner's study of Dickens's indebtedness to pantomime sees it as 'the essential pattern of Dickens's comedy, the basis for his psychological insights and his social vision, as well as the modus operandi of his aesthetics.' Eigner's study focuses on *David Copperfield*, though it surveys a range of other novels, and it demonstrates models of characterisation and explorations of the roles which characters play which are evidence of their roots in pantomime, such as Columbine, Harlequin, Pantaloon, Lover and Good Fairy. Edwin Eigner, *The Dickens Pantomime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). All subsequent references are to these editions.

[44] Hollington, pp. 8-9.

[45] Hollington, p. 11.

[46] Bradbury, pp. 156-7.

medieval concepts of the 'humours.'[47] Nevertheless, he deployed them within the context of a growing tradition of nineteenth-century realism. His novels were grounded in thematic and structural concerns about the nature of mid-century society, the impact of emergent modernity, and the price that it exacted from the individual and from social structures, such as the family. In other words, his imaginative and fictional mission was a contemporary one, and vividly relevant to the society which he saw being created around him. And yet, older formulations of comedy and comic character were deployed in that intensely contemporary mission.

The sense of representational opposition revealed in the analysis of Squeers and Tappertit show that there are ways other than the socially or psychologically realist to evaluate character and its role within narrative, from whatever narrative mode that character comes. One alternative view of character, for instance, is to see it purely as an artifice: as a function of a work of art, constructed by a literary artist in the service of artistic purposes. From this point of view, as Uri Margolin points out, characters are 'invented [...] through the use of language, following certain literary-artistic conventions. They are ultimately semiotic constructs or creatures of the word.'[48] From this perspective, characters are 'abstract [...] they do not exist in real space and time, and are more like concepts [...] they *are* [...] complexes of descriptions'[49] From Margolin's use of the word 'convention', we can infer that they are as much structures of reading as of literary creation.

E.M. Forster, in his study of fiction for the 1927 Clark lectures, *Aspects of the Novel*, writes, essentially, from the position of the realist critic's concern for some degree of psychological verisimilitude, and he states that 'the actors in a story are, or pretend to be, human beings,' and that '[s]ince the novelist is himself a human being, there is an affinity between himself and his subject-matter.'[50] Nevertheless, almost despite himself, he sees the issue of character as potentially complex. In a phrase that foreshadows Margolin's 'semiotic constructs or creatures of the word', he describes

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[47] Northrop Frye sees Dickensian fiction in this context, '[w]hat he writes [...] are not realistic novels but fairy tales in the low mimetic displacement.' Character, therefore, can be seen within a dramatic tradition which emphasises New Comedy of Classical tradition, via Ben Jonson, '[m]ost of the people [...] are neither realistic portraits [...] nor 'caricatures' [...] [t]hey are humors [...] [t]he humor is a character identified with a characteristic'. Northrop Frye, 'Dickens and the Comedy of Humours' (1968), *The Stubborn Structure* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 218-40, p. 218, p. 223. Eigner acknowledges what he sees as the undoubted influence of Jonson and the New Comedy, but asserts that pantomime is a 'more immediate' influence on Dickensian characterisation. Eigner, p. 9.

[48] Uri Margolin, 'Character', *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed., David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 66-79, p. 67. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[49] Margolin, p. 68.

[50] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005), p. 54. All subsequent references are to this edition.

characters as 'word-masses,' which acknowledges the constructed nature of fiction in the same way as Margolin.[51] He goes on to say that '[t]hey are not real because they are like ourselves [...] but because they are convincing.'[52] Forster's analysis is interesting. He is clearly troubled by the literary representation of the real, seeing it not as 'reality' but as something which is able to convince us of its reality through conventions of literary creation and of reading practices. Realism is a pretence of itself.

In his famous division of fictional characters into the 'flat' and the 'round,' Forster attempts a taxonomy of character.[53] But his attempts fail to satisfy even himself and it is significant that he uses Dickensian characters as illustrations of his failure. Forster asserts that Dickensian characters are essentially flat, and that they lack, 'the incalculability of life.'[54] By implication, Dickensian characters are 'humours' in the mould of sixteenth and seventeenth-century drama, and are sometimes referred to by Forster as types, and sometimes caricatures, which, he argues, work best as characters when they are comic.[55] However, Forster seems unable to maintain, even for his own purposes, the critical stance on Dickensian character that this analysis implies. He notes that our reading is ambivalent, or even ambiguous, and that it creates within his own critical terms an apparent paradox, 'Dickens's people are nearly all flat [...] and yet there is this wonderful feeling of human depth.'[56] Forster goes on to state that, 'Dickens [...] does use types and caricatures [...] and yet achieves effects that are not mechanical and a vision of humanity that is not shallow.'[57] Forster's problematic and unresolved formulations indicate the extent of the difficulties that we experience in our understanding of Dickensian comic character and the reading strategies that it requires.

What Forster calls 'convincing', other critics, who recognise the artificial nature of realist conventions of character, term false. In his survey of the application of structural linguistic analysis to narrative, Roland Barthes considers the development of the 'modern' notion of character which developed from earlier, Aristotelian, models of character, theorised on older narrative forms, such as folklore and fables.[58] Barthes notes how, 'character, which until then had been nothing but a name, the agent of an action, took on psychological consistency, became an individual, a "person," a fully

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[51] 'These word-masses are his characters.' Forster, p. 55. Margolin, p. 67.
[52] Forster, p. 69.
[53] Forster, p. 73.
[54] Forster, p. 81.
[55] Forster, p. 73, p. 77.
[56] Forster, p. 76.
[57] Forster, p. 76.
[58] Roland Barthes, 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative', *New Literary History*. 6 (1975): 237-272. All subsequent references are to this edition.

constituted "being"' and 'the instant embodiment of a psychological essence.'[59] The construction of the modern critical understanding of 'character,' with its range of realist, particularly psychologically realist, conventions, and readers' expectations of 'character,' is dependant on the development of particular forms of literature, at particular times and in particular cultures, the development of which has been paralleled by the development of particular reading practices.[60] Barthes concludes that, 'the claim that 'realism' is the prime motivation of narrative must be largely discounted,' and that,

> [t]he function of narrative is not to 'represent'; it is to put together a scene which [...] does not belong to the mimetic order in any way. The 'reality' of a sequence does not lie in the 'natural' order of actions that make it up [...] the origin of a sequence is not the observation of reality.[61]

Importantly, Barthes goes on to assert that while realism is a falsely authoritarian signifier, there is, nevertheless, meaning in narrative and in its analysis, and he argues that, '[i]t is the passion to discover meaning, it is a striving towards a higher order of relation which also carries its emotions, its hopes, its dreams, its triumphs.'[62]

Barthes points out the common trends in structural analyses of character: that character is seen in terms of narrative, and the function of character within narrative, and that there is a limited range of possible character functions. Whether the critic of Dickensian comedy follows this line of analysis or not, the construction of Dickensian comic character, with its almost defiant non-realism, its range of overtly comic names,

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[59] Barthes, p. 256.

[60] Barthes draws on the work of narrative theorists who have analysed the concept of character in ways other than the realist. Vladimir Propp, in his formalist analysis of fairy tales, saw character in terms of roles and functions within the overall patterns of narrative of which they formed a part, not in terms of their supposed psychological reality. Such characters have existence solely in terms of narrative, and the actions which the narrative demands of them, and Propp reduced character to a taxonomy based on those actions. Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1927), (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981). Tzvetan Todorov, from the same structuralist perspective, but with a different approach to analysing character, advocated a focus on the broad relationships, which he terms 'basic predicates,' between characters, and examination of the 'rules' by which those relationships change during the narrative. From this formulation of poetics derived from structuralism Todorov suggests, as Propp does in a different way, that narrative and character are deeply implicated in each other and that character is, in effect, a function of narrative, and that these functions can be scrutinised in terms of their recognisable patterns, and classified accordingly. 'We shall call this minimal unit the *narrative proposition.* The proposition involves [...] two kinds of constituents, which we may call [...] agents and predicates.' Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics* (1973), (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981), p. 49. Algirdas Julien Greimas takes this analytical, even scientific, approach further, in his reduction of character to grammatical terms, as, 'actants,' in which the key characteristic of a character is not 'what they are,' but 'what they do.' Further, Greimas sees character functioning in terms of only three potential axes of action, to which he gives grammatical language, and metaphorical grammatical functions, analogous to Todorov's 'predicates.' Algirdas Julien Greimas, 'Actants, actors, and figures', *On Meaning: Selected Writing in Semiotic Theory*, trans. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 106-20. Barthes, p. 256/7.

[61] Barthes, p. 271.

[62] Barthes, p. 271.

physical abnormality, and verbal tags, and the consequent focus by the reader, as with Simon Tappertit, on narrative and thematic function, rather than psychological plausibility, is illuminated by these theoretical models of 'character as function,' rather than character as 'the real.' In other words, the practice of Dickensian comic characterisation is consciously to expose the constructed nature of character, to expose the sign and the signified, and thereby to expose what Terry Eagleton, in his study of English colonial hegemony in Ireland, calls realism's 'chronically naturalising mode'.[63] Dickens, then, becomes in his practice of comic character, a writer who, as the modernists were to do later, uses the comic to undermine and subvert the otherwise smooth relationship between fiction and the real.

As well as indicating that character and narrative can be read in non-realist ways, Barthes's essay has implications for the process of narration, and the practices which the reader brings to bear on texts. Under this scrutiny, the role of writing is 'not to 'transmit' the narrative, but to make it conspicuous.'[64] He discusses, briefly, for instance, oral literatures, in which, 'the 'author' is not the one who invents the most beautiful stories, but the one who achieves the greatest mastery over the code he shares with his audience.'[65] In the context of oral literatures, 'it is difficult to conceive a 'tale' without the coded narrative signs, ('Once upon a time,' etc.)'[66] In other words, for Barthes, the whole process of writing and reading becomes non-realist one, and one in which the healthy approach is for the constructed nature of fiction to reveal itself, and for the sign to become the ''double sign' – the sign which gestures to it own material existence at the same time as it conveys a meaning'.[67] It is the scientific analysis of character and of narrative, Barthes seems to argue, that are the only ways in which criticism, or literary theory, have an impact on the 'real' world:

> the narrational code should be the last level to be reached by our analysis; going any further would be overstepping the limit of narrative-as-object or transgressing the immanence rule which underlies this analysis [...] beyond the narrational level begins the external world, that is to say other systems (social, economic, ideological).[68]

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[63] Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 196. Eagleton asserts, '[r]ealism aspires to a unity of subject and object, of the psychological and the social', and he explores, 'those realist notions of coherent narrative and self-determining characters'. p. 149, p. 298. All subsequent references are to this edition as 'Eagleton, *Heathcliff*.'

[64] Barthes, p. 264.

[65] Barthes, p. 264.

[66] Barthes, p. 264.

[67] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 136.

[68] Barthes, p. 264.

We should not confuse, this analysis seems to argue, stories with real lives, or fictional characters with real people. Fiction is a system of signs and codes, in which both writer and reader join, but which realism seek to disguise:

> there are innumerable narrational devices which try to naturalize the ongoing narrative, artfully presenting it as the product of natural circumstances [...] This reluctance to dramatize its codes is peculiar to bourgeois society and the mass culture to which it has given rise: both insist on having signs that do not look like signs.[69]

Barthes's use of the words 'naturalize' and 'natural' to describe the process by which we seek to deny the fictionality of fiction, echo the words used by Eliot, and the reviewer of *Bleak House*, and by implication Simcox, in their critique of Dickensian characterisation. It is as if the realist critic, such as Eliot, is afraid that fiction will lose something – its imaginative power, perhaps, or its cultural relevance, or its intellectual credibility – if it does not have a clear link to the real. And yet, Barthes indicates that the reading of character as non-realist does not imply any diminution of the meaning or the impact of fiction, 'the summary or paraphrase of a narrative (if carried out according to structural criteria) preserves the individuality of the message [...] narrative is *reducible* without fundamental damage.'[70]

Barthes asserts the fundamental value, meaning and relevance of literature independently of the claims of realism. Even if Dickensian comic character is not realist, it does not fail to be relevant to literary purpose, method and vision. Furthermore, the defiantly non-realist nature of Dickensian comic character, with roots in traditional and popular modes of narrative, is what makes it most relevant to an artistic vision that reveals the alienating and non-naturalising imperatives of emergent industrial and urbanised nineteenth-century modernity. Not only does Dickensian comic character not read realistically, but that lack of realism, far from being evidence of failure, is evidence of strength. Dickens disturbs the relationship between sign and signified, in order to create the Barthesian, healthy – because self-referential – sign, and the comedy and comedic representations of character which result are processes of disturbed signification. In that sense, and in the same way as Dickensian comedy created a metanarrative of the quixotic, Dickensian comic character is a metanarrative of reading and misreading the realist.

On the other hand, our actual experience of reading Dickens is not as coldly scientific as these schematic analyses might imply. Paradoxically, despite their lack of conventional realism, we often sense that we can recognise Dickens's characters, as,

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[69] Barthes, p. 265.
[70] Barthes, p. 269.

perhaps, we recognise individuals in our own world. Certainly, the nature of many of Dickens's comic characters, such as Micawber, Squeers, or Jingle, live vividly for us, and seem almost to have a life of their own, a vivid, extra-literary, quality, despite, or, perhaps, because of, their 'exaggeration' or unreality. Our exploration of character is therefore ambivalent, rather like the ambivalent reactions of Dickens's own early critics, and suitably ambivalent for a literary artist who mingles older, traditional and popular literary and narrative forms in a vividly contemporary mission. From the critical point of view, we are aware of the potential to understand Dickens's comic characters from a Barthian, non-realist, literary-artistic perspective – even the desirability, or necessity, of doing so – where they become agents of narrative action, as functions within a domain of narrative or as elements in a patterning of artistic imperatives. And yet, while recognising the value of this scientific approach, it is also clear that, '[w]e are willingly engaged in a game of make-believe' a game whose nature is fed by, and defined by, those formulations of narrative and character that defy the realist.[71]

There are constant tensions, therefore, between modes of interpretation of character, as there are between modes of narration. It is these tensions that Dickens not only exploits, but, in fact, manipulates. He deploys varieties of modes and styles, concentrations of character types, richness of physical and psychological characteristics, to the extent that the exuberance – or 'exaggeration,' as some of his critics would have it – of character and narrative, themselves become artistic qualities in the service of his imaginative purposes. Eliot's criticism that Dickens becomes 'transcendent in his unreality,' is not only accurate, but an inevitable consequence of Dickens's imaginative and fictional concerns.

Dickens is never afraid to advertise the nature – indeed the 'signs' – of his comic mode. He frequently references processes of reading and of representation and those references emphasise, defiantly, that a non-realist reading strategy is required. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the narrator comments on:

> such principle as prevails in melodramas, and in virtue of which the elderly farmer with the comic son always knows what the dumb girl means when she takes refuge in his garden, and relates her personal memoirs in incomprehensible pantomime.[72]

The melodramatic action which the narrator gently satirises is, from the narrator's point of view, blatantly and undisguisedly absurd. In fact, the narrator's comic enjoyment of the melodrama is increased by the artificiality of its representation. Dickensian comedy

[71] Margolin, p. 71.
[72] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 90.

becomes the metanarrative that confounds the realist narrative. The narrator's comic meaning is conveyed, and enjoyed by the reader, through a process which recognises the absurdity of the reading demanded by the melodramatic action, and the consequent deployment, by the narrator, of a reading strategy which is antagonistic to the melodrama. The explicit satirical articulation of this style of dramatic representation, emphasising its implausibility and its artificiality, constitutes a pointer to the range of perspectives through which we can read character and action, in this scene and elsewhere.

Subsequently, the reader is given an opportunity to read the action of Pecksniff in terms which are similar to those given by the narrator's comments. He contrives to find himself discovered by old Martin, 'reading – by an accident: he apologised for it – an excellent theological work. There were cake and wine upon a little table – by another accident, for which he also apologised.'[73] Here the deceptively unobtrusive ventriloquising of Pecksniff by the narrator invites us to read his hypocrisy much as we would through a rhetorical gesture on stage. Later, in a scene of grotesque love-making to Mary Graham, Pecksniff uses the florid idiom of stage romance, in a scene which itself comically stages a scene of conventionally unwanted love-making and, equally conventionally, principled rejection, ''[a]h, naughty Hand!' said Mr Pecksniff, apostrophising the reluctant prize, 'why did you take me prisoner!''[74] In both cases, the style of narration almost places the reader in the position of a member of a stage audience: not within the consciousness of the character, but placed externally. We watch the physical form and the physical action, we hear the words he speaks delivered through the dry ironising of the narrator, we witness and interpret, almost as a member of an audience would, his hypocrisy and his selfishness, and we enjoy our growing understanding of it. As with Squeers, we enjoy the character and it is the narratorially conscious metareading of the scene which draws the reader away from a simplistic representation of character as solely caricatured comic types and turns the scene into a rich comic interplay of understandings, in which we come to enjoy, ambivalently, the vices of others, even while they are harshly exposed.

The scene in *Martin Chuzzlewit* in which Ruth Pinch meets Westlock is another where Dickens deploys the idiom of comic romance, though with the intention, ultimately, of gently undermining it as a narrative signifier.[75] The innocent and wholesomely good, though much put upon, brother and sister are making the best of life, and each other's company in their new rooms. They are poor but their life has the

[73] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 214.
[74] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 552.
[75] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Ch. 39, pp. 672-83.

quality of the happy fairy tale, where even the butcher can make 'a piece of art, high art,' and Ruth and Tom's steak is wrapped in, 'the greenest cabbage leaf ever grown.'[76] Tom's attempt at heart-warming optimistic resilience, in the face of uncertainty and poverty, Ruth's girlish willingness and her pretended competence at cooking the pie, all have the tone of romance, reminiscent, perhaps of Babes in the Wood, '[t]here is no knowing what may happen, if we try hard.'[77] In the way that is conventional in romance, or in fairy tales, Tom's optimism becomes validated almost immediately, and in conventional form, by the arrival of his friend, Westlock, who – having been conventionally attracted to Ruth – relates his conventional story of the mysterious stranger who has an unexpected offer of work for Tom. The narrator makes explicit in this episode the tension between conflicting modes of narration, and conflicting modes of reading, as he pretends to feel obliged, with consciously ironic intent, to rein in the exuberance of romance in favour of a more sober realism, though it is an attempt which is doomed, by the intention of the narrator, to fail,

> [o]h, heaven, what a wicked little stomacher! and to be gathered up into little plaits by the strings before it could be tied, and to be tapped, rebuked and wheedled, at the pockets, before it would be set right, which at last it did, and when it did – but never mind; this is a sober chronicle.[78]

Dickens frequently makes narratorial, or even authorial, interventions which bring the reader's attention to the constructed nature of the narrative, to the wide range of reading strategies which the reader is required to deploy, and which point to the material and artificial nature of character and of the text. The impact of these interventions is comic and the comic mode, therefore, is the means of disrupting the naturalising tendencies of what could otherwise be thought to be realist narrative. We are drawn to laugh not just at the narrative, but at the means of narrative, which Dickens makes an object of laughter. Through that meta-narratising process comic character, too, is denaturalised. The clearest example of this is Dickens's footnote in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which emphasises clearly the difference between the author and his characters: '[t]he most credulous reader will scarcely believe that Mr Pecksniff's reasoning was once set upon as the Author's!!'[79] This is a clear statement of the artificial, non-realist, nature of Dickens's narrative, emphasising not only the concepts of, and interplay between, author, character and reader, but also that the reader should not be too 'credulous,' which is, in some degree, a necessary requirement of the process of reading, though it is also what creates the danger of mistakenly reading a text for the

[76] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 674.
[77] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 675.
[78] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 676.
[79] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 394.

real world. Even the rhetorical double exclamation marks breach the conventional realist decorum of distance between author and reader.

Nor is this an isolated example. At the start of Chapter 31, the narrator explains that 'The closing words of the last chapter lead naturally to the commencement of this, its successor'.[80] In a reference to the classic image of realist narration, the mirror, the narrator of *Martin Chuzzlewit* describes the face of old Martin's grandnephew as lacking in physical form, and he is able to 'save looking-glasses the trouble of reflecting more than just the first idea and sketchy notion of a face, which had never been carried out.'[81] This image is the far extent of meta-narration: an image of a non-image of a non-character, a signifier of a signifier of failed signification, a signifier with no signified.

Dickens, then, subverts and problematises the process of reading character by emphasising the non-realist basis of character, by highlighting the complexities and failures of realist modes of reading, and by writing in a constantly shifting and antagonistic range of non-realist narrative modes. One of the most complex interplays between narrative modes, reading strategies and comic characterisation is found in *Dombey and Son* (1846-8).[82] In large part, this novel has the atmosphere, emblems and narrative movements of the romance and the fairy tale as Bradbury and, particularly Stone, demonstrate.[83]

Dickens's explicit deployment of romance and fairy tale in the depiction of character in *Dombey and Son* functions, partly, with comic characters who represent generic comic values. Walter Gay's role as rescuer of Florence prefigures his later and more decisive rescue and indicates that, outside the immediate reach of the Dombey 'court,' as in fairy tale and romance, there is an alternative world of human and humane

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[80] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 556.
[81] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 108.
[82] Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed., Alan Horsman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[83] Bradbury's discussion, informed by a recognition of Bakhtinian dialogism in Dickensian fiction, of the development of the 'shape, pace, structure, and texture' of Dickens's 'novel form' highlights the romance elements of *Dombey and Son*. Although *Dombey and Son* has 'a tighter form' than preceding novels, 'Fairy-tale displaces realism [...] fairy-tale, myth, and legend rhetorically assert a fictional world opposed to Dombey's calculations, and in this way narrative mode contributes to the oblique attack [...] on his assumptions.' Bradbury, p. 152, p. 159. Stone asserts that the novel reveals 'the new fairy-tale method', in which 'a virtuoso fusion of reality and fantasy' creates 'a book about 'the way we live now.' It dealt with businessmen and railroads, capital and labour, the concerns and problems of the day. Yet this new book, with its new subject matter, and its up-to-date milieu, was to have the old indebtedness to fairy stories.' Nevertheless, Stone is still concerned to assert that Dickens enjoys realist credentials, '[a]ll this is woven into a densely realistic context [...] What emerges is a more profound realism, a realism that transcends the merely realistic [...] he joins iron realism with directive supernaturalism'. Stone, p. 191, p. 144, pp. 156-7.

values, inhabited by Sol Gills, Captain Cuttle and Walter.[84] The values these characters embody are indicated, conventionally, by their poverty, but also that, despite their poverty, they are hardworking, loyal and supportive – even loving – to each other. Here, as Snow White does with the dwarfs, Florence finds a comic sanctuary, both in her rescue from 'Good Mrs Brown' and her subsequent rescue from her father, with her alternative family of self-abnegating comic friends: Walter, the strong, masculine but sensitive hero and Captain Cuttle, the bluff, but deeply loving, alternative father.[85]

These characters' roles, then, echo those of characters within fairy tales and romances. Further, Dickens also establishes a comic, fairy tale, romance-like, moral universe where these characters play their roles: bad characters are punished, weak or misguided characters are educated and ultimately reformed and good characters endure their trials successfully and receive their own restoration. Dombey is humbled and educated, his pride is humiliated, and he finds redemption in Sol's shop, with his alternative friends, with his true, comic, family, and without the trappings of proud commercial majesty. Florence has her father restored to her, and can begin to produce future generations of a healthier commercialism. It is important to point out that these references to romance and fairy tale are not idle literary glances. Dickens powerfully embodies in Cuttle not only comic opposition to Dombey and to the values that Dombey represents, but also opposition to conventional realist narrative. It is Cuttle's blatantly absurd, fairy-tale like belief, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that Walter will, as Dick Whittington does, not only make his fortune, but marry the master's daughter, which eventually comes true. Walter does, indeed, return to London, after suffering a shipwreck, and undergoing subsequent adventures which include proving himself in a position of trust, and he does return to wed Florence.

However, those structures and emblems are renewed through the comic mode. His deployment of these echoes of alternative narrative modes of character in a vividly contemporary context results not in a simplification of narrative and character, as critics like Eliot may have supposed, but in a problematising of it. There is an interplay between the demands of the narrative as a critique of nineteenth-century emergent modernity and the nature of the comic characterisation deployed by Dickens, in which he seeks to renew, reform and complicate conventions of comic character. While not

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[84] *Dombey and Son*, pp. 74-88.

[85] The Gills household of Walter, Old Sol and Cuttle reflects Holly Furneaux's description of non-heteronormative, elective 'families of choice' in 'physically eccentric domestic spaces', which she describes as 'an important corrective to the belief in a monolithic Victorian family model'. A detailed examination of the comic mode may enrich Furneaux's assertion of the importance, of 'sunnier, more optimistic interpretations' than have hitherto been possible with queer readings of texts, particularly Dickensian texts. Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 28, p. 50, p. 22, p. 14.

conforming to a rigid expectation of a fairy tale or romance character, Major Bagstock has clear affinities with a formulation of character which is both descended from those narrative modes, and yet is also a reformulation in response to modern commercial and social realities. Like many Dickensian comic characters clearly separated from a psychologically realist mode, he is a grotesque: physically malformed, with wooden features, a blue face, staring eyes, rigid jaw-bones, long, elephantine ears, and a large stomach.[86] He is behaviourally automatised, with an obsessive self-interest, manifested not only as friendship for Dombey, but also as his bizarre linguistic tag in which he constantly reformulates his own name, 'old Joe Bagstock, old Joey Bagstock, old J. Bagstock, old Josh Bagstock'.[87] This repetitive refashioning and comically automatic self-assertion do not reflect the conventions of realism but are required by a narrative concerned with issues of identity and the ways in which they are manufactured by commercial modernity and, in the Major's case, imperialism. The Major becomes a comic narrative force, disquieting in his self-interest and, at times, threatening, destructive and malign, but, at the same time, enjoyably comic as a manifestation of one of the guiding principles, that of selfishness, of the world that Dickens saw coming into being around him.

Captain Cuttle is further evidence of Dickensian comic representation in which a character who has roots in romance and fairy tale plays a thematic role. He is exuberant with vivid life and he fulfils important functions such as his rescue of Florence. He is clearly a comic character, comic both in the sense of being a source of our laughter, and also comic in the sense of representing values which counter the predominantly exploitative commercial imperatives of the novel. He is a non-realist character, though not a stereotype or a caricature. He may be an example of those which Eliot called 'transcendent in their unreality.' His precautions when attempting to leave his lodgings and escape the fierce Mrs MacStinger, his landlady, are farcical and clearly mark him as an absurd figure. Cuttle also has the verbal and behavioural tics that mark the Dickensian comic with his constantly shifting search for the source of examples of literary moral improvement and his desire to, '[o]verhaul the book' and 'when found, turn the leaf down.'[88]

His importance lies, again, less in his psychological or social realism, or the lack of it, and more in the moral weight he carries in the overall texture of the novel. Dickens deploys Cuttle against the false vision of Dombey's proud and disdainful commercialism. In contrast to this commercialism, Cuttle displays the true human

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[86] *Dombey and Son*, pp. 91-2.
[87] *Dombey and Son*, p. 92.
[88] *Dombey and Son*, p. 47, p. 45.

values of understanding and sympathy, compassion and care for others, qualities which are shown by Dickens in defiantly non-realist ways: his comically malleable body shape, his lack of knowledge of the world and in his lack of control over events. But in these comic 'failures,' when judged by Dombey's pride, at least, live sanity and love. He provides nurture, protection and sanctuary for Florence following the rejection from her own family and he provides continuity during the absences of Walter and Sol Gills. He is strong, in the sense that he can be a source of comic restoration as in his domestic friendship with Mr Dombey at the end of the novel. But he is also comically and endearingly vulnerable and he admits his comic vulnerability in his fear of the formidable Mrs MacStinger. Captain Cuttle possesses the physical distortions which often accompany the Dickensian comic character, with his missing hand, and the red mark that results from his tight hat though, significantly, he does not have the facial distortions, particularly of the eyes, which mark those comic characters who are satirised, such as Squeers, or Major Bagstock, with his 'complexion like a Stilton cheese, and his eyes like a prawn's.'[89]

In contrast to those characters who are not comic, and who are represented as fixed entities, such as the stiff pride of Mr Dombey, Cuttle is bizarrely polymorphous, in a way that is reminiscent of the characters of that other site of comic virtue, Sleary's circus, in *Hard Times*, where Childers is 'a most remarkable sort of Centaur, compounded of the stable and the play-house. Where the one began, and the other ended, nobody could have told'.[90] When Walter goes to Cuttle's lodgings seeking his advice after Mr Brogley takes over Gills' shop, Cuttle appears, within a single paragraph, to be both, 'one of those timber-looking men, suits of oak as well as hearts' and 'as if the Captain had been a bird and those had been his feathers.'[91] He is able to change the functions of his own body, as his hand, replaced by a hook, can also be substituted by a knife when eating. Cuttle's comic sympathy with the misfortunes of others is clear in his reaction to Walter's dilemma when he has to tell Old Sol that he is to go abroad on Mr Dombey's instructions. He is metaphorically consumed by his concern, 'Captain Cuttle's infinite consternation and astonishment [...] gradually swallowed that gentleman up, until it left his face quite vacant, and the suit of blue, the glazed hat, and the hook, apparently without an owner.'[92] This is an important indication of Cuttle's comic value in the novel, his all consuming concern for others, in contrast to the all consuming concern for self that characterises Dombey and his 'court.'

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[89] *Dombey and Son*, p. 134.
[90] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed., David Craig (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 72. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[91] *Dombey and Son*, p. 125.
[92] *Dombey and Son*, p. 222.

It is Cuttle's materiality, as well as the range of narrative functions, which are the Dickensian signals of his comic role. He is not fixed physically and his view of the world is, equally, not fixed, or limited to a single view as is Dombey's and the others who share Dombey's commercial imperative. The Dickensian narrative signs indicate that Cuttle is the repository of comic yet noble human values which are absurd but essential and with which Dickens wishes to oppose the cold inflexibility of Dombey. In terms of romance or fairy tale, he plays the role of the simple, but intensely loyal and active, companion and friend. As soon as Walter has finished his account of Old Sol's difficulties, and without the need for words, Cuttle assembles his meagre savings and his limited collection of valuables, and sets off to put his money in the service of friendship.[93] He represents the values which should be most precious in the world, and he wishes to put those values into operation. Yet, significantly, he also represents the extent to which those values are an embarrassment in the competitively commercial world he and the other characters inhabit. As he and Walter set off for Brighton to plead for Old Sol's rescue, even Walter is embarrassed at the prospect of Cuttle using his store of valuables to impress Mr Dombey, a recognition of just how out of place Cuttle's comic, in the sense of both ridiculous and commendable, values are. During the interview, Cuttle does cut an embarrassingly out-of-place figure, with his large shirt-collar and his 'knobby nose', waving to the ladies with his hook, and the imprint of his hat, like a 'red equator round his head.'[94]

The comic contrast between Cuttle and Mr Dombey is a stark one. Where Cuttle tells Dombey that Old Sol's debt is the result of friendship, 'helping a man,' Dombey asserts his own harsh business interpretation of the action as, 'engaging for other men. It is an act of dishonesty, and presumption.'[95] Paul is consulted on the decision to lend the money. Mr Dombey's hope is that Paul will learn, in some way, the answers to his previous questions, which were so troubling to his father, ''And you see, Paul [...] how powerful money is, and how anxious people are to get it.''[96] His need to feel the distance between himself and this decision – which could be interpreted as an act of kindness contrary to the commercial imperatives by which he lives, or a recognition of the debt he owes to Walter for Florence's rescue – is so strong that he asserts, twice, to Walter and Cuttle, that it is Paul's decision.

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[93] *Dombey and Son*, p. 133.
[94] *Dombey and Son*, p. 139.
[95] *Dombey and Son*, p. 141.
[96] *Dombey and Son*, p. 142. Earlier in the novel Paul Dombey disconcertingly asks his father, 'Papa! what's money?', 'I mean, [...] what can it do?', and, perhaps most disconcertingly, 'Why didn't money save me my mama?' His father's answers do not satisfy him. Paul perceives that the questions 'alarm' Dombey and make him 'uncomfortable'. pp. 99-100.

Cuttle is clearly, in one sense, a supernumerary in this scene in that the business of the plot could be conducted in his absence. However, the inclusion of his character adds comic thematic depth. Cuttle presents a stark contrast with the other male adult, the other 'father' figure, Dombey. Unlike the formal man of money, Cuttle knows money's true value: to assist the lives of others, to restore happiness, to provide security and to show human love. It is for this reason that Cuttle's absurd attempt to leave his pathetic stock of trinkets as recompense for Dombey's agreement to alleviate Old Sol's debt becomes an important assertion of his innate understanding of the value of wealth, '[t]he stock's one security. I'm another.'[97] It is a nonsensically comic attempt at mutual recognition as men of property and an act which Dombey peremptorily rejects as we would expect. It serves thematically to emphasise Cuttle's lack of comprehension of how Dombey's, and capitalism's, values differ from his own. What Cuttle is willing to do so freely – give what he can, in fact all he has, to help another – contrasts with Dombey's restrained assertion of the coldly reasoned commercial analyses of the capitalist world. It is the paradoxical nature of Dickensian comedy that it is the absurd and comic act of the absurd and comic character, whose characterisation lies in non-realist modes of representation, that reveals the brutal moral truths of modernity.

The comic laughter of this scene asserts an important dimension to our reading of it, and one which would not be present if the scene was one merely between Dombey and Walter. Cuttle becomes a comic double of Dombey, both physically and morally: polymorphous where the other is monolithic; mobile where the other is fixed; willing to give freely, where the other is reluctant to do so, except in narrowly defined circumstances; in search of fellow feeling where the other is rigid in his understanding of the financially determined nature of the relationships in the scene. The presence of Cuttle in this scene is a comic problematising of, in essence, the conventional scene of a romantic hero asking for help from a kingly authority. Cuttle is both a figure of laughter and a figure worthy of profound respect: comically out of joint with his times, and yet profoundly in tune with what his times lack, morally and spiritually. It is the absurd comic ambiguity of his role which is its significance and a clear indication that our reading of him cannot be limited to whether he is 'real' or not. Dickens's opposition to realist modes of representation is also opposition to the cold commercial realities that sanction the nineteenth-century cash nexus.[98]

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[97] *Dombey and Son*, p. 132.

[98] 'In these complicated times, with Cash Payment as the sole nexus between man and man'. Thomas Carlyle, 'Chartism' (1839), *Selected Writings*, ed., Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp 151-232, p. 199.

Harthouse, in *Hard Times*, is further evidence of the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of Dickensian comic character. He is socially accomplished, at least in the context of Coketown, charismatic and sexually magnetic and Dickens invests him with a significance in which the comic mode is ambiguous and paradoxical. With overtones of the Mephistophelian tempter in his relationship with the Gradgrind siblings he is a dilettante and represents dandyism, a failure to engage morally with the world. He is rich enough to indulge in a range of activities, of varying interest and use, but which, serially, do not last. Harthouse is representative of a class of independent but socially useless men who are amoral, uncommitted, unsympathetic and potentially threatening,

> he was a thorough gentleman, made to the model of the time; weary of everything and putting no more faith in anything than Lucifer.[99]

Harthouse is, then, a satirised character and the subject of corrective laughter because he is emblematic of values which Dickens was seeking to critique. However, Harthouse plays a more complex role than that. In his first scene, in which he enquires at the bank about Bounderby's address, he is not only a figure who is, himself, satirised, but he is also the agent of satire of Mrs Sparsit. The latter's false modesty, which actually asserts her feelings of her innate social superiority despite her reduced circumstances, is as much a target of Dickens's comic criticism as Harthouse's dilettantism and it is Harthouse who is the agent of Dickens's comic treatment of her. Dickens's characterisation of Harthouse richly combines both roles, as a satirised figure and as the agent of satire. He expresses an amusingly repeated ennui which expresses his own failure to engage with the world around him. At the same time his amusingly repeated ennui enables us to understand, even to sympathise with, his reaction to the tedious nature of Mrs Sparsit who wholly justifies his ennui in a comic meta-narratorial interplay between narrator, reader and both characters, '[t]he stranger seemed a little more fatigued than before [...] It seemed scarcely worth his while to finish the sentence, so he played with his watch-chain wearily.'[100]

Similarly, Harthouse's politely circumlocutory investigation of his early contact with Coketown and its inhabitants is enjoyably comic in its revelation of his complete ignorance of the realities around him, ''[w]ill you allow me to ask you if it's *always* as black as this?'', ''I asked a fellow whom I met; one of the working people; who appeared to have been taking a shower bath of something fluffy.''[101] In his first meeting with Bounderby, Harthouse is used by Dickens in a similar way to underscore the already apparent blustering of the banker through a bland description of Harthouse's

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[99] *Hard Times*, p. 153.
[100] *Hard Times*, p. 154.
[101] *Hard Times*, p. 154-5.

responses. The narrator's dry ironising of Harthouse's suppressed irritation enables a fertile interplay between narrator, character and reader that adds an extra dimension to our comic enjoyment of the scene, '[i]f anything could have exalted Jem's interest in Mr Bounderby, it would have been this very circumstance. Or so he told him.'[102]

We are aware from the narrator's first description of Harthouse that he is not a sympathetic character. His success among the political class of Coketown is openly acknowledged by the narrator to be the result of 'genteel listlessness [...] assumed honesty.'[103] There is condemnation here of Harthouse, but equally there is condemnation of those who are foolish enough to allow themselves to be manipulated by him. There is the reader's sense of enjoyment at the criticism of Harthouse's lack of moral values, but there is also, perhaps, equal enjoyment at the expense of those who are so readily duped by him that goes beyond the reader's enjoyment of his vice. Harthouse is an object of moral criticism by the author but he is also the author's agent of moral criticism of other characters and, perhaps, because of our pleasure in his world weary, disdainful and ironising stance on the uninspiringly utilitarian Coketown, we appreciate him as much for the latter as we disapprove of the former, if not more.

Like Jingle, Harthouse is powerful because he is an agent as much as a subject of comedy. For parts of the novel, Harthouse almost becomes a dominant narratorial consciousness, observing and interpreting from his own jaundiced viewpoint, comically positioned between narrator and reader. The scene in which he meets Bounderby, Louisa and Tom for the first time is refracted through his mind and his attitudes. We are aware that we should disapprove of him, and yet we come to trust his swift and accurate judgements and enjoy his humorous stance. He refers, for instance, to Bounderby's 'braggart humility,' which is a sound, perceptively oxymoronic, description.[104] His initial impression of Louisa is equally accurate, '[h]er features were handsome; but their natural play was so locked up [...] Utterly indifferent, perfectly self-reliant, never at a loss, and yet never at her ease [...] her mind apparently quite alone.'[105] His impression of Tom, and of Tom's relationship with Louisa, is perceptive, and compares favourably with the failure of comprehension of most other characters, '[t]his whelp is the only creature she cares for.'[106] We also enjoy Harthouse's cool toying with the increasingly drunken Tom during their drink at Harthouse's hotel, which requires so little effort on the part of Harthouse for Tom to reveal his own reprehensible and utilitarian selfishness. Harthouse's replies to Bounderby are often

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[102] *Hard Times*, p. 160.
[103] *Hard Times*, p. 194.
[104] *Hard Times*, p. 161.
[105] *Hard Times*, p. 161.
[106] *Hard Times*, p. 164.

presented in this scene, as often elsewhere when Harthouse is exercising his empty politeness, as third person indirect speech, a narratorial device in comic contrast to Bounderby's verbose self-regard, expressed in first person direct speech, 'Mr Harthouse professed himself in the highest degree instructed and refreshed, by this condensed epitome of the whole Coketown question.'[107] Harthouse's dry ironising is expressed through the narrator's own dry ironising, in a layering of comic character which dislocates the realist narrative tone and emphasises the artificiality of the narrative.

Comedy, again, forces us into complicity. Harthouse is also genuinely self-aware and honest in his expression of that awareness, while still being subject to Dickensian disapproval. He asserts to Louisa, ''I assure you I attach not the least importance to any opinions,'' while recognising his own power over, in particular, Tom, 'he knew himself to be a kind of agreeable demon who had only to hover over him, and he must give up his whole soul if required.'[108] Yet, even here, in the awareness of his power over Tom, Harthouse professes a sympathetic understanding which the reader is able to see is accurate. He refers to Tom as having 'not been fortunate in his training [...] he rushes into these extremes for himself, from opposite extremes that have long been forced [...] upon him.'[109]

Like Jingle, Harthouse is a disturbing agent of comedy. He is a threat and yet he is still superior to the characters around him. He is morally acute and better able than them to understand the nature of the world he inhabits. He possesses many of the qualities of a sympathetic comic character. Like Sam Weller and Mark Tapley he is comically resistant and he possesses what is usually a comic virtue, the ability to identify and resist self-serving claptrap. The difference is that he is willing to engage in claptrap if circumstances and his self-interest demand it. He, like Tapley and Weller, has a perceptive understanding of others, particularly Louisa, and he is able to see truth in a morally reprehensible world even when he helps to obscure truth with his support of the utilitarians and the pursuit of his own amatory objectives. Unlike Weller and Tapley, he uses his perceptive understanding for his own advantage, rather than for the protection of others. We enjoy his power whilst we also fear him and fear for those sympathetic characters, particularly Louisa, who are in his power. Harthouse, then, has the traditional comic virtue of human sympathy, in the sense of an innate understanding of others, but it is comically perverted and used for his own benefit. He is the uncanny double of Cuttle: adept where the sailor is absurd, experienced where the other is

[107] *Hard Times*, p. 160.
[108] *Hard Times*, p. 162, p. 166.
[109] *Hard Times*, p. 201.

innocent, but like him an awkward comic force that reveals moral truth in a cruel modern world. We are forced into complicity with this dark agent of comedy.

It is for this reason that it is Sissy who confronts him at the end and who subjects him to an appropriately satirical fate. In contrast to the comeuppance of other satirised characters, such as, in *Hard Times*, Bounderby, or, in other novels, Squeers, Pecksniff or Casby, who are exposed to public ridicule, Harthouse's comic unmasking is relatively private and discreet.[110] Instead of his elopement with Louisa he is confronted by the infuriatingly confident and adept Sissy who banishes him from Coketown. Sissy, herself a comic character with the comic virtue of an innate understanding of humanity, particularly of Louisa, is also Harthouse's comic double. They are the two characters, from opposite ends of the moral spectrum, the 'tempter' and the 'saviour', who have most understanding of Louisa.[111] In the scene of confrontation with Sissy, after a firm, but polite, discussion, Harthouse, the man of the world, is comically reduced, like Tappertit. His reduction is not physical but psychological, a reduction of his identity of himself as potent gentleman of affairs to inconsequentiality, 'her mind looked over and beyond him'.[112] He finds himself, an experienced man of the world, reduced to insignificance by a young and loyal servant girl and obliged to leave Coketown and his service to the utilitarians with a comically ironic self-awareness of the nature of his predicament. This is no brutal satiric unmasking, though it is clear that he leaves Coketown as a defeated figure. In fact, in this interview he regains some of his ironic comic power with an amusingly exasperated and comically sympathetic awareness of the absurdity of his position.

In his final conversation with Sissy, Harthouse does not seek to evade the consequences of what he has done, and his defence, though obviously self-serving, rings true. He claims not to have been a hypocrite, or deceptive, which other characters certainly have been,

> 'I am not a moral sort of fellow [...] and I never make any pretensions to be the character of a moral sort of fellow. [...] Her father's [...] a machine [...] her brother's [...] a whelp [...] her husband's [...] a bear [...] I have had no particularly evil intentions.'[113]

He displays what may be considered, in the circumstances, something approaching a commendable self-knowledge, 'I had no idea the catalogue was half so long until I

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[110] Squeers is sentenced to transportation for seven years and Dotheboys Hall is broken up by open rebellion. *Nicholas Nickleby*), p. 924, pp. 927-30. Pecksniff is humiliated and physically beaten in the presence of the novel's core of sympathetic characters, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 882. Casby's hypocrisy is verbally exposed and he is shorn of his Patriarchal image by Pancks in front of an attentive audience in Bleeding Heart Yard, *Little Dorrit*, pp. 667-70.
[111] *Hard Times*, p. 167.
[112] *Hard Times*, p. 253.
[113] *Hard Times*, p 254.

began to turn it over. [...] I find [...] it is really in several volumes,' a self-knowledge through which he becomes aware that any defence he seeks to make becomes only 'a conscious polishing of but an ugly surface.'[114] Harthouse is not a hypocrite, conscious or otherwise: he does not pretend that he is other than he is, either to himself or to others. The completeness of the defeat of Harthouse's dalliance with utilitarianism lies in the narrator's description of Sissy's ironic indifference to Harthouse's suddenly discovered need to complete his mission, 'It had no effect on Sissy, fact or no fact.'[115] Finally Harthouse is restored to a comic status, defeated certainly, but not humiliated as satirised characters often are. He finds himself outmanoeuvred by Sissy, comically exasperated at the loss of his powers by the abandoned daughter of a performer in a circus, ''[i]t wanted this to complete the defeat [...] James Harthouse a Great Pyramid of failure,'' and absurdly writing to his brother that he will now be 'going in for camels'.[116] The narrator's final comments on Harthouse are not unsympathetic, 'what was about the very best passage in his life was the one of all the others he would not have owned to on any account.'[117]

Conclusion: He Do the Comedy in Different Voices.

Dickens uses character to shed a mordant light on the problematic emergent modernity depicted in *Hard Times*, a mordancy which is both corrosive and cleansing. Harthouse's impact is unsettling and awkward. He is an alienated and alienating voice, among a disconcerting chorus of voices, calling from the incoherent and fractured world of Coketown. In *Dombey and Son* Captain Cuttle is absurd, awkward and incompetent and it is the comedy that results from his absurdity, awkwardness and incompetence that makes him a beacon of virtue in a harsh world. And in *Barnaby Rudge* Simon Tappertit's removable legs are the comic emblem of failed demagoguery. Leo Bersani argued that realism is a force for connectedness and cohesion and an ideologically normalising function which serviced nineteenth-century society's need for 'containing (and repressing) its disorder within significantly structured stories about itself.'[118] Dickens's comic characterisation resists this ideological function and what Eagleton refers to as 'the illusion of realism', and 'the naturalizing constraints of

[114] *Hard Times*, p. 255, p. 254.
[115] *Hard Times*, p. 255.
[116] *Hard Times*, pp. 256-7.
[117] *Hard Times*, p. 257.
[118] Leo Bersani, 'Realism and the Fear of Desire', *A Future for Astyanax* (1976), (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), pp. 51-88, p. 63.

realism'.[119] There is, then, a contrast between a realism, such as Eliot's, which has the effect of accommodating contradictions in society through the imposition of a coherent narrative vision, the vision of realism which underlies Simcox's criticism of Dickens, and Dickensian comic characterisation, which is complex, alienating and dislocating.

That Dickens uses the modes of romance, melodrama and fairy tale in his comic modes of representation does not mean that his writing is thereby constrained by those modes. Dickens may not, in Eliot's view, be writing realist fiction, but neither is he writing romances, melodrama or fairy tales, which the term 'unreality,' may imply. He, like others who have used those modes, can play with comic character, comic roles and comic values, in the service of an individual comic vision. Equally, the searching combination of an intensely modern artistic mission that uses a mix of well established popular narrative and character forms and modes alongside aspects of nineteenth-century realism does not mean that the examination of serious themes, or its relevance to the critique of emerging modernity, are less valid, only that we need to be careful in the reading strategies that we deploy. Dickens's characterisation is not without its realist dimension, but our understanding of the full force of his imaginative purposes will be lost if that is the sole means by which we interpret it.

In the Dickensian comic mode of characterisation and layering of narrative, there is an emphasis on mixture, confusion and complexity. Comedy is a response to emergent modernity that sees meaning as slippery and anarchic, and healthy because it is slippery and anarchic, and opposed, as the comic is, to repression. Dickensian comic character combats those, like Dombey or Bounderby, who attempt to structure the modern in dangerous ways, who seek to privilege monolithic modes of understanding that simplify, limit, stultify and damage. Dickensian comedy is a response to those who see meaning as simple, in the sense that Dombey sees the world simply as family and commerce and that Bounderby sees the world simply as fact. Dickens's fiction is packed with characters whose obsessive singularity of thought is destructive: Lord George Gordon and papist conspiracy, Pecksniff and his own hypocritical morality, the Veneerings and social status, Mrs Clennam and Evangelical dourness, Mrs Jellyby and philanthropy, Miss Havisham and sexual revenge and Quilp, Squeers, Ralph Nickleby, Montague Tigg, Scrooge, Uriah Heep, Casby and many others who see their world as a combination of self, power and money.

That is not to say that comedy is always used to critique these characters. As this study argues, we are often drawn into complicity with those such as Harthouse and Jingle whose agency of comedy is a potent source of attraction. It is that ambiguity of

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[119] Eagleton, *Heathcliff*, p. 176, p. 179. He also refers to 'the chronically naturalizing mode' of realism, noted above in fn. 62.

comic characterisation which is its strength. For Dickens, comedy is resistance: rich, human and humane, though, also, at times, darkly unknowable and threatening. It counters a reductive and simplistic version of the real by championing the complexities of the comic. Transcendent unreality should not be read as artistic failure.

Chapter Four

Inside 'The Madman's Head'[1]: Is there a Distinctive Dickensian Comic Language?

Dickensian words constitute a rebellious anarchy of the imagination. They decline conformity. They refuse to be obedient subjects. They insist on independence and they demand agency. Comic imagination and comic style resist.

Dickens exploits the ambiguity and ambivalence of language and meaning for comic purposes in order to challenge those who impose epistemological and, therefore, ideological, political, social, economic and psychological certainties. For ideological and political purposes Dickens exploits comedy and its capacity to interrogate ideologically valorised versions of reality. Comic style enables Dickens to challenge an emergent modernity which seeks to implement ideologies through which people, objects and relationships come to be understood as monolithic and therefore controllable and controlled. If modernity wants to define, explain, limit, constrain and enclose, Dickens wants to explode.

Building on the conclusions of the previous chapter that Dickens deploys comedy to challenge realism and the economic, social and political systems that enact restraint and repression and that distort and undermine the health of the mind and of society, this chapter demonstrates the often contradictory features of the comic stylistic mode and the roles it plays in Dickens's artistic aims, purposes and methods. A focus on Dickensian comic style, on comic language and on the tropes and figures of comedy provides evidence for comedy's moral and ideological purposes. It also provides evidence of how Dickens exploits particular approaches to language to problematise reading practices for comic, as well as for ideological and political, purposes.

Dickensian comic style is a powerful mode and critical examination of its linguistic basis is overdue. There are three main concerns: the dislocating impact of the Dickensian comic style, the relationships between Dickensian comic style and the Freudian uncanny, and the importance of the distinctive relationship between Dickensian comedy and developing concerns in the nineteenth century about the changing relationships between people and material reality.

In the nineteenth century, the great age of manufacturing in which raw materials were combined in novel formulations and for new purposes that both reflected and helped to create the modern world, words, too, like industrial raw materials, were combined, separated, recombined, manipulated, changed and distorted and, so, formed

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[1] Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), ed., P. N. Furbank (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 140. All subsequent references are to this edition.

meanings that served the interests, innocent or guilty, conscious or unconscious, of those that wielded them. Dickens combines words, he alters their relationships to each other and to the world they nominally represent and, therefore, he alters, too, through our experience of his fiction, our own relationship to the world and to the word. Dickens exploits for comic purposes the arbitrary nature of language and meaning as expressed by Ferdinand de Saussure: '[a] language is a system which is intrinsically defenceless against the factors which constantly tend to shift relationships between signal and signification [...] there is nothing at all to prevent the association of any idea whatsoever with any sequence of sounds whatsoever.'[2] In his Saussurean literary manufactory, words become raw materials of a comic imagination, artefacts of a mind, representatives of an alternative set of relationships, and a recasting of the functions of narrative between writer, narrator and reader. Dickens's fiction, particularly his comic mode, teaches us how to read.

'A Diseased Extravagance'[3]: Style as Pathology and as Diagnosis

Edith Simcox saw the blurring of boundary and the disruption of category as social but it is also psychological.[4] In one of the few analyses of his own practice as an artist Dickens commented, '[i]t is my infirmity to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally.'[5] The same letter considers, 'what I see in a droll light' and concludes that, 'I dare say I pet it like a spoilt child.' The tone of these comments is apologetic and he self-consciously positions his imagination as weakness or 'infirmity'. In his metaphorical link between illness and childhood, he expresses guilty consciousness of unhealthy obsession and self-indulgence.

Dickens was not alone in identifying the aberrant nature of his imagination. In similar terms of psychological illness Hippolyte Taine states that '[t]he imagination of

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[2] F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), ed., Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans., Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 76. All subsequent references are to this edition. Roy Harris concludes, 'languages themselves, collective products of social interaction, supply the essential conceptual frameworks for men's analysis of reality and, simultaneously, the verbal equipment for their description of it. The concepts we use are creations of the language we speak.' Saussure, p. ix.

[3] John Ruskin, 'extract from a letter to W. H. Harrison, 6th June, 1841', *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed., Phillip Collins (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 100. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[4] 'H. Lawrenny' [Edith Simcox] 'from a review in *The Academy*, October 1870, ii, 1-3', Collins, pp. 545-7.

[5] Letter to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, 28? Nov. 1865, *The Letters of Charles Dickens: 1820-1870*, (2nd Release), Electronic edition, Vol. 11: 1865-1867. Viewed online 22nd November 2011.

Dickens is like that of monomaniacs.'[6] He goes on to diagnose alienating features of Dickensian style as psychological symptoms,

> [e]xcessive metaphors bring before the mind grotesque fancies. We feel ourselves beset by extravagant visions [...] These eccentricities are in the style of sickness rather than of health [...] his inspiration is a feverish rapture, which does not select its objects, which animates promiscuously.[7]

John Ruskin identified, 'a diseased extravagance, a violence of delineation' and Cornelius Felton, writing the *North American Review* in 1843 identified, '[s]trange but striking comparisons, a sudden bringing together of opposite ideas'.[8] Mowbray Morris, in the *Fortnightly Review* in December 1882, comments in similar terms, finding 'this want of proportion and control, this riot of fancy', and concluding that 'he uses this power too indiscriminately, intemperately sometimes, and unreasonably'.[9] Morris's use of the word 'unreasonably' here is key, identifying an irrational force in Dickens's style.

Even when commentators write sympathetically and are less concerned with the darkly alienating aspects of the Dickensian, discussion, almost inevitably, shades into a diagnosis of psychological aberration. G.H. Lewes, writing in 1872 identifies, in initially positive terms, Dickens's, 'glorious energy of imagination'.[10] He continues that Dickens is 'gifted with an imagination of marvellous vividness, and an emotional, sympathetic nature [...] a seer of visions', but he also identifies a 'vividness of imagination approaching so closely to hallucination.'[11] Lewes is at pains to deny the implication of actual mental disease in Dickens, and yet he is insistent on the peculiar force – a not entirely healthy force – which characterises the Dickensian imagination,

> there is considerable light shed upon his works by the action of the imagination in hallucination [...] created images have the coercive force of realities [...] What seems preposterous, impossible to us, seemed to him simple fact of observation [...] believing in its reality however fantastic, he communicated something of his belief to us [...] even while knowing it was false we could not help, for a moment, being affected, as it were, by his hallucination.[12]

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[6] Hippolyte Taine, *Charles Dickens son talent et son oeuvres* (1856), *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed., Stephen Regan (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 23. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[7] Regan, pp. 23-4.
[8] John Ruskin, 'Extract from a letter to W. H. Harrison, 6th June, 1841', Collins, p. 100; [Cornelius C. Felton], 'from a review in *North American Review*', January 1843, lvi, 212-37, Collins, p. 131.
[9] Mowbray Morris, 'from 'Charles Dickens'', *Fortnightly Review*, 1st December 1882, n.s., xxxii, 762-79, Collins, p. 606.
[10] G. H. Lewes, 'from a review of Vol. I of Forster's *Life*, *Fortnightly Review*, February 1872, xvii, 141-54', Collins, p. 571.
[11] Collins, p. 571.
[12] Collins, p. 571.

Modern commentators, too, have identified features of a distinctive Dickensian style. As a whole, analyses of features of Dickensian language seem to cluster in three areas. These areas are novelty or newness in Dickens's language, linguistic methods which are disconcerting and anarchic, and unusual relationships between aspects of material and non-material reality. However, commentators rarely critically examine the comic mode, its special nature and the particular roles it plays in Dickens's aims, methods and effects. Robert Newsom's survey, for instance, identifies Dickens's self-conscious deployment of a range of styles, and highlights Dickens's striking use of metaphor, his enjoyment of linguistic oddity, neologism and incongruity.[13] Garrett Stewart also identifies Dickens's style as novel, '[n]o one ever wrote prose that way before.'[14] Stewart's discussion identifies a range of Dickensian stylistic characteristics that relate to both his comic and non-comic style, such as his comic verbosity, his use of litotes, his 'archly elevated diction and swollen syntax' and '[h]eavy-handed comparison, strident parallelism, deliberate contortions of idiom, rampant neologism, extended metaphor, phantom puns and phonetic undertones'.[15]

Stewart's discussion, reminiscent of Simcox's objections, produces useful and interesting insights into the special nature of Dickens's style which this chapter will build on. For instance, he draws attention to 'the collapsing of boundaries between people and things [...] the blurred border between personality and objecthood [...] the witty discrepancy between literal and metaphoric senses [...] a reductive doubling between the external and internal'.[16] While his focus is not the comic, Stewart's discussion identifies a disorderly and alienating force in Dickensian style, the contention, antagonism and opposition of 'grammatical subjects battling with objects for priority, adjectives choking the life out of nouns before they can manifest a verb, adverbs riding on the coattails of remorseless verb chains'.[17] Stewart's argument about Dickensian style parallels the psychic dislocation which earlier commentators and Dickens identified. This chapter will build on Stewart's analysis and will demonstrate the importance of this dislocation and how the comic mode enacts linguistic disturbance and alienation. It will demonstrate that this psychic disturbance is enacted on the reader through the complicity that comedy engenders.

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[13] Robert Newsom, 'style of Dickens', *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed., Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 540-5. All subsequent references are to this edition as *Oxford Companion.*

[14] Garrett Stewart, 'Dickens and Language', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), pp. 136-151, p. 136. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[15] Stewart, pp. 137-8.

[16] Stewart, pp. 141-2.

[17] Stewart, p. 138.

The view that Dickensian comic style is disturbing is not uncontentious, however. John Carey, one of the few critics to write at length on Dickens's comic mode, resists the interpretation that Dickens is a writer who anticipates the modernist vision of dissolution, alienation and discord with which the previous chapter of this study concluded.[18] Carey refers dismissively to, 'this rather shrill surrealism,' a stance that reflects much of his rather disdainful approach.[19] His reading of the Dickensian comic mode is that it tames or moderates the excesses of Dickens's imagination. Carey asserts that, '[h]is humour serves as a weapon and a refuge [...] It allows him [...] to keep the terrors of his imagination at bay.'[20] Carey acknowledges the darkness of Dickens's imagination, but places against it a regenerative or protective quality provided by comedy, '[t]he materials of horror may be there, but they are transmuted by humour.'[21] Consequently, '[l]aughter establishes Dickens' confidence [...] and the confidence is deeply unmodern.'[22] Carey resists '[t]he temptation [...] to make Dickens look more modern than he is.'[23] For Carey, Dickensian humour is mitigation, moderation and restraint. Humour is a function of safety, rather than of danger. It ensures acceptability rather than presents a challenge and is the sugar that allows the medicine, or poison, to slip down unnoticed.

Evidence of the disturbing complexity of the Dickensian comic mode is demonstrated in Dickens's treatment of the suffering of the children at Squeers's school during Nicholas Nickleby's first morning at Dotheboys Hall.[24] The narrator's first response to the experience is a tone of disgusted polemical outrage at the blighted lives that confront Nicholas, subvert his ideals and begin to corrode his romantic vision of a successful future. The start of the description is serious in tone, almost pleading, and is intended to evoke feelings of sympathy for the inmates and disgust at the social, political and economic systems which have brought these miserable specimens to such a bleak spot. The language emphasises absence and withdrawal, as the pupils themselves are absent and withdrawn mentally and physically from the life and the humanity that should be theirs. Nicholas feels the loss of 'the last faint traces [...] the remotest glimmering,' of his hope, and idealism; the faces of the pupils are 'darkened,'

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[18] John Carey, *The Violent Effigy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[19] Carey, p. 175.
[20] Carey, p. 175.
[21] Carey, p. 175.
[22] Carey, p. 175.
[23] Carey, p. 174.
[24] Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed., Michael Slater (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), Ch. 8 pp. 148-62. All subsequent references are to this edition.

childhood is 'quenched, its beauty gone'.[25] The narrator also emphasises the bodily malformations and suffering of the pupils, with their, '[p]ale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures [...] countenances of old men, deformities [...] stunted growth [...] long meagre legs [...] stooping bodies.'[26] What he sees is ugly, both physically and morally, but it is not Aristotelian comic ugliness. This is not comic writing. It is an outraged call to arms with a strong rhetorical tone, 'what an incipient Hell was breeding there!'[27]

What is significant about this description, however, is the transition into the next paragraph, which, while it describes the same scene, marks a complete reversal of tone. The narrator is still outraged by what Nicholas experiences, the pupils are still suffering, the Squeerses are still cruel, but the narrator marks the point at which he begins to extract comedy from the scene. He points to this change with a self-referential, narratorially self-conscious sentence that signals the transition of mode,

> [a]nd yet this scene, painful as it was, had its grotesque features, which, in a less interested observer than Nicholas, might have provoked a smile.[28]

This sentence, particularly in this context, raises a number of important issues that illuminate the deployment of Dickens's comic mode, and its relationship to other literary modes. The narrator acknowledges that the scene is 'painful', an acknowledgement that the comedy that is to come is indecent when applied to the exploitation and suffering of children. Nicholas is excused from the comic pleasure as one who is too 'interested' in the scene. The reader, however, is deeply implicated. We will shortly enjoy the comic pleasure at the expense of these poor children. We are 'less interested' than Nicholas and therefore our laughter is, uncomfortably, understandable, though this concession comes with the tacit implication that it should never be understandable to laugh at tortured children. Finally, the narrator highlights that it is the 'grotesque' element of the scene which leads us to the comedy. The scene, mixing horror and the pleasure of laughter, enacts Hollington's contention that the grotesque is heterogeneous, 'an essentially mixed or hybrid form [...] combining in unstable, conflicting, paradoxical relationships'.[29]

And yet, the scene has already been described. We have already appreciated that it is grotesque and that the narrator has emphasised its grotesque nature in order to incite our anger. In this sentence, the narrator seeks to adopt the pose of an impartial observer of the scene which is unfolding unbidden before him. He is an observer

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[25] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 151.
[26] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 151.
[27] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 152.
[28] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 152.
[29] Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 1.

obliged to point out, reluctantly, that there are comic elements which he must bring to our attention. In this key transition, we see that the Dickensian narrator is aware of the illicit nature of his comedy, that he feels self-conscious about it, and that he feels obliged to excuse it, as he does his infirmity and his petting of a spoilt child. However, he finds that it is too tempting: he cannot prevent himself from extracting comedy from the misery of the scene, despite the valiant effort at serious polemic which precedes it. The narrator brings to our attention the transgressive nature of the comedy that we will shortly enjoy, as if, by so doing, we may be able to convince ourselves that we are not in the wrong, we will feel less guilt and we will blame him less for our pleasure. The word Dickens uses to indicate Nicholas's and our relationship with this episode, in which we are more or less 'interested', is freighted with meaning. The word variously connotes intellectual curiosity, emotional engagement and financial exposure, and indicates the potential investment we make and the troubling yield which accrues.

Following this transitional sentence, the narrator's tone becomes ironic. His words become dissociated from the direct representation of the horror into linguistic formulations indicative of a polite discourse of knowing, wry and detached observation. Each wretched pupil becomes a 'young gentleman,' the basin of brimstone and treacle becomes a 'delicious compound,' for which boys wait, 'with countenances of no pleasant anticipation,' and after which they recover by 'making a variety of wry mouths indicative of anything but satisfaction'.[30] His style becomes politely circumlocutory, as old and shrunken trousers are 'a something tighter fit than drawers are usually worn,' and stolen boots bear 'a most suspicious resemblance to those which the least of the little boys had worn on the journey down.'[31] We are invited to enjoy the sight of direct physical abuse and of an oral penetration that creates, in a monstrous simulacrum of the uncomfortable comedy itself, a gross, distended smile, in the distorted scale of the spoon which, 'might have been manufactured for some gigantic top, and which widened every young gentleman's mouth considerably'.[32] Despite the shift in modes, and the self-conscious signalling of that shift, the tone is not wholly comic. At most, the comic becomes a significant, though not completely dominant addition to the tone with which the scene is described. At the end of the paragraph, as if to end on a more respectable note, the narrator seems keen to distance himself from complete mockery of the suffering children, as he draws back from finding that their jumble of clothes,

[30] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 152.
[31] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 152.
[32] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 152.

'would have been irresistibly ridiculous, but for the foul appearance of dirt, disorder and disease, with which they are associated.'[33]

There is much in the short paragraph which follows the transitional sentence which typifies the Dickensian comic style. The comedy lives in the Dickensian darkness, in the misdirection of words, in the distortion of scale, in incongruity and in an emotional detachment, combined with a clarity of observation that is reminiscent of Bergson's 'anaesthesia of the heart'.[34] It has a vivid, exuberant and darkly cruel, imaginative excess, and a guilty pleasure in black comic delight, a guilt of which Dickens is all too aware, but which is insufficient to prevent him from sharing the pleasure anyway, as if he cannot resist, while knowing that he should resist.

Prior to the transition, the reader's reaction to the scene is straightforward, or at least, more straightforward than it is afterwards. The narrator guides us to feelings of pity and disgust for the victims, to outrage at the circumstances that have led them to this place and anger at the adults who exploit them. Following the transition, our understanding of the morality of the situation is much the same. However, the comic tone changes fundamental aspects of our reading, which becomes much more problematical. It becomes enjoyable.

Carey's analysis places this scene, and much of Dickens's comedy, into the context of an unappealingly unsympathetic mockery in which Dickens exploits other people's suffering for commercial literary advantage. Carey feels that the initial tone of lofty seriousness is 'insufferably stilted and didn't allow either his imagination or his intellect to work.'[35] In contrast, Carey identifies what he calls, '[t]he flippant, educated tone' where 'the pity or anger we would normally feel at the sufferings of the little victims is extinguished in laughter.'[36] In Carey's view, 'Dickens has stopped feeling and started to write well.'[37] Carey is overtly cynical about Dickens's motives: 'Dickens quite consciously misrepresented his subject. He did not wish to provoke anger or reform so much as to retain a large and lucrative audience.'[38] On the face of it, Carey's position is a reasonable one. Dickens does describe misery and cruelty, and he does present it to us in a way that is intended to provoke our laughter.

While it is possible that some of Dickens's contemporary and subsequent readers may have found cruelly elitist pleasure in this scene and others, it stretches credulity that a writer with supposed Hobbesian attitudes to the comic could have built

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[33] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 152.
[34] Henri Bergson, 'Laughter' [*Le Rire*] (1899), *Comedy* (1956), ed., W. Sypher, tr., F. Rothwell (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp. 61-190, p. 64.
[35] Carey, p. 71.
[36] Carey, p. 70; p. 71.
[37] Carey, p. 71.
[38] Carey, p. 71.

and sustained massive and wide ranging readership throughout a broad range of social classes, including among those closest to the misery depicted at Dotheboys Hall, at the historical period in which misery was so prevalent.[39] Nor is it credible that a writer could, while exercising unsympathetic mockery, have built an overwhelming public reputation for gently benevolent philanthropy and championship of the underclass. Dickens is no stylistic bully. And yet, the broad thrust of Carey's position is clearly correct: the weak and vulnerable become suitable matter for laughter.

The episode develops into an uneasy mixture of the comic and the serious. There is an absence of resistance, or of antagonism to the misery. Nicholas himself, nominally the hero, is as lethargically acquiescent as the pupils, which indicates that the scene is not meant to offer a gleam of comfort for us. We cannot think to ourselves that, however horrible the experience for these children, and however uncomfortable for us as readers, that the children, or at least one of the children, shows nobility, or intelligence, or a spirituality brought on by suffering. Nor can we anticipate that Nicholas himself will become a force for rescue or redemption, as he, instead, becomes as passive as the pupils, inert in the consciousness of being, 'depressed and self-degraded [...] the aider and abettor of a system which filled him with honest disgust and indignation, he loathed himself.'[40] Dickens does not allow us an escape, or a sense of relief. This is no Lowood, there is no Maria Burns and Nicholas is no Jane Eyre.[41]

Within this context, the comedy is cruel, but it is most cruel for us, the reader. It does not lessen our sympathy for the pupils, but rather gives that sympathy a cruel point, and underscores our implication in the moral dynamic of cruelty. It is almost as if Dickens is pointedly mocking his contemporary reader, and us, by inviting us to recognise our ambivalent role, partly as holders of easy and obvious moral positions against child cruelty, but also as ambiguous citizens of a society in which child cruelty not only exists, but prospers and is a source of prosperity. How absurd, how nonsensical, that we permit such things; how absurd and how nonsensical we are; how morally implicated we are. We may not consider ourselves morally implicated, because we may consider ourselves opponents of systems of child cruelty, but the Dickensian jokes say we are implicated, if only by our enjoyment and by a gain of pleasure that discomfortingly echoes the financial gain of those who exploit children for money. The

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[39] Thomas Hobbes expresses an unattractive formulation of Aristotelian corrective humour that reinforces a competitively individualistic paradigm of human interaction, '*Sudden glory* is the passion that maketh those *grimaces* called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.' Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathon*, (1651), ed., John Plamenatz (London: Fontana, 1962), p. 93.

[40] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 160.

[41] Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (1847), ed., Richard Dunn (New York: Norton, 2001).

comedy is uncomfortable, not because it is callous, as Carey argues, because we would reject it if it were merely callous: it is uncomfortable because it is enjoyable.

Dickens's strikingly comic simile of the porridge resembling, 'a brown composition which looked like diluted pincushions without the covers' is evidence of this discomforting complicity.[42] It is an image of the miserable poverty of the food provided at Dotheboys Hall. Yet the bizarre nature of the image and the work that the reader has to decode it ensures pleasure even while we are disgusted at the idea of the food and at the moral position of child starvation. The loftily pseudo-scientific but equally vague tone of detachment in 'brown composition', the absurd concept of 'diluted pincushions without the covers' which, in its connotation of polite and leisured female activity and powerfully surreal incongruity in the idea of the pincushions as floating food, is both removed from the squalor into the more respectable world of the reader, and yet is powerfully evocative of the context and its lumpy porridge.

Similarly, the narrator's use of the word 'treacling' as a verb is strikingly comic.[43] This instance is the first recorded use of 'treacling' to mean, '[t]o smear or spread with treacle; to dose with (brimstone and) treacle; to sweeten or render palatable with treacle', and it is only the second example of the use of the word as a verb.[44] The novelty of the word in this context is powerful. Dickens transfers meaning from the object which the boys consume, which is a nasty perversion of both food and medicine, into something which is done to them, the cruel process which they are forced to undergo. Yet, he maintains the linguistic guise that it is something sweet and enjoyable. Dickens comically transforms and enriches our understanding of the word, as he comically transforms and enriches our understanding of the moral world.

It is clear that the nature of the Dickensian comic is more complex than Carey's account. Rather than moderation, regeneration and protection, this discussion demonstrates how comedy enacts the psychic trauma that commentators earlier in this chapter identify in Dickensian style. The comedy dislocates our customary frames of moral reference. The laughter which follows the transitional sentence is not simplistically cruel, even though logic – Carey's logic, at least – dictates that it should be. The scene is not unequivocally comic, as it is no longer unequivocally polemical. Rather there is a partnership between the comic and the serious, where the comic does not merely provide a simplistic light relief, or opportunities for literary exploitation of

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[42] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 154.
[43] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 152.
[44] 'treacle v.', *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, 1989, http://dictionary.oed.com.chain.kent.ac.uk/cgi/entry/50256908?query_type=word&queryword=treacle&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=2&search_id=a0zY-TnUttI-1893&hilite=50256908. Viewed 3/3/2010.

the misery of others, but adds important qualities of darkly unsettling complicity and guilt for the reader. Despite the comedy, in fact because of it, the scene remains a powerful condemnation of child cruelty and a vehicle for Dickens's social mission.

Inside the Madman's Head: Is there a Comic Uncanny?

In a striking image, Dickens depicts, in advance of the Freudian formulation, the concept of an agitated subconscious. It is an individual subconscious, but also familial and therefore collective and social. The Pecksniff household sleeps, and the individuals dream: '[t]hus in the quiet hours of the night, one house shuts in as many incoherent and incongruous fancies as a madman's head.'[45] It is a comic image of lunacy found in the minds of those nominally sane, whether individual or collective. It is an image of the hidden life of nineteenth-century society.

Knud Sorenson, in his study of linguistic innovation in Dickensian style raises this important issue.[46] He uses the phrase 'Dickens has an uncannily fine ear for language', where the qualities of Dickensian style, though not just comic style is put, perhaps merely in passing, into Freudian terms.[47] Robert Alter, too, uses the Freudian term to aid identification of the special nature of Dickensian style.[48] He quotes Saul Bellow on 'the uncanny insight' that style gives its readers and how it can 'unearth buried essences.'[49] In an argument that does not focus on either the comic or the Freudian, Steven Connor nevertheless provides evidence that supports the importance of the relationship between specifically comic style and the Freudian uncanny, by describing Dickensian style in terms strongly reminiscent of Freud.[50] He argues that Dickens's metaphorical language enables fluidity in his fictional world where, 'things flow uncontrollably into each other, where the substitutions of metaphor run together normally separate areas in grotesque and exciting ways.'[51] Similarly, Dickens's use of metonymy enables an 'accretive openness [...] exhilarating openness of association', in which metonymy 'seems to enact disconnectedness'.[52] These commentators open potentially significant areas for critical discussion, which focus on the Dickensian

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[45] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 140.
[46] Knud Sorenson, 'Charles Dickens: Linguistic Innovator', *English Studies* 65 (1984): 237-47. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[47] Sorenson, p. 238.
[48] Robert Alter, 'Reading Style in Dickens', *Philosophy and Literature* 20 (1996): 130-37, p. 130. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[49] Alter, p. 130.
[50] Steven Connor, 'Metaphor and Metonymy in *Dombey and Son*', *Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[51] Connor, p. 45.
[52] Connor, pp. 46-7.

comic mode as an expression of the psychic disturbance, darkness, alienation and dislocation of the Freudian uncanny.

In his essay on the uncanny, Freud identifies features which echo descriptions of Dickensian style described earlier in this chapter.[53] His summary of Jentsch constitutes a catalogue of the ambiguities and ambivalences of Dickensian comedic language.[54] Jentsch, for instance, points to the power of the possibility of life in something that we think is inanimate, or by contrast, the lack of life in something we think is animate. Jentsch also notes the effect of insanity and how it implies forces at work behind outward appearance. Freud builds on these ideas, and, in his account of Hoffman's story 'The Sand Man', he concludes that much of the uncanny power of the story is dependent on the uncertainty with which the story is narrated. The frame of reference, by which we know how to read and understand the story, is made uncertain in the way that, 'the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one'.[55] This aspect of the Freudian uncanny is reminiscent of the way Dickens uses comedy to disturb the reader's frame of reference.

Freud identifies a range of features which can be sources of the uncanny, such as the concept of doubling, with its implications for identity, where, 'the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own [...] there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self.'[56] Freud also identifies repetition as a source of the uncanny, allied to doubling in character and identity, 'the constant recurrence of the same thing — the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names'.[57] A further feature Freud identifies is death and our feelings of ambivalence about death, along with dismemberment, and the allied fear of parts of our bodies having independent life. Freud goes on to discuss how the uncanny expresses the anxiety of that which has been repressed, 'this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.'[58]

Dickens's use of metaphor, simile and other tropes illuminates Freud's categories of the uncanny. His description of Chuffey, the old clerk of Jonas and Anthony Chuzzlewit, is described in terms which are an assertion and a negation of

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[53] Sigmund Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'' (1919), Penguin Freud Library Vol.14 *Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 339-76. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[54] Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', pp. 347-8.
[55] Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', p. 351.
[56] Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', p. 356.
[57] Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', p. 356.
[58] Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', pp. 363-4.

Chuffey as a character. In a startlingly comic image he is described as a person who is living, but also who is not living, '[h]e looked as if he had been put away and forgotten half a century before, and somebody had just found him in a lumber-closet.'[59] His appearance is psychologically and socially marginal, a semi-animate object, 'of a remote fashion, like the rest of the furniture [...] decayed [...] rusty [...] the very paupers of shoe strings'[60] Finally he becomes a character of absence and negation, staring at nothing, seeing nothing and 'he was an embodiment of nothing.'[61] This final image is a complex one, and uncanny in its implications. Not only does Chuffey not embody any quality or attribute, it is nothing itself, absence and negation, that embodies him. The image is of a character who, in no meaningful sense, is a character. He is the strange comic emptiness, the void that results from servitude to the selfishness and the commerce of the Chuzzlewits. Dickens uses simile and metaphor to create a sense of what the subjects of those similes and metaphors are not, the alienation of the self that results from becoming an object in the service of the commercial. Dickens uses comic uncanny style to enact his social mission.

The uncanny is principally an ontological concept which Dickens uses as a comic tool. In the Dickensian comic style, characters become non-characters, partial and contingent. The reality of the self is denied. Mrs Gradgrind, a vague character with an appropriately vague illness, remarks on her deathbed, ''I think there is a pain somewhere in the room [...] but I couldn't positively say that I have got it.''[62] Bodies are dispersed into constituent, and independent, parts, and recombined into comically novel formulations of physicality, 'Mrs Sparsit got behind her eyebrows'.[63] Characters become what they would like themselves to be, such as Fanny Squeers who examines herself in a mirror, 'where, like most of us, she saw – not herself, but the reflection of some pleasant image in her own brain.'[64] The emotions of the false characters are themselves comic falsifications, impositions onto the world of how those characters would like the world to be. Fanny Squeers, rejected by Nicholas, plans her revenge, and is reduced to a void, in which she becomes the representation of an absence, 'her affections (or whatever it might be that in the absence of anything better represented them)'.[65] Lord Verisopht even loses his physical human integrity, and becomes a separable entity, a disparate collection of body parts and externals, 'a suit of clothes

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[59] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 237.
[60] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 237.
[61] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 238.
[62] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), ed., David Craig (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 224. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[63] *Hard Times*, p. 89.
[64] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 201.
[65] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 209.

[...] a pair of whiskers [...] a moustache, a head of hair and a young face.'[66] To what extent, Dickens seems to ask, are these, 'characters' indeed 'characters': to what extent do Fanny Squeers and Lord Verisopht share membership of the category known as 'person'. Verisopht's dinner companion, Snobb, falls into a similar physical ambiguity, which is highlighted more strongly as Dickens, comically subverting his own mission as writer, fails to define the extent of Snobb's lack of categorisation, 'with the neck of a stork and the legs of no animal in particular.'[67]

Dickens presents comic characters as mixtures or blends, even as assemblages of parts, analogous to an uncanny industrial assembly. They have qualities and physical attributes which jostle uneasily for supremacy. Montague Tigg, in *Martin Chuzzlewit,* is described as a succession of physical details, gloves, boots, trousers, coat, cravat, hat, moustache, hair, and a succession of sense impressions that emphasises the blended assemblage, 'something which smelt like several damp umbrellas, a barrel of beer, a cask of warm brandy-and-water, and a small parlour-full of stale tobacco smoke, mixed.'[68] Tigg is presented as contradictory, '[h]e was very dirty and very jaunty; very bold and very mean; very swaggering and very slinking.'[69] In the same novel, Poll Sweedlepipe is described in terms of his bizarre resemblance to a range of birds, taking a quality from each one, or in contrast to each one: hawk, eagle, sparrow, dove, pigeon, raven and robin, though none of the birdlike qualities predominates, 'when any of his ornithological properties were on the verge of going too far, they were quenched, dissolved, melted down, and neutralised.'[70] Dickens emphasises malleability, the failure of the definitive, the defining, and the fixed.

The amorphous traffic between uncannily ambiguous conceptions of people extends to equally ambiguous conceptions of animals. Crummles's pony, with an uncertainty not resolved by the application of language, is 'a strange, four-legged animal [...] which he called a pony.'[71] This animal, of uncertain form and being, beyond the capacity of language to define, takes on human attributes of a not altogether commendable nature, as it 'evinced every now and then a strong inclination to lie down.'[72] Subsequently we learn of the animal's father who was a dancer and who was good at melodrama and ultimately took to drinking with clowns, and his mother who excelled at low comedy, eating apple pies, firing pistols and going to bed in a nightcap. For a writer whose comic mode extends and blurs the boundaries that define reality, it

[66] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 306.
[67] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 306.
[68] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, pp. 96-7.
[69] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 97.
[70] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 486.
[71] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 361.
[72] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 361.

is significant that the pony's comic biography should appear in what is, in some respects, a comic biography.

The barriers between people and objects become blurred, too.[73] Mr Lillyvick is transformed, in his admiration for Miss Petowker, into 'a most persevering umbrella', so that each time the actress acknowledges his presence, 'the umbrella broke out afresh.'[74] Bodies become dispersed and the dispersed sections become autonomous. The legs of the servant, significantly, a footman, who attends the carriage that takes Kate and Mrs Nickleby to the theatre, 'although somewhat large for his body, might, as mere abstract legs, have set themselves up for models at the Royal Academy.'[75] Crummles's theatrical troupe and Sleary's circus function through uncanny manipulations of body, role and identity. Dickens uses those groups as a focus for parallel uncanny manipulations of language. At the final meeting Nicholas has with Crummles, before the latter's departure for America, Crummles appears with his body comically dissolved into Cubist dislocation, 'one very bushy eyebrow stuck on crooked over his left eye, and the fellow eyebrow and the calf of one of his legs in his hand'.[76] Subsequently, he reconstructs his own body from the parts. He 'put on his other eyebrow, and the calves of his legs, and then put on his legs, which were of a yellowish flesh-colour, and rather soiled about the knees'.[77]

There is a similar, uncanny manipulation of language, a comic negation of metaphor, in the narrator's description of the Pecksniffs' journey to London, with, on the coach, 'olive branches in the boot and the family of doves inside'.[78] The bizarrely false image of the Pecksniffs as a family of peace-loving doves involves complicated layers of perception: the Pecksniffs see themselves in these terms, as does Pinch, who is seeing off the departing family and whose consciousness is closest to the description, though the image is not his, but the narrator's. It is the narrator's exaggeration, and yet deadpan certainty of expression which, ironically, is the pointer for the reader that this is a comically illuminating metaphor, though illuminating because it does not say what it says, but, in fact, says the opposite of what it says.

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[73] The identification of prosopopoeia and reification as distinctive elements of Dickensian style, though not explicitly in the context of the uncanny, has been made frequently, including by Carey, who describes 'the border country between people and things', p. 101, and by Van Ghent, 'The course of things demonically possessed is to imitate the human, while the course of human possession is to imitate the inhuman'. Dorothy Van Ghent, 'The Dickens World: A View from Todgers's' (1950), *The Dickens Critics*, ed., George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), pp. 213-32, p. 213.

[74] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 395.

[75] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 426.

[76] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 721.

[77] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 723.

[78] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 145.

The narrator's subsequent, apparently innocuous, clichéd simile of Pinch's happiness is a striking example of how Dickens uses language in a comically uncanny sense, where Pinch is described not in terms of a negation, but in terms of himself, as if he is his own double, where both sides of the simile are identical, 'as happy as only Tom Pinch could be.'[79] While this simile is an assertion of Pinch's, by now well known, innocently benevolent, character, it is also a negation of language, an uncanny doubling, where the language and the meaning become part of a reflective process where meaning is both asserted, but also negated, by being seen only in terms of itself. It is an appropriate simile for a character who comically deceives himself about the nature of Pecksniff, and who, therefore, has created a sense of himself, almost his own comic double, based on an error.

Dickens's comic language blurs the boundaries between the human and the natural world. Tapley's comically extended metaphor of the sea, exasperatedly provoked by the unpleasant travelling conditions he endures, points to an imaginatively uncanny mingling of the human with the immensely, amorphously and non-quantifiably, non-human. The vastness of the sea, and its watery shapelessness, are attributed qualities that relate to an underemployed and academically underachieving child,

> 'the sea is as nonsensical a thing as any going. It never knows what to do with itself. It hasn't got no employment for its mind, and is always in a state of vacancy [...] it never can be quiet. Which is entirely owing to its uncommon stupidity.'[80]

Dickens creates a world in which the passive becomes active, the inert becomes animated and the dead live again, if only to be eaten, as in young Martin's meal in America, where the food rapidly disappears, 'as if every bird had the use of its wings, and had flown in desperation down a human throat. The oysters, stewed and pickled, leaped from their capacious reservoirs, and slid by scores in to the mouths of the assembly.'[81] In addition, the multitude of greedy eaters becomes one, 'assembly', while also retaining a sense of it still being a multitude, with its 'mouths'.[82] It is a disconcerting, uncanny, image where the conventional barriers that mark the differences by which we understand the world – food, living, dead, separation, individuality, and multitude – seem to have been breached. General Fladdock, similarly, crosses the blurred boundaries by which we categorise the world. He is 'like

[79] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 262.
[80] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 310.
[81] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 334.
[82] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 334.

a dead clown' but, subsequently, he becomes, 'animated as if by a miracle.'[83] Pecksniff, learning that Jonas Chuzzlewit has marital intentions for his daughters, breaks into 'a sort of dejected vivacity'.[84]

Dickens deliberately points to the absurd nature of the imagery that we use to give meaning to the world. Pecksniff proposes to Jonas that they surprise his daughters, 'and come upon them like a clap of thunder'.[85] The narrator underscores the inadequate nature of this simile, and, perhaps, by so doing, underscores the essentially arbitrary nature of all tropes and the conventions by which we read them,

> [i]t might not have been easy to decide in respect of which of their manifold properties, Jonas, Mr Pecksniff, the carpet-bag, and the portmanteau, could be likened to a clap of thunder.[86]

The impact of the uncanny bears significantly on our understanding of Dickensian comic reality. Freud argues that the uncanny alters our perceptions of the significations of objects and their representations, 'when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes'.[87] There is a clear indication of the nature of the Dickensian comic in what Freud terms, 'the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality'.[88] The deployment of the uncanny by the literary artist is described as a form of trickery, which helps to inform our understanding of the realities in play in imaginative fiction: 'he deceives us by promising to give us the sober truth, and then after all overstepping it. We react to his inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences'.[89] The comedy of Dickensian style draws the reader in to pleasure, but the uncanny makes that pleasure an experience of disturbance and disconcertion.[90]

Comic Language and Comic Materiality: The Word, the Signs and the Meaning

> The meanings of words! Without Dr Johnson, or somebody of that sort, we might have been at this present moment calling an Italian-iron a bedstead.[91]

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[83] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 352.
[84] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 392.
[85] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 397.
[86] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 397.
[87] Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', p. 367.
[88] Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', p. 367.
[89] Freud, 'The 'Uncanny'', p. 374.
[90] Dickens vividly deploys the uncanny in his treatment of childhood recollections of Christmas in 'A Christmas Tree', *Household Words*, 39 (Dec.21 1850): 289-95. Viewed online: http://search.proquest.com.chain.kent.ac.uk/britishperiodicals/docview/7847729/1343875634547 5C2F9E/1?accountid=7408. Date viewed: 12th January 2012.
[91] Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1849-50), ed., Jeremy Tambling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004), p. 657. All subsequent references are to this edition.

The mission of the rapidly industrialising emergent commercial modernity of the nineteenth-century was to fix, quantify and determine reality and our experience of it. Objects and people were to have roles and relationships that aligned them within an ideology of the empirical and the commodified. The age was a commercial one, concerned with measurement, containment, particularisation and commodification. For commerce to be possible, certainty was necessary, certainty about who people were, certainty about what role or roles they played within society and within the economy, and certainty about what objects were, whether spoons, railway engine, or money. It was the machine age, and the parts of a machine must function with only a small degree of tolerance.

The qualities of Dickensian comic style identified earlier in this chapter have important epistemological functions. They serve to disturb the prevailing commercial ideology which helped to characterise emergent modernity. Characters like Dombey and Gradgrind seek to constrain and restrain meaning in the service of commercial imperative. If we were to work, buy, sell and consume, we had to know exactly what we were: worker, shopkeeper, banker, father, mother, or child. We also needed to know what we were buying or, in view of Catherine Waters's discussion of fakery, what we thought we were buying and from whom.[92] Reality had to be definable, dependable and predictable. Relationships, too, social and commercial, had to be definable, dependable and predictable if they were to have economic worth. Above all, language also had to be definable, dependable and predictable. It had to be formulated and classified and given, thereby, a tradable reality by which it could become a medium of exchange in our transactions with a world which has the market as its paradigm. Victorian commercial industrialism required a particular understanding of reality and of what constitutes it and therefore of the language in which that reality is conceptualised.

In her analysis of the context of a developing nineteenth-century commodification culture, and the changing understandings of the relationship between people and objects that commercial modernity was bringing into being, Waters surveys commentators on Dickensian style who have identified the features of Dickens's deployment of animation, reanimation, reification, and anthropomorphism.[93] She argues that the linguistic techniques Dickens used are symptomatic of changing understandings of the relationships between people and objects in a developing

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[92] Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's* Household Words*: The Social Life of Goods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 40-2. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[93] Waters, p. 3-4.

commercial society.[94] Waters' analysis is based on scrutiny of *Household Words* and Dickens's contribution to it as both writer and 'conductor', and her emphasis is not specifically on the comic. Nevertheless, the principle of establishing that the language of Dickens's comic mode is expressive of a desire to reflect, but also to subvert, the developing commercial paradigm, is clearly established.

Terry Eagleton, writing on structuralism and semiotics, analyses the malleability of language in terms which seem to reflect our experience of the Dickensian. He sees language as essentially various, multiple and heterogeneous, gaining meaning as much from its use, as from any intrinsic or inherent sense of meaning, where poetry, 'gains its effects through constant clashes and tensions.'[95] In this context, the troubling nature of the Dickensian comic style and its relationship both to Dickens's imagination and to the nature of emergent modernity, become easier to place. As Eagleton says of structuralism, '[m]eaning was not "natural",' and 'we inhabit many different 'languages' simultaneously, some of them perhaps mutually conflicting'.[96] Within this theoretical context, we find a means of accounting for how the Dickensian comic becomes profoundly disquieting, and why contemporary observers, and Dickens himself, characterised it as sickness, '[t]he confident bourgeois belief that the isolated individual subject was the fount and origin of all meaning took a sharp knock.'[97] Utilitarian bourgeois certainties are countered by comic language which makes reality something which is malleable and polymorphous, as the language which describes it is also malleable and polymorphous. For Dickens, comic language is a mission to subvert the stable signifier.

In Dickens's fiction language is potentially, or even primarily, the site of problematic comic meaning. In the satirical portraits of Squeers's and Gradgrind's educational methods language is an area of contest, where divergent and contrasting meaning is not only exploited for comic effect, but points to equally divergent and problematic readings of reality. Squeers's unpleasant comic despotism attempts to control language and thereby to control meaning in the service of utilitarian economics. Squeers represents his pedagogy as 'the practical mode of teaching', whereby the meaning of a word becomes a severely utilitarian activity that supports Dotheboys Hall's internal economy,

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[94] 'The strange kinship of persons and things [...] is the disquieting perception of subject-object relations that emerges from *Household Words*'s engagement with commodity culture.' Waters, p. 5.
[95] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 102. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[96] Eagleton, p. 107, p. 115.
[97] Eagleton, p. 107.

> '[c]-l-e-a-n, clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r-, der, winder, a casement. When a boy knows this out of book, he goes and does it.'[98]

For Squeers and Gradgrind the meaning of the word 'horse' is of particular interest. Squeers's meaning is brutally concise, ''A horse is a quadruped, and quadruped's Latin for beast'' and Gradgrind's is scientifically summative, as delivered by Bitzer, ''Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive''.[99] Both educationalists are keen to emphasise practical, materialist, and severely empirical meanings that reflect the ideology of capitalist, industrial and commercial imperatives to quantify and to define. As Nicholas observes of Squeers's methodology, in a feeble attempt at opposition, ''[i]t's a very useful one''.[100]

Further evidence of Dickens's resistance to linguistic codification, even by a benign character, is shown by his gently parodic attitude to Dr Strong, whose lifelong writing of a dictionary is chaotic and never completed. Mrs Markleham points out,

> '[w]hat a useful work a Dictionary is! What a necessary work! The meanings of words! Without Dr Johnson, or somebody of that sort, we might have been at this present moment calling an Italian-iron a bedstead.'[101]

In a novel in which meaning and names are problematic, the dictionary, consisting of scraps of paper randomly distributed about Dr Strong's person, are, despite Mrs Markleham's assertion, clearly no defence against the possibility of mistaken – or falsified – relationships between words and meanings. Calling an Italian-iron a bedstead is precisely the sort of thing Dickens does. *David Copperfield* can be seen in the same way as Barry Thatcher sees *Hard Times*, as an expression of a drive towards, and a reaction against, an empiricist model of language, with characters, such as Gradgrind and Bounderby, who express a desire for language to be fixed and certain.[102]

Threatening and dangerous characters such as Gradgrind, Squeers and Dombey express the ideological imperative to control language and thereby restrain and limit its potential range of meanings. Their linguistic mission is reductive. They exercise linguistic power as they exercise social, economic, political and ideological power. They reduce and control words as they reduce and control people. Comic characters such as Micawber and Captain Cuttle, in contrast, are liberated from the need to control language. In their cases, the balance of power between character and language is reversed, and it is the words that exercise the power and the character who has a

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[98] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 155.
[99] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 155; *Hard Times*, p. 50.
[100] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 155.
[101] *David Copperfield*, p. 657.
[102] Barry Thatcher. 'Dickens' Bow to the Language Theory Debate.' DSA 23 (1994): 17-47.

troubled and troubling relationship to meaning. For these characters meaning is fluid, changing and polysemic rather than limited, controlled and systematised. It is no surprise that characters such as these, whose human values are opposed to the linguistic systematisers, become, almost, linguistic freedom fighters, with an instinctive attitude to meaning of comic liberation and freedom. They deploy comic values in comic language.

Gradgrind is confronted with a powerful source of opposition to his attempt to control meaning and language and, by extension, economic and social organisation and personal relationships. Sissy Jupe is the focus of resistance to Gradgrind and to utilitarian values because she is comically figured as resistant to his educational search for stable signification, a resistance which is for him supposed educational deficiency and for the reader a celebration of comic linguistic polysemy. For Gradgrind, meaning limits and controls. A horse is an idea, fixed and systematised like an industrial process. Meaning is 'correct' or 'incorrect' and Gradgrind thereby empowers himself to make the signifier 'horse' become stable.

For Sissy, however, the meaning of 'horse' cannot be constrained in this way. Her world is a multiplicity of horses. They become, individually, valued members of the circus with their own personalities and attributes. They play different roles and they can even help Tom escape justice. In the circus the boundaries between horse and other species are blurred, where Childers is 'a most remarkable sort of Centaur'.[103] Even the concept of species is subverted when we first meet the circus performers at the Pegasus Arms, named after the winged horse.[104] For Sissy, the production of meaning is much more fertile than it is for Gradgrind, for whom it is both an industrial and disciplinary process that seeks to limit and constrain. For Sissy meaning includes rather than excludes, extends rather than limits and it has both an affective dimension and a moral purpose. For Sissy, her father is a circus performer: for Gradgrind, Signor Jupe has to be redefined into an economic unit who has a useful and productive economic role in industrial and commercial society, 'veterinary surgeon, a farrier and a horse breaker'.[105]

Similarly, the circus folk have a comic language which interrogates Gradgrind's authoritarian stance on the production of meaning. Gradgrind is proud that, "I call a spade a spade".[106] The circus folk, however, rejoice in their specialised vocabulary, where Jupe "[o]ffered at the Garters [...] Missed his tip at the banners [...] was loose in his ponging."[107] The specialised circus vocabulary almost anticipates the

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[103] *Hard Times*, p. 72.
[104] *Hard Times*, p. 70.
[105] *Hard Times*, p. 49.
[106] *Hard Times*, p. 74.
[107] *Hard Times*, p. 73.

lessons of structuralism, "[t]ight-Jeff or Slack-Jeff, it don't much signify".[108] Sissy mistakes the linguistic registers of the powerful which are deployed in the schoolroom, but her errors express not the educational underachievement which she fears it does, but rather express a comic corrective to harsh utilitarian imperatives. She mistakes the religious and moral catechism for the political when she is asked, "[w]hat is the first principle of this science?" and she answers, "[t]o do unto others as I would they should do unto me."[109] Sissy finds suffering and searches for compassion where M'Choakumchild finds logic, system and reason.[110]

Furthermore, Sissy understands the difference between an object and its representation in a way which the utilitarians do not. She is able, instinctively, to appreciate the potentially comic instability of language and the arbitrary relationship between sign and signified in an implicit act of celebratory linguistic rebellion. Where the 'gentleman' who intervenes in the discussion asserts that flowers on a carpet are inappropriate because they would then be walked upon by heavy boots, Sissy is able to understand the difference between the sign and the signified, or rather to perceive that the sign may be polysemic, "[i]t wouldn't hurt them, sir. They wouldn't crush and wither [...] They would be the pictures of what was pretty and pleasant".[111]

Micawber, too, is defeated by words. Unlike Sissy, for whom linguistic failure is misery, even while it indicates her powerful moral understanding, Micawber exults in his. Micawber manufactures words prolifically. However, as a verbal industrialist in the commercial age in which he is so keen to play a role, he is non-productive. He has a superfluity of words and the manufacturing processes of his verbose speeches and letters combine them to lose, rather than gain, meaning. His vocabulary and range of reference are exuberant and extensive but his long sentences have the comic effect of obscuring, rather than elucidating. Micawber is keenly aware that his comically superfluous style hinders rather than clarifies meaning, though his comically repeated failure does not educate him to a more restrained style. He needs to match each periphrastic phrase with its own explanation, a comically uncanny double of simplicity,

> "[u]nder the impression [...] that your peregrinations in this metropolis have not as yet been extensive, and that you might have some difficulty in penetrating the arcane of the Modern Babylon in the direction of the City road – in short [...] that you might lose yourself –"[112]

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[108] *Hard Times*, p. 73.
[109] *Hard Times*, p. 95.
[110] *Hard Times*, p. 97.
[111] *Hard Times*, p. 52.
[112] *David Copperfield*, p. 167.

Micawber's use of language is ambivalent, because he uses words which obscure rather than reveal meaning, and for the same reason Micawber is a comically ambiguous figure. Micawber's language characterises his dominant mode of thought and behaviour. He seeks continually to produce himself in his own linguistic factory. The verbal combination and recombination of words in forms that express extensive knowledge of the linguistic forms of bourgeois gentility are his vain attempts to create and maintain bourgeois gentility. He aims, as many Dickensian characters do, to manufacture himself in words.

However, he finds that words do not create reality. Life refuses to conform to his view of what it should be and it refuses to provide the outlets for his talents which he and Mrs Micawber believe those talents deserve. He is, therefore, unable to maintain that manufactured verbal facade. His continual attempts at gentility consequently break down in the face of reality, where reality is reflected in his 'in short': the point at which his attempt to master language breaks against language's brutal mastery of him and reveals the failure of his product, himself, in the verbal marketplace.

Importantly, Micawber's linguistic shortcomings are not criticised in the novel, apart from Aunt Trotwood's caustic asides in Chapter XLIX, where she asks, '[w]hat are you talking about?' and in Chapter LII.[113] In fact, Micawber is productive, if not in a commercial sense, then in a moral, human and humane sense. Micawber's moral rectitude, for instance, defeats Heep and restores Wickfield and Agnes to their rightful positions. Micawber's comic failure, like Sissy's, to master language in the utilitarian age is a Dickensian revelation of the human and humane values those characters embody.

Like Micawber, Captain Cuttle is a comic character who often talks nonsense, applying words in failed communication. Cuttle is a frequent user of words in combinations which lose coherence. In conversation, Cuttle assures Toots of his belief in his honest friendship,

> '[i]f you're in arnest, you see, my lad [...] you're a object of clemency, and clemency is the brightest jewel in the crown of a Briton's head, for which you'll overhaul the Constitution, as laid down in Rule Britannia, and, when found, *that* is the charter as them garden angels was a-singing of, so many times over.'[114]

In a similar way to Micawber, Captain Cuttle's verbal surreality is expressive of his human and humane moral values. He uses words in combinations which are

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[113] *David Copperfield*, p. 715.
[114] *Dombey and Son*, p. 577.

frequently confusing and nonsensical. And yet his words convey an alternative and a healthier perspective on reality. They negate meaning as Squeers, Gradgrind, Dombey and others recognise it but they affirm meaning as Sissy, Micawber, and Dickens recognise it. Toots's response to Cuttle's words conveys both the meaninglessness, and the meaningfulness, of Cuttle, '[w]ell, you'll excuse me [...] if I don't quite follow you sometimes [...] I feel that I'd rather think about Miss Dombey in your society than talk about her in almost anybody else's.'[115] Daniel Peggotty is a generally more cogent speaker, but he, too, has words which both have no meaning and are, paradoxically, full of meaning. His use of the word 'gormed', occasions recognition of the inadequacy of traditional linguistic taxonomy, as 'nobody had the least idea of the etymology of this terrible verb passive'.[116] However, despite the absence of a formal definition, this word is eloquent to those who hear it and it expresses clearly, on each of Daniel's uses of it, an essential, forceful, meaning, 'they all regarded it as constituting a most solemn imprecation.'[117] Similarly, following David's reunion with the Micawbers in Canterbury, they sing 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'when we declared we would 'take a right gude Willie Waught,' and hadn't the least idea what it meant, we were really affected.'[118] Verbal chaos expresses moral worth. The unstable signifier constitutes healthy disorder.

If unambiguous naming, clear and uncomplicated meaning, and the consequent authoritarian assertion of identity of both things and of people, are requirements of an industrialised, commercialised bourgeois modernity, then the opposite, the declaration that language, meaning and identity are neither fixed, nor clear, nor unambiguous, is a key message of the Dickensian comic world. The comic and uncanny failure of words to name definitively in the Dickensian comic mode results from, and in, an awareness of the arbitrary nature that they have as signs.

David Copperfield is a novel about meaning and the difficulty of finding it, with a focus on how words have, or fail to have, meaning. For such a long novel, a novel of so many words, it is remarkable how many of the words fail, comically and otherwise. The problems of finding meaning in a confused and confusing world is signalled from the start, '[w]hether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.'[119] Autobiography and life writing are narrated in order to locate meaning in lived experience, to find causes and relate them to consequences, to trace the channels of

[115] *Dombey and Son*, pp. 577-8.
[116] *David Copperfield*, p. 46.
[117] *David Copperfield*, p. 46.
[118] *David Copperfield*, p. 273.
[119] *David Copperfield*, p. 13.

development in the individual mind, in relationships and in social networks and to determine the profound links between 'then' and 'now'. Biography enacts the Victorian mission of words to explain and to define. By the end of the novel the conventions of a generically comic happy ending are invoked: characters are appropriately rewarded or punished, marriage suitably applied and children distributed. The novel is a journey towards the stable signifier, but it encounters much instability on the way.

Throughout *David Copperfield* the process of formulating meaning is recognised as a problematic one, and it is made problematic by the awkward nature of language, its unreliability, shifts and changes of language, and the comically failed relationship of words to meaning. It is as if Dickens is seeking, uncannily, to subvert his own literary mission and, thereby, the mission of Victorian words. From David's childhood reading to Peggotty, the book about crocodiles, from which Peggotty draws the impression that crocodiles, or '[c]rorkindills', are 'a sort of vegetable', to his inability to express his love for Agnes on his return from Switzerland,

> I could find no utterance for what I felt. I tried to bless her, tried to thank her, tried to tell her [...] but all my efforts were in vain. My love and joy were dumb

the novel recounts the comic problems that characters have with a slippery language.[120]

Peggotty is 'not quite right in the name yet,' and David himself, on his jaunt with Murdstone to Lowestoft, comically fails to recognise his own informal appellation as 'Brooks of Sheffield' even though it is awarded as a caution against his perception.[121] For the reader, the meaning of, 'Brooks of Sheffield' is clear, and it is a source of comic pleasure. However, it is a pleasure which is different in nature from the innocently humorous pleasure in Peggotty's failed understanding. It is a more ominous, knowing comedic awareness of Murdstone's capacity for duplicity, signalled by his control of these words and their particular meaning to him and his cronies, which threatens the domestic harmony of David and his mother. The comic pleasure serves, in both examples, to point to the manipulations, both conscious, and unconscious, for both innocent and for guilty purposes, to which words and their polysemic capacities, can be subjected. Both examples create a vivid sense of a fluid, and not wholly knowable, world, a world which characters, not least David himself, struggle to understand fully.

The novel is a narrative of problematic comic naming. David fails to understand, on his trip to Lowestoft with Murdstone, the meaning of the word 'Skylark'

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[120] *David Copperfield*, p. 28, p. 844.
[121] *David Copperfield*, p. 29, p. 35.

on the sailor's shirt, assuming it signifies the sailor's, rather than the boat's, name.[122] More powerfully, in confusion between signifier and signified, namer and named, person, building and relationship, David assumes that he has discerned meaning in the name of one of those in Daniel Peggotty's home and asks him, "[d]id you give your son the name of Ham, because you lived in a sort of ark?", to which Daniel gives an answer that negates, not only the connotations of the name, but also the relationship which David has assumed, and that evokes a new, as yet unspoken familial history, ''[n]o, sir. I never giv him no name [...] My brother Joe was *his* father''.[123]

David's mission in *David Copperfield* is to understand himself and his relationships and whether, and in what ways, the word 'hero' correctly describes him. His search for understanding requires an acknowledgement of the role that words play, both in defining and in subverting meaning. David shows that he has learned the ambiguous nature of language in his commentary on Micawber's ornate eloquence at the unmasking of Heep in Chapter LII. Micawber expresses himself in his customary florid way, expressive of his 'relish in this formal piling up of words'.[124] David recognises that Micawber's style indicates the troublesome nature of our relationships with words, '[w]e talk about the tyranny of words, but we like to tyrannise over them too; [...] the meaning or necessity of our words is a secondary consideration'.[125] Similarly, Peggotty's substitution of the word 'azackly' for 'exactly', causes David to meditate on her 'militia of words', indicating a loose and ill-disciplined force, unpredictable, independent, possibly even aggressive.[126] David expresses, not without some implied reservation appropriate to a character who learns emotional discipline, the troubling idea that we can use language independent of meaning, that language and meaning are separate and, often, antagonistic, though also potentially liberating.

Literary tropes, too, are distortions of language and falsifiers of relationships between words, people and objects. They are the imaginative means, or the deceptive trickery, by which the material and the non-material are enabled to mix. They empower the comic uncanny. They vivify the inanimate and deaden the living. They signify the transformation of people, objects and ideas into what they are not. Dickens's use of tropes plays on this falsification and underlines it, as he deploys figures which comically highlight their own falsity. All tropes are conventions and their boundaries can be exceeded. Dickens's use of them is surreal, in the sense that they create comically incongruous, bizarre and absurd, rather than realist, interpretations of the

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[122] *David Copperfield*, p. 36.
[123] *David Copperfield*, pp. 43-5.
[124] *David Copperfield*, p. 758.
[125] *David Copperfield*, p. 758-9.
[126] *David Copperfield*, p. 54.

fictional world. They provide meaning which is deceptive, and which is not meaning. They are ideal tools for a subversive, linguistically radical, Dickens.

In *The Cricket on the Hearth* the uncannily plural, though actually singular, Gruff and Tackleton, is described 'as perfectly at home, and as unquestionably in his own element, as a fresh young salmon on the top of the Great Pyramid.'[127] This simile, with its comic contrast and incongruity – youth and age, marine and desert, taste and dust, depth and height, assertion and ironic negation – could be seen as no more than a successful figure, expressive of social discomfort, perhaps along the conventional lines of 'a fish out of water'. However, there is an extraordinary power of exaggerated detail in the simile, a superfluity of image, that is, at once both hugely enjoyable and somewhat disturbing. There is almost an atmosphere of an ancient mariner buttonholing us, and going just a little too far in his analogy in an obsessive, not entirely healthy, way. In a similar way, and also with a piscine theme, is the simile from 'The Bloomsbury Christening' from *Sketches by Boz*, in which Dumps is described as 'feeling about as much out of place as a salmon might be supposed to be on a gravel walk'[128] One of the participants in the game of whist, shortly after the arrival of Pickwick's party at Manor Farm, Mr Miller, plays poorly and excites both the humour of his opponents and the irritation of his partner. As a consequence he 'felt as much out of his element as a dolphin in a sentry box'.[129]

In all three images there is an implied humanising of animals, the attribution of human social delicacy to an animal which, in the first two cases, is usually seen as cold, hidden and undifferentiated, and experienced only dead and as food. It is the feelings of these animals at finding themselves in such uncongenial situations which is the analogous link to the people to whom the similes are relevant. In the same way, the human subjects of the images take on the animal's qualities: no doubt flapping around ineffectually, gasping in desperation, conscious of their slow, painful and inevitable death, although a comically social, rather than actual, death.

It is striking how extreme the similes are, yoking together such remarkable incongruities – wet and dry, swim and walk, aquatic animal and human – appropriately enough for the desired meaning but indicative of an imagination which works at the comic extreme. The comic attribution of delicate and recognisable human feelings in language of social nicety has an uncanny, surreal and cartoon quality, and it leaves us

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[127] Charles Dickens, *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), *The Christmas Books Volume 2*, ed., Michael Slater (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 14-120, p. 70.
[128] Charles Dickens, 'The Bloomsbury Christening' (1834), *Sketches by Boz* (1836), ed., Dennis Walder, pp. 535-54, p. 549.
[129] Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), ed., Robert L. Patten (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 143.

with the feeling of a world much richer and full of forces and drives than can be accounted for from a merely material and empirical perspective. The images, while amusing, are also comically disturbing. Each image is the comic appropriation of death as an image of social embarrassment. The comic death of an animal gives the social understanding of an embarrassed human being in an awkward social situation.

The linguistic process under investigation here extends beyond the processes of naming previously discussed. Meaning is problematised in the Dickensian trope, but in a different manner to the ways in which words are problematised. The Dickensian comic trope is meaning as excess. The 'infirmity' which Dickens identified in his style, the 'petting of the spoilt child' is evidenced most clearly in these complex comic tropes. Meaning expressed in these tropes goes beyond the rational, the contained, the systematic and the ordered. Dickensian linguistic figuration has radical ideological as well as aesthetic purposes.

The gathering of old Martin's relatives at Pecksniff's house is a bizarre and unpalatable collection of grotesques. Pecksniff is described as a freakish comic self-concocted hybrid,

> [i]f ever man combined within himself all the mild qualities of the lamb with a considerable touch of the dove, and not a dash of the crocodile, or the least possible suggestion of the very mildest seasoning of the serpent, that man was he.[130]

The image is itself a comically freakish hybrid. It mixes the register of the domestic recipe with traditional animal iconographic connotation and is expressed in a gentlemanly tone of learned eloquence which almost disguises the image's freakishness. It is not a realist image. The image is surreal and bizarre, violating boundaries of register and calling attention to its own freakish violations. It pushes at the boundaries of what is possible in language and still convey meaning. Its comic impact is the violation of linguistic convention. It is a comic blow in the Dickensian linguistic fight for freedom against system, order and excessive rationalistic logic whether in language or in a mechanistic modernity.

Further evidence of Dickens's comic linguistic liberation theology is found as the narrator builds the comic theme of Pecksniff's false earnestness with his description of Pecksniff as being 'in a kind of moist meekness!'[131] As he greets his guests, Pecksniff is 'damp with gracious perspiration'.[132] Here, too, Dickensian comic style pushes the limits of meaning. Pecksniff's wetness of eye and brow signify, for him at

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[130] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 106.
[131] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 107.
[132] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 107.

least, his honourable good intentions and earnest insistence on his own plain dealing. However, the signs of his meaning, and the language in which it is expressed, are comically strained and dislocated in the same way that his hypocrisy strains and dislocates his benignity. Graciousness and meekness are social qualities with strong overtones of the spiritual. In Dickens's tropes they are subject to bodily processes, perhaps even become bodily processes. Equally, perspiration, an animal function, takes on social, partly spiritual, values. The stresses of the language enact the stresses of the social performance.

Epistemological categories – social, spiritual, physical – are violated. Perspiration is gracious and meekness moist only as tropes within the imaginative comic world of the novel and only through Dickens's comic manipulation of words. These tropes combine abstractions, the spiritual qualities of meekness and grace or, at least, their social equivalents of modesty and deference with unpleasant and disconcerting bodily symptoms which queasily indicate illness, feverish excitement or contamination.

These tropes do not play on the potent comic ambiguities of language discussed earlier in this chapter. However surreal and unsettling they are, the meaning of the tropes and our understanding of Pecksniff that results is clear: he is a hypocrite, self-centred and threatening. Nevertheless, Dickens makes meanings which are urgently and defiantly combative to the epistemological borders and limits by which modernity seeks to categorise and therefore understand.

The comically and bizarrely named Mr Spottletoe, whose name, suggestive of Edward Lear, connotes a comically diseased body, is given the freakish appearance of baldness combined with facial hirsuteness, such that 'he seemed to have stopped his hair, by the sudden application of some powerful remedy, in the very act of falling off his head, and to have fastened it irrevocably on his face.'[133] This image, too, has a startling comic vitality. It is also shockingly bizarre, combining the monstrous idea of the man's hair falling, at once, and in a unified mass, onto his face, leaving his head completely bald, but, by application of some agency for its descent to be arrested in time, and in the required form, for it to become his whiskers. And, too, this idea is delivered in a narratorial tone of disconcerted, though essentially rational, analysis. The image crosses the bounds of the rational, however, and enters an imaginative world where the fantastic informs the real, and where the real, as a consequence, seems to become less real. The depth of the comic absurdity is a function of the extent to which the boundaries between logic and illogic, between real and unreal, and between

[133] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 107.

epistemological categories have been breached, emphasised in Mrs Spottletoe's contention that 'the said whiskers were 'the lodestar of her existence''.[134]

Other family members express their personalities in a similar mixing, or rather blurring, of the personality and the body, 'their tempers were reduced to something less than their waists, and sharp lacing was expressed in their very noses.'[135] George Chuzzlewit is afflicted by the corporeality of his clothes, which have the appearance of disease, an appearance which transfers itself to George himself, 'the bright spots on his cravat [...] seem to have broken out upon him'.[136] The distortion and torture of the body is seen also in the description of Charity Pecksniff in the mornings. Her nose is red, with 'a scraped and frosty look, as if it had been rasped', which is a parallel to her mood, which 'is of a sharp and acid quality, as though an extra lemon [...] had been squeezed into the nectar of her disposition'.[137] Again, this is an intricate image, where personality is figured as mythical substance, whose legendary sweetness is marred, figuratively, by a mundane reality, in this case a lemon.

These bizarre images point to distinctive features of Dickens's imagination and how that imagination is manifested in language. He is able, comically, to yoke together extremes of experience and of thought, extremes of relationship, whether relationships of similarity, or of divergence. There is a fluidity expressed in the Dickensian comic, a fluidity of conception of the world, in which the customary barriers which separate the different modes of being, such as 'person', 'object', 'idea', 'human', 'animal', 'mechanical' and, even, 'moral' which customarily allow us to understand those modes and, perhaps, as part of that process of understanding, to measure and quantify them, have been disrupted. Their contents and contexts have been allowed to mingle and become blurred. Dickens's comic purposes are clearly opposed to the appropriating imperatives of industrial and commercial modernity, with its focus on codification, definition and predictability. Modernity wishes to police the borders of meaning, but Dickens wants to invade them.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that Dickens's comic linguistic world is a disturbing one. He uses comic tropes to challenge the limits of language. He plays on the ambiguities of meaning and the capacity of language for the uncanny, and draws the reader into an

[134] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 107.
[135] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 107.
[136] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 108.
[137] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 140.

unsettling complicity, in which the customary realist parameters are confused, epistemological borders become permeable and limits are violated. This complicity has powerful ideological functions. It establishes an aesthetic which counters the excessive rationality and emotionless logic which characterises the machine age. Strange combinations are made, of physical matter and non-matter, animal and human, abstractions and the spiritual, mechanical and natural, both within those pairings and across them. Appropriately, for a comic mode which shockingly recombines the separate and the disparate, the Dickensian comic world alienates at the same time as it is enjoyably comic, it threatens while it entertains and it agitates while it provokes laughter. There is a tension, then, in Dickens's comic language. The relationship between words and meaning is problematic and open to corruption, both intentional and otherwise. But the relationship can also be a positive moral force in his fiction, expressive of liberation, and a potently combative element in both undermining the monolithic and asserting the virtuous.[138]

Dickens is like Micawber, a trader in verbal manufacture. In fact, Dickens himself is also a profligate with words, a highly successful and prosperous merchant of language, and a positive of Micawber's negative in the sense that where Micawber fails to turn words into bourgeois prosperity, at least before his emigration, Dickens succeeds. He is a commodifier of words. Dickens traded within this economy, but he traded as one whose products were often comically subversive of the certainties required by modernity.

Malleable language is the moral saviour in Dickens's comic world. Imagination expressed as linguistic style enables freedom of thought and of affect which liberates the mind from the formalities that modernity imposes. The Dickensian comic style foregrounds the absurd, the false, the different; it creates dissonance; it alienates the reader while making the reader complicit; it remakes the world, or at least it reformulates the terms by which we understand it. The Dickensian comic mode of language celebrates the transgressive. It is a recognition, and a creation, of uncanny and grotesque disorder and we enjoy it because it is transgressive and grotesque. It is a linguistic world where sea creatures exist in sentry boxes, on pyramids or on gravel walks, where evil people have only one eye, and where a megalosaurus walks down Holborn in the fog.

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[138] 'Dickens's use of [benevolence] questions the dominant ethical programme of the nineteenth-century, utilitarianism, which sought precisely the calculative consistency that the novels so distrust, and the subordination of metaphor and figure (which Dickens sometimes calls 'Fancy' but is much more than that) to the norms of its reason. [...] [the novels] produce disturbing and uncanny textual-moral effects, which are not reducible either to the felicific calculus or the pragmatic benevolence that opposes it, through a figurative, paradoxical, and hyperbolic language'. John Bowen, *Other Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 22.

Chapter Five

Satire: Radical Author and Radical Authority

But the thing about satire is that it doesn't really work unless it accords with what people already think. So in that sense, it is much more like the *Daily Mail* than a lot of people would like to believe. And I also now think that if we did have any effect, it was more likely to have kept the government [*sic*] in power for longer, as we provided a pretty large-scale safety valve for a lot of people.[1]

Satire articulates fundamental idealism: the world can be a better place. It is literature's revenge on tyranny, folly and vice. Satiric laughter may be temporary but it invokes potent moral scrutiny. Satire is Dickens's powerful judgement on emergent modernity's distorting, destructive and alienating social, psychological, political, cultural and ideological potencies. It is the mode that positions the ethically engaged Dickens novel at the heart of his culture, the mode where aesthetic practice becomes moral engagement with his age. Satiric laughter empowered him as it empowers us. In satire we temporarily heal or punish a sick and guilty humanity with Dickens's help.

Paradoxically, Dickens's comic writing reveals that the anarchic and unsettling imagination is also conservative and controlling. The mind that comically juxtaposes the aquatic and the ancient Egyptian, or that sees a dinosaur in Holborn, also becomes exasperated at the pretensions of young men or the absurdities of polite society.[2] His comic imagination destabilises us but it also establishes community of opinion on key issues of the day. It emphasises alienation but also educates us into shared, gentlemanly, middle-class, good sense. There is tension rather than balance in Dickens between corrective and subversive laughter, a paradoxical contrast between wild imaginings and staid rectitude which his deployment of satire clearly exposes.

Satire is the literary convergence of moral vision and laughter, an aesthetic intersection where laughter asserts, implicitly or explicitly, a moral judgement. Satiric laughter controls rather than liberates. It attacks and corrects – rather than celebrates – difference and aberration because located within them are not human and humane values, the ideal, the whole and the healthy, but corruption, destruction and alienation. Here, Dickens is clearly in a classical satiric tradition. His satire is indebted in form, structure and style and like much of that tradition it is conservative and authoritarian. For Horace, the essential purpose of satire was to 'speak truth with a laugh', or, as

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[1] John Lloyd, quoted in Nicholas Wroe, 'Thatcher Years: A Life in Comedy.' *The Guardian.* Saturday 11th April 2009, pp. 12-13, p. 13. All subsequent references are to this article as 'Thatcher Years'.

[2] Charles Dickens, 'Thoughts about People' (1835), 'The Tuggs's at Ramsgate' (1836), 'Horatio Sparkins' (1834), *Sketches by Boz* (1839), ed., Dennis Walder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 251-5, pp. 386-408, pp. 409-426. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Menippus was described, the satirist is 'the man who jokes about serious things.'[3] Satire, then, is above all a moral art with a pungent restorative or retributive energy. Highet emphasises the corrective, regulatory and authoritarian functions of satire in his reference to satire as 'the physician or the policeman', to which we could add that, in Dickens's case, it is also the social and political reformer, the psychologist, the psychiatrist, the theologian, and the moralist.[4]

Dickensian satire is distinct from his other modes but the targets remain the same: the debilitating effects of industrial, commercial and urban modernity upon society and the life of the mind. Dickensian satire contrasts with the dark and anarchic uncertainties and with the celebrations of benign human particularity which are found in other comic modes. Satiric episodes are callous in their clear-eyed purity.[5] Action collapses to formal and ritualistic sacraments of social emptiness. Emotional distance for the reader and for the participants foreshadows Bergson's contention that, in order fully to appreciate humour, we must have 'a momentary anaesthesia of the heart.'[6] Dickens exposes a world void of individual and spontaneous thought and action, in which human beings reduce to players in ritualised, sham ceremonies, alienated from themselves.

Ritual, from the psychological perspective, is 'any sequence of action or behaviours that is highly stylised, relatively rigid and stereotyped [...] A fairly

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[3] Michael Coffey, *Roman Satire* (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 70. All subsequent references are to this edition. '[W]hat harm can there be/ in presenting the truth with a laugh [...] ?' Horace, 'Book 1 Satire 1', *Horace: Satires and Epistles Persius: Satires*, trans., intr. and notes, Niall Rudd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 39-43, ll. 24-5, p. 40. All subsequent references are to this edition as 'Horace/Persius'. Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 233. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[4] Highet, p. 26. James Sutherland refers to '[t]he satirist, like the magistrate on the bench.' James Sutherland, *English Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 19. Paul Simpson, from the perspective of linguistic pragmatics and stylistics, identifies satire as 'the glue, lubricant and sandpaper': it acts to encourage social empathy, encourage goodwill and remove sources of social friction. Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humour* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2003), pp. 3-4. Dustin Griffin expresses discontent with what he regards as an old-fashioned consensus on satire established by critics such as David Worcester and others, in which 'satire is a highly rhetorical and moral art. A work of satire is designed to attack vice or folly.' However, despite Griffin's contention that 'the old theoretical consensus is clearly inadequate', he finds that 'vigorous and probing criticism of individual texts has not led to a new theoretical consensus,' and that, consequently, 'I do not offer a new and comprehensive and unified 'theory''. This study, while acknowledging that aspects of the consensus that Griffin critiques are problematic, relies on the consensus that Griffin does not supersede, both in terms of the features of the satiric mode and in its analysis of the absorption of satire into the heteroglossic nineteenth-century novel. Dustin Griffin, *Satire A Critical Reintroduction* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), p. 1. David Worcester, *The Art of Satire* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1940). All subsequent references are to these editions.

[5] Worcester depicts satire as having a 'single and steady focus' with a clear objective, in contrast to comedy which he characterises as 'more casual and promiscuous'. Worcester, p. 37.

[6] Henri Bergson, *Le Rire* (1899), trans. F. Rothwell, *Comedy*, ed., Wylie Sypher, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp. 61-190, p. 64.

elaborate, stereotyped set of behaviours that perhaps had functional origins but they are no longer apparent.'[7] Satire is a 'ritualised' literary form in the sense that we read it in special ways that are rhetorically signalled. It is an appropriate mode for Dickens to depict ritualised society in which humans shrink to social or economic roles and in which humanity is no more than that required by the demands of commercial modernity. Characters and their relationships become representations: types, caricatures or grotesques. We read them neither as realist and mimetic nor as complex psychological portraits, but as emblematic forms read by convention, which is what the human beings they stand for have become and what their relationships have become.

The Veneerings' dining room has been emptied of human meaning and life has been shrunk to social ritual. The setting is conventionally satiric: a middle-class dinner party, where human relationships erode to formal interaction devoid of the human or humane.[8] Dickens's target is the Veneerings' emptiness. Their name indicates that they are surface with no depth, whether of character, sympathy, empathy, understanding of others, or emotion. Their guests are only after good food, 'or new people wouldn't come.'[9] Lady Tippins's 'lovers' are superficial affectations rather than tender attachments. Twemlow is obsessed with identifying who is the Veneerings' oldest friend when the guests barely know each other. Characters are false and shallow and their newness represents the new, false and shallow values of the age.

Dickens signals satire in a highly rhetorical style. Alvin Kernan identifies specific linguistic features as characteristic of the satiric, noting the 'prolix style' as a function of the 'amplifying' tropes of satire which deploy 'elaborate periphrasis, macrology, pleonasm'. Charles Knight, too, argues that the linguistic characteristics of satire mean that 'readers usually know that a given text is satiric and must be read with particular care.'[10] In the episode of the Veneerings' dinner the forcefully insistent repetition of 'bran-new' in the first sentence is underscored by the compulsive reverberation of 'new' throughout the paragraph and the next, a total of thirteen direct uses of the word, as well as other implied uses, such as the description of the potential

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[7] Arthur S. Reber, 'Ritual', *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, (Penguin Books: London, 1985), p. 649.

[8] Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), ed., Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), Ch. 2, pp. 48-59. Manning also emphasises this passage as clearly satiric, where she emphasises that characters are 'organic forms of nonlife', and 'absolute satire'. Sylvia Manning, *Dickens as Satirist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 203, p. 209. All subsequent references are to these editions.

[9] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 53.

[10] Alvin Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 38. Subsequent references are to this edition as Kernan, *Satire*. Charles A. Knight, *The Literature of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 38. All subsequent references are to this edition.

great-grandfather.[11] There are further linguistic repetitions, such as the description of the mirror which repeatedly, '[r]eflects' the people at the dinner.[12] There is also rhetorical linguistic formality. When dinner is announced, the words are attributed to their speaker with the phrase, '[t]hus the melancholy retainer.'[13] Twemlow is 'in frequent requisition', circumstances have 'steeped his feeble soul in confusion' and he devotes time to 'the excogitation of this problem'.[14] The scene is narrated using the present tense, like much of *Bleak House* (1852-3), which provides a vivid contemporaneity required of satire as well as a disconcerting immediacy to the events, in contrast to the more conventional past tense of the preceding chapter.[15]

The characters in this episode are treated distinctively. Twemlow is depicted as an object: appropriately for this context, a piece of dining room furniture.[16] He is 'an innocent piece of dinner furniture that went upon easy castors [...] Mr and Mrs Veneering [...] arranging a dinner [...] put leaves in him, or added guests to him.'[17] Twemlow is present only as an object, not a human being, and an object, moreover, that has limited use, in limited locations and circumstances. He is present because his connections are valuable for the Veneerings in this ritual of social commodity, as is shown later in the conversation when they drop his name in connection to Lord Snigsworth: the guests are duly impressed and 'Veneering is clear that he is a remunerative article.'[18] Other guests, too, are reified into social objects and performers of mock roles in false masks throughout the empty formality of the dinner and thereby they lose signification as living human beings. They become, merely, 'a Member, an Engineer, a Payer-off of the National Debt, a Poem on Shakespeare, a Grievance, and a Public Office'.[19] They become caricatures, with a single attribute emphasised for comic effect.[20] They have been reduced to their labels, in both life and satire.

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[11] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 48.
[12] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 52.
[13] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 51.
[14] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 8.
[15] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1852-3), ed., Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971). All subsequent references are to this edition.
[16] Sylvia Manning refers to the critical lines of argument that explore Dickensian reification and prosopopoeia that begin with Dorothy Van Ghent. Manning, p. 8. Dorothy Van Ghent, 'The Dickens World: A View from Todger's' (1950), *The Dickens Critics*, ed., George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1961), pp. 213-232.
[17] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 8.
[18] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 11.
[19] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 8.
[20] John Dixon Hunt examines Dickensian caricature in the context of Hogarthian graphic satire and concludes that it is not conventional exaggeration for comic effect, but the embodiment of moral constitution: 'In Dickens the matter *can* be made flexible and responsive to the spiritual condition of the characters, and in that sense he might well be seen as a caricaturist', but, '[t]he architectural features of Mr Gradgrind, because they identify the idea of the man, may be said to avoid caricature; they are functional, not arbitrary.' John Dixon Hunt, 'Dickens and the

Dickens deploys other formal and structural devices which trouble the reader's perspective and degree of emotional detachment and so bring satiric distance to our reading. He places within the episode of the Veneerings' dinner a supplementary satirical perspective, in addition to the narrator, whose role periodically shifts our engagement with the action. The servant referred to as 'the melancholy retainer', is shown silently commentating with satiric effect on the moral situations he witnesses: '[h]ere is another wretched creature come to dinner', '[t]he retainer goes round, like a gloomy Analytical Chemist: always seeming to say, after 'Chablis, sir?' – 'You wouldn't if you knew what it's made of.''[21] The label attached to the melancholy retainer, of 'Analytical Chemist', points to his satiric role, as he analyses the chemistry of the situation, and finds it morally repellent; he acts, almost, from outside the action of which he is a part, alienated by his stark moral perspective and his Dickensian contempt.

Dickens signals the satire of Merdle in *Little Dorrit* through shifts of perspective which are similar to those he employs in the Veneerings' dinner party. Merdle's parrot, described as a 'judge', attacks Merdle, in an implied comment on the falseness of his life,

> [a]s a kind of faint attempt to convince himself he was master of the house, he concluded by presenting his forefinger to the parrot, who expressed his opinion on that subject by instantly driving his bill into it.[22]

Similarly, Dickens shifts the narrative perspective for satiric effect by illustrating Merdle's lack of comfort with his own butler, whom he correctly suspects disdains him, '[i]t made him hot to think what the Chief Butler's opinion of him would have been'.[23]

The repetitions, the formality, the present tense and the treatment of character signal that we are in the presence of a mode of writing which requires us to read in a different way.[24] Our emotions are distanced and we step back to view the scene of the Veneerings' dinner with a degree of detachment which contrasts with the gothic

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Traditions of Graphic Satire', *Encounters: Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed., John Dixon Hunt (London: Studio Vista, 1971), p. 139. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[21] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 9, p. 11.

[22] Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), ed., Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 328, p. 332. All subsequent references are to this edition. Manning sees the parrot as both an emblem of Mrs Merdle and a 'satirical commentator' on her. Manning, p. 222.

[23] *Little Dorrit*, p. 527.

[24] Manning recognises the rhetorical force of the treatment of the Veneerings; she defends it as 'regular to satire', but does not acknowledge it as, therefore, placing Dickens within a satirical tradition. Manning, p. 16. Knight sees the rhetoric of satire as indicative of its language becoming performative, ''[t]he language does not mean exactly what it says, and this obvious otherness of meaning signals that it is a performance enabling the language to become ironic, not merely a statement but a vehicle for commentary.' Knight, p. 156.

mystery of the novel's opening chapter, in which we are more inclined to immerse ourselves emotionally, or the more celebratory or disturbing comic modes explored in Chapters Three and Four of this study.

This episode, and others like it, are in the tradition of powerfully engaged moral satire with a direct and potent contemporary application to social change – the rise of a class of philistine and bourgeois *nouveaux riches* isolated from human and humane values – which Dickens regarded as morally and socially destructive and which he exposes to ridicule and contempt through his stylistic and rhetorical formulations. The Veneerings and their guests become 'types' of a representative social grouping. This approach to satire, which focuses on ridicule of the representative type rather than scurrilous attack on specific and identifiable individuals, is typical of one aspect of Dickensian indebtedness to the satiric tradition.

Sylvia Manning's study of Dickensian satire is an extensive and detailed examination that does much of the groundwork for our understanding of Dickens as a satirist. A feature of Manning's methodology, however, is to deduce Dickens's own conception of what 'satire' and 'satirical' mean from instances of his use of the words in his letters and fiction, whether voiced by the narrator or by a character. She uses examples from characters as diverse as the narrator of 'An Old Stage-Coaching House' (1863) from *An Uncommercial Traveller*, (1866), David as narrator in *David Copperfield*, (1849-50), Esther in *Bleak House*, and Edwin in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, (1870).[25] Such instances are of great interest, but are weak when used as evidence because they are expressive of particular characters in particular narrative contexts.

Manning concedes that her references to Dickens's use of 'satire' and 'satirical' establish that he understood satire as a 'formal and traditional' literary genre, with a strong overtone of classical satire, including satire as a short mocking piece. However, having established Dickens's awareness of this conceptualisation of satire, she denies its relevance to Dickens and asserts a looser and less formal one which, she concedes, 'is rather difficult to define.'[26]

This chapter has demonstrated in its account of the Veneerings' dinner that Dickens wrote within a clearly identifiable tradition of satiric representation of a social

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[25] Manning, p. 4-5, p. 27. Charles Dickens, 'An Old Stage-coaching House' (1863), *The Uncommercial Traveller*, (1866) *The Dent Uniform Edition of Charles Dickens' Journalism Volume 4 The Uncommercial Traveller and Other Papers 1859-70*, ed., Michael Slater (London: J. M. Dent, 2000), pp. 269-77. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, (1849-50), intr. Jeremy Tambling, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004). Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), ed., Arthur J. Cox, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985). All subsequent references are to these editions.

[26] Manning, p. 5.

type. Further evidence that Dickens wrote within the satiric tradition can be demonstrated, however, in that concomitant strand of satire in which Dickens also ridicules individual, thinly disguised, though identifiable, contemporaries. In 'Mr Bull's Somnambulist' (1854), for instance, Dickens satirises the Prime Minister, Lord Aberdeen; in 'A Parliamentary Sketch' (1836), he characterises Sir Andrew Agnew, as 'The Lord's-Day-Bill Baronet', humorously expressing Dickens's own anti-Sabbatarian views and characterising other identifiable parliamentarians. Similarly, though as part of a longer fiction, in *Bleak House* he satirises Leigh Hunt in the character of Harold Skimpole.[27]

Dickens's indebtedness to the satiric tradition is demonstrated, too, in Dickens's deployment of the short satire. One strand of classical verse satire took the form of a monologue with a single, strong and controlling voice which expressed exasperation, amusement or indignation and which established a clear sense of a persona behind the writing, whether of the author or of the author's mouthpiece. The verse satires of Juvenal and Horace, such as Satire III by Juvenal, quoted and modernised by Highet, or Horace's Book One Satire Two or Book One Satire Three are examples of this strand of satire.[28]

Manning recognises that Dickens wrote short 'satires' but her examples focus on those which she deems less successful. Her assessment of Dickensian satires of contemporary topics is, 'the more topical the reformatory purpose of his satire, the less effective it is.'[29] However, Dickens wrote successful short satires to address contemporary concerns and issues as Horace, Juvenal and the verse satirists of the eighteenth century such as Pope did.[30] Such pieces are not in verse, of course, but in

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[27] 'A Parliamentary Sketch' (1836), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 181-193, p. 191. Dennis Walder comments on his introduction to this sketch, '[m]uch of it would be libellous today, since the originals of the characters would be easily identifiable', p. 605. *Bleak House*, pp. 118-28. Dickens also satirises Sabbatarianism and Sir Andrew Agnew in 'Sunday Under Three Heads' (1836), *Reprinted Pieces 'Sunday Under Three Heads and Other Tales Sketches, Articles etc.*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1908), pp. 297-333, pp. 312-9.

[28] Highet, pp. 4-5. Juvenal, 'Satire III', *The Sixteen Satires*, trans., intro. and notes, Peter Green, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 87-98, extract used by Highet, pp. 95-6. All subsequent references are to this edition. Horace/Persius, pp. 44-54.

[29] Manning, p. 27.

[30] Highet's definition of the genre of the classical satiric monologue accords with many, though not all of the characteristics of Dickens's short satires and humorous sketches, 'It is a monologue, [...] which is informal and apparently improvised. It appears to be perfectly spontaneous and to have no set logical structure, but to spring from a momentary impulse, a casual occurrence, a passing remark. It is marked by a constant variety of tone and shifts of subject matter, and it is enlivened by wit, humor, parody, paradox, word-play, and other decorations. It is, of course, non-fictional, non-narrative. It deals with a theme of general interest, but it illustrates it subject by personal references, topical allusions, and character-sketches, and it introduces fiction in the form of anecdotes and fables. Its language is sometimes lofty, but is more usually prosaic and comic, generally colloquial, even obscene. Its tone is not serious, but flippant, sarcastic, ironic, shocking'. Highet, pp. 40-1. Dickensian 'satires', while

other ways they are similar in focus and form. The generally short and self-contained monologue structure has its Dickensian prose equivalent in short sketches or journalistic pieces, whether non-fiction or fiction, which are dominated by a strong narrative voice, such as 'A Few Conventionalities', 'Private Theatres', and 'Mr Bull's Somnambulist'. They establish a bond between the satirist, the moral message, and the reader. The narrator appeals to shared interests and common values as means to convince the reader of the rightness of the satire.[31]

In addition to character attacks on individuals in his short satiric pieces, Dickens also satirised specific political situations. Dickens ridicules the government of Lord Aberdeen following the fiasco of the Crimean War in 'Mr Bull's Somnambulist', in which he takes an overtly contemporary political satiric line. The piece is an enjoyably amusing satiric conceit, in the guise of a doctor's report, where Lord Aberdeen becomes 'Abby Dean', a virtually blind, elderly and increasingly forgetful, sleep-walking housekeeper, who believes it is her job to do 'nothing.'[32] As a consequence of his housekeeper's inadequacies, Mr Bull, the householder, and Abby Dean's employer, is obliged to send his children to fight with a neighbour over a stolen turkey. The extended analogy, where Mr Bull's household stands for Britain, and Abby Dean stands for the Prime Minister, works extremely well. Once the reader has understood the double nature of the narrative, how the characters and the story have a dual meaning, we enjoy Dickens's skill in manipulating the range of analogous elements. We quickly equate Mr Bull's cabinet with the cabinet that governs Britain and so we can, with equal ease, equate the deficiencies of the one to the other with enjoyably satiric effect,

> Mr Bull has in his possession a Cabinet, of modern manufacture and curious workmanship, composed of various pieces of various woods, inlaid and dovetailed with tolerable ingenuity considering their great differences of grain and growth; but, it must be admitted, clumsily put together on the whole, and liable, at any time, to fall to pieces.[33]

It is not only the rhetorical style, the forms and the range, variety and contemporaneity of satiric targets that reflect the degree to which Dickens's satire is rooted in the classical satiric tradition, but also the literary structures that he deploys. Dickens uses a narrative structure which is rooted in a genre of classical satire, the

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often apparently informal, are often characterised by carefully worked structures, such as 'Mr Bull's Somnambulist' (1854) analysed below. Charles Dickens, 'Mr Bull's Somnambulist' (1854), *The Works of Charles Dickens National Edition Vol. XXXV Miscellaneous Papers Vol. I* (London: Chapman Hall, 1908), pp. 207-212. Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed., John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963).

[31] As argued by Worcester, p. 14.

[32] 'Mr Bull's Somnambulist,' pp. 207-8.

[33] 'Mr Bull's Somnambulist', p. 209.

Menippean. Based on the lost satires of Menippus with their extended narrative and mix of verse and prose which mocked or censured undesirable behaviour, it was a flexible form, and one that ultimately translated easily into the novel.[34] An example of the Menippean satire is Seneca's *The Apocolocyntosis*, discussed at length by Coffey.[35]

The Apocolocyntosis is a satire at the expense of the dead emperor, Claudius. It satirises Claudius's lack of physical and intellectual robustness and it mingles personal and political criticism. The essence of the narrative form of the Menippean is the journey, the 'fabulous narrative' which included conventional motifs, such as the journey to the underworld, and the 'Council of the Gods.'[36] In addition, aspects of the Menippean satire are reflected in the rise, during the eighteenth century, of the '*ingenu* satire', described by Worcester, which is characteristic of Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) and *L'Ingenu* (1767), Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and picaresque works by Fielding and Smollett.[37] These satires are characterised by motifs such as an innocent hero on an extended journey, who possesses a simple good nature, and who has a naïve response to what the world has to teach him. The narrative becomes a journey of learning and revelation for the hero. In 1828, Benjamin Disraeli published *The Voyage of Captain Popanilla*, discussed at length by Dyer, which recounted a fantastic journey in order to satirise contemporary issues, such as the Corn Laws, Utilitarianism, 'silver fork' novels and stock market speculation.[38] However, Dyer argues that Disraeli's deployment of the Menippean form marks the decline rather than the vigour of the form,

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[34] Coffey refers to '[t]he alternative convention of satire in which prose discourse or narrative was interspersed with a variety of verse forms'. Coffey, p. 149. Coffey also refers to Petronius's *Satyricon* being regarded as 'disreputable novelistic writings', suggests that the title indicates 'a tale in the form of a novel', and that it is 'in some respects a hybrid of satire and novelistic narrative'. Coffey, p. 179, p. 182, p. 186. Knight describes the Menippean as 'satire that takes the form of a novel.' Knight, p. 4. Gary Dyer discusses the transition of the Menippean from distinct prose satire into the novel, '[t]he usefulness of the distinction between the Menippean satire and the novel wanes in the early nineteenth century, as the former genre loses to the latter what little ground of its own it had retained'. Dyer also indicates that the Menippean is particularly suitable for absorption into the novel, as the Menippean's 'foremost characteristic is its inclusiveness'. Gary Dyer, *British Satire and the Politics of Style 1789-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 18. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[35] Coffey, pp. 165-73. P. T. Eden, ed., *Petronius The Satyricon and Seneca The Apocolocyntosis*, trans., J.P. Sullivan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

[36] Coffey, p. 165-6, p. 175.

[37] Worcester, pp. 102 - 3. Highet's discussion of the satiric nature of *The Pickwick Papers* includes its likeness to *Candide*. Highet, p. 198-9. Dyer discusses these texts as 'satirical travelogues'. Dyer, p. 127. Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet), *Candide* (1759), *Candide and Other Stories*, trans., Roger Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet), *L'Ingenu* (1767), *Zadig/L'Ingenu* trans., John Butt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 103-91. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, ed., Louis A. Landa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 1-239.

[38] Dyer, p. 6, pp. 127-38. Benjamin Disraeli, *Popanilla, Popanilla and Other Tales*, (London: Peter Davies, 1926), pp. 3-107.

> [t]he example of *Popanilla* nevertheless suggests that [...] satire was becoming a moribund literary form [...] the half-heartedness of its attack marks it as a mere literary exercise in composing satire.[39]

The decline of the Menippean and of the *ingenu* satire in the period shortly prior to Dickens's early fiction is important. Dickens's version of the Menippean and the *ingenu* satires demonstrates his debt to the satiric tradition at the point of its transition to the multimodal nineteenth-century novel, a transition to which Dickens's fiction made its own contribution, as did Disraeli's fiction, as Dyer asserts,

> [t]he first three decades of the nineteenth century saw the prose satire finally losing to the novel what independence it had retained [...] Disraeli [...] is exemplary of how satire became impracticable [...] he settled on a related but distinct form, the novel that combines satirical, romantic, didactic, and visionary elements to advance specific political and social ideas.[40]

The demonstration of the significance of the Menippean and its eighteenth-century successors to Dickensian satire provides evidence for the transformation of satire from a distinct genre in either prose or verse into a distinctive satiric voice amid the heteroglossia of his fiction, a transformation in the nineteenth-century novel more generally which is demonstrated by Dyer and discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

The Pickwick Papers has parallels to the Menippean satire and how that form was deployed by eighteenth-century writers in *ingenu* satires. However, the full range of Menippean features identified by Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963) does not appear in *The Pickwick Papers*. The debt that *The Pickwick Papers* has to the Menippean satiric tradition does not include the fantastic elements, such as the exotic geographies of *Gulliver's Travels* or *The Voyage of Captain Popanilla*, or the heterogeneous medley of verse and prose. This study follows Knight on the Bakhtinian Menippean and therefore treats it as 'a tradition of satire rather than as a particular genre', in which the key aspects that Dickens has taken include the *ingenu* hero and the episodic narrative structure of the educative moral journey of the hero.[41] Bakhtin's account of the Menippean permits this, 'we consider it necessary to emphasize that the generic label 'menippea', like all other generic labels [...] is, when applied to the literature of modern times, a means of designating *the essence of a genre*, and not any specific genre canon.'[42]

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[39] Dyer, p. 127.
[40] Dyer, p. 138.
[41] Knight, p. 217.
[42] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963), ed. and trans., Caryl Emerson, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 137. All subsequent references are to this edition as Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky*.

Pickwick is an innocent, *ingenu*, hero. He is presented to us as a naïve and genially beaming man with a touching faith in human nature. His motivation is, 'the desire to benefit the human race', from a position of 'general benevolence'.[43] *The Pickwick Papers* tells the Menippean and *ingenu* story of a series of journeys. Pickwick travels through a strange land, though it is the land that has surrounded him all his life: his own England. We know little about his life before the novel except that he was in business, but there is the clear implication that it has been spent in the narrow confines of London: '[a]s well might I be content to gaze on Goswell Street for ever, without one effort to penetrate the hidden countries'.[44] In other words, despite his relatively mature years, the world is unknown to Pickwick. Furthermore, Pickwick sets off to learn about the world armed with his notebook and expecting to be able to reduce its complexities to something akin to his 'Speculations on the Source of the Hampstead Ponds' and to some letters to the Pickwick Club.[45] His journey for knowledge is a perversely imperialistic and bourgeois progress through his own land. It is a journey in which he seeks to command and control – for instance, his group of companions – and to appropriate and interpret – for instance, the lump of antiquarian stone.

The journey is an educative one in the tradition of the Menippean and *ingenu* satires. Of course, Pickwick's learning does not come in the form he was expecting. His first encounter with the world he sets out to subject to the 'Pickwickian theory', when he eagerly notes the details of the pugnacious cabman's treatment of his absurdly aged horse, is grossly misunderstood and results in a violent assault which is as amusing for the reader as it is educational for Pickwick: 'a light flashed upon Mr Pickwick – it was the note-book.'[46] The Menippean satiric journey of laughter for the reader and enlightenment for Pickwick continues and leads eventually to the more sombre educative episode of his imprisonment. During his term of imprisonment, at his lowest ebb, Pickwick is Seneca's Claudius in *The Apocolocyntosis*: in hell and observing his own funeral procession in the underworld.[47] Pickwick tours the prison, observing the 'squalor [...] turmoil and noise'; his fellow prisoners are a nightmare: 'like the shadows in an uneasy dream.'[48] He concludes, ''I have seen enough [...] My head aches with these scenes, and my heart too. Henceforth I will be a prisoner in my own room.''[49]

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[43] Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), ed., Robert L Patten (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 71, p. 85. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[44] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 73.
[45] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 67.
[46] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 75, p. 85.
[47] Coffey, p. 173.
[48] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 737.
[49] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 737.

Further evidence of the Menippean satiric form which can be identified in *The Pickwick Papers* is the convention of the 'council of the Gods', in which the gods assemble to pass judgement on the hero. *The Pickwick Papers* is structured between two such 'councils', one in each of the opening and closing chapters.[50] The first is the meeting of The Pickwick Club, in which the idea for The Corresponding Society, and for Pickwick's travels, are first approved. The members of the club are seated in judgement of Pickwick and his idea, with Mr Blotton, at least, unimpressed by Pickwick. The scene, parodic of learned societies such as The Royal Society, mingles comic admiration for Pickwick, with satiric undermining of his bourgeois rationalism: 'he had felt some pride when he presented his Tittlebatian theory to the world'.[51] Dickens's places us, too, in the mock-divine council of judgement as the satiric challenge is set.

By the end of the novel, Pickwick has undergone the process of moral education that is the consequence of satire and again he is placed in a 'council'. In this case, the council is of his friends and admirers in his new house and again we are led to a judgement, though in this case it is of unqualified admiration for the Pickwick who has completed his educative journey:

> [a]nd in the midst of all this, stood Mr Pickwick, his countenance lighted up with smiles, which the heart of no man, woman or child, could resist: himself the happiest of the group.[52]

The Pickwick Club dissolves, and Pickwick retires to quiet withdrawal in Dulwich, a sadder and a wiser man for the experience of the preceding two years of travel.

Dickens satirises the bourgeois Pickwick, but still holds him in affection. This affection is made apparent for the reader because Pickwick learns: 'numerous scenes of which I had no previous conception have dawned upon me – I hope to the enlargement of my mind and the improvement of my understanding.'[53] *The Pickwick Papers* and Samuel Pickwick himself model the process of satire: an unthinking though receptive bourgeois ego is taught harsh, but for the reader amusing, lessons about the nature of his society. The satiric subject is educated to understand the world and the age in which he lives. He learns to see its follies, vices and absurdities but also to see his own follies, vices and absurdities and to begin to understand what the world, the age and himself could, or should, be. The satiric novel makes Pickwicks of us all.

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[50] *The Pickwick Papers*, Ch. 1, pp. 67-72, Ch. 57, pp. 891-8.
[51] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 71.
[52] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 895.
[53] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 893.

Further, *The Pickwick Papers* provides evidence not only for Dickens's debt to the Menippean and *ingenu* satiric traditions but also for Bakhtin's analysis of the Menippean as 'carnivalesque'.[54] The parody of learned societies and of forms of literary expression, the anarchic multiplicity of voices that includes Jingle, both Wellers, the varied members of the corresponding society, Bob Sawyer, Benjamin Allen and the many others less frequently present such as Mrs Leo Hunter, Mr Pott and Mr Slurk, as well as the embodiment of the carnivalesque social body in Pickwick's experience of the Eatanswill election or in the pound in Ipswich all enact that 'carnivalesque' 'polyphony' that characterise the Bakhtinian Menippean.[55] Pickwick's monologic bourgeois authoritarianism is tamed by the satiric polyphony of the Menippean satire as the monologic moral authoritarianism of 'the satire' is tamed by the satiric polyphony of 'the novel'.[56]

Author as Authority

The ambition of the Dickensian novel in satiric mode is to change history. Dickensian satire articulates the potent relationship between Dickens's literary mission and emergent modernity. Like classical satirists, he exposed to scrutiny, and thereby to castigation and ultimately to correction, moral wrongs in his contemporary world by providing laughter and moral instruction through reprehensible characters and actions in a fictional world. Dickens researched the scandal of the 'Yorkshire Schools,' for instance, during a trip to Yorkshire early in 1838.[57] His interest had been stimulated as a child by a boy whose suppurating abscess had been ripped open by his teacher who is presented in the 1848 Preface to the First Cheap Edition of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), with grim satire, as the boy's 'Yorkshire guide, philosopher and friend'.[58] Dickens makes explicit his position on this public issue, 'what about the hundreds of thousands of minds that have been deformed for ever by the incapable pettifoggers', a remark

[54] Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky*, pp. 112-22.
[55] Dyer, pp. 67-8.
[56] 'The usefulness of the distinction between the Menippean satire and the novel wanes in the early nineteenth century', Dyer, p. 18. Ronald Paulson argues that the transition from eighteenth-century formal satire to the novel enacts a shift in interest from morality to the individual consciousness. Ronald Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 5. All subsequent references are to this edition. The survival of the satiric mode in the novel, however, indicates that the moral tradition remained a focus of interest in fiction.
[57] Michael Slater, 'Appendix B Dickens and the Yorkshire Schools', *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), ed., Michael Slater, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 940–2. All subsequent references are to this edition. Mabel Evans points out, from the perspective of the 1930s, that the contemporaneity of Dickensian reformism is often lost. Mabel Evans. 'Dickens the Satirist'. *The Dickensian* 31 No. 233 (Winter 1934/5): 111-116, pp. 115-6.
[58] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 48.

which clearly links the specific target of this satire to his underlying moral vision of the times: the deforming and unhealthy influence of industrialising capitalism as applied to the education of young people.[59] The Yorkshire schools did not survive the publication of *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Dickens's contemporary satiric targets ranged widely from the specific and personal to the social, political and governmental. He satirised an ineffectual political class in *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), stagnant government administration, a moribund upper class, excessive philanthropy, dandyism and social climbers in *Bleak House*, a failing education system and trade union demagoguery *Hard Times* (1854), an aspiring middle class that is all surface and no depth in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), and the low churches in *The Pickwick Papers*.[60] He sees the ludicrous nature of his society in the forms of social behaviour, in attitudes and beliefs, in social institutions, in misplaced charity, in the conventions of popular entertainment, in forms of public regulation and in how human beings cope with the pressures of their world. Dickens satirises the Circumlocution Office, the Court of Chancery, vulgar Americans, funereal rites, the administration of workhouses, members of Parliament, capitalism as represented by Scrooge, Dombey and Merdle, and the young men-about-town of the Finches of the Grove.[61]

The satirist's world is a vividly contemporary one, rooted in a depiction of the recognisable experience of the reader but driven by the force of the satirist's persona and point of view. It is full of practical realities: transport, leisure, shops, clothes, food and drink; and it is full of the realities of human relationships: families, work, neighbourhood, politics and love and Dickens was concerned with the unsettling changes that those realities were undergoing. Even when the narration is placed in the

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[59] *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 48.

[60] Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (1855-7), ed., Harvey Peter Sucksmith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), ed., David Craig, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969). All subsequent references are to these editions. Hunt explores the similarities between the subjects of Dickens's satire and those of graphic journalism, 'the very extent to which Dickens handles subjects from the traditions of graphic journalism is itself extraordinary [...] there is a closeness of purpose between the artists.' Hunt, p. 129.

[61] *Little Dorrit* Ch. X, pp. 87-104, pp. 68-9, pp. 208-13; *Bleak House*, Ch. 1, pp. 49-55; Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4), ed., P.N. Furbank, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 336-8; Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed., Angus Calder, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 298-300, p. 292, pp. 236-7; Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1837), ed., Kathleen Tillotson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 9-10; *Nicholas Nickleby*, pp. 259-68; Charles Dickens, 'A Christmas Carol' (1843), *The Christmas Books*, ed., Michael Slater, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982); Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed., Alan Horsman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). All subsequent references are to these editions. Highet points out that classical satirists knew no limit to the topics that could be covered, '[m]en [*sic*] have written satire on the gravest of themes and the most trivial [...] There are very few topics which satirists cannot handle. However, we can say that the type of subject preferred by satire is always concrete, usually topical'. Highet, p. 16.

past, the context of the narration is often firmly in the present of the writer's current thoughts and observations. In 'Thoughts about People' (1835), the Dickensian narrator describes past observations of people, but his humorous moral observations are expressed in a paradox of the present: 'he cannot be said to be forgotten when he dies, for no one remembered him when he was alive'.[62] Similarly, the often satiric 'Dickens' voice which jointly narrates *Bleak House* with Esther, speaks in the present tense.

Dickens's satire can be demonstrated to be contemporary in other ways. Not only does he refer to contemporary culture and public figures, but also he specifies named areas, streets and buildings that anchor us to the physical geography of his world, usually London. 'The Boarding House' (1834), a lightly satiric account of social manners, for instance, makes reference to contemporary showmen, a fashionable hairdresser, contemporary writers and popular songs, as well as Great Coram-street, London University, the New Saint Pancras Church, The Foundling Hospital, Walworth and the Duke of Wellington.[63] Paul B. Davis points out that Dickens's world, like Hogarth's, is a social and human one, not a spiritual or metaphysical one.[64] Dickensian satire is at the expense of what we share here and now: a type of person, an institution, an attitude of mind or a mode of behaviour which, as it is depicted, is also disdained as degeneration, collapse, and failure.

Evidence of Dickens's forceful satiric engagement with modernity is demonstrated by his deployment of powerful narratorial voices. Dickensian satire is characterised by a trenchant sense of a narrator who is lofty, detached and commanding, who controls narrative tone from a position of distant, ironic observation and who establishes a relationship with the reader of mutual superiority, in which the Dickens narrator directs the reader's attention to what he leads us to regard as his well-judged observations of the world's absurdities and vices.[65] The Dickens satiric narrative

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[62] 'Thoughts about People', p. 251, p. 255.

[63] 'The Boarding House' (1834), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 321-61.

[64] Paul B Davis, 'Dickens, Hogarth and the Illustrated Great Expectations'. *The Dickensian*. 80 (1984): 131-43, pp. 133-4. All subsequent references are to this article as Davis, *Great Expectations*.

[65] Manning discusses with insight the Dickensian narrative persona, 'Dickens's narrator presents the targets of satire and often embodies the qualities they lack. Because he defines the standpoint and the norm from which the attack is justified, his presence in the foreground of the work is both as central and as legitimate as that of the speaker in Pope's satires and moral epistles [...] the persona of the novels is very close to the author.' Manning, pp. 16-7. However, while locating this parallel with the satiric tradition, she does not identify it as a debt. Also, it is important to recognise that the Dickens narrative persona is not monolithic but a feature of a more heteroglossic mix of voices that includes other characters, shared narration with Esther, and the initial narratorial pose as editor in *The Pickwick Papers*. Coffey identifies the satiric narrator taking the 'stance of the fellow citizen'. Coffey, p. 45. Worcester describes the effect on the reader as 'the sense of belonging to an initiate'. Worcester, p. 111. Kernan describes the satiric persona as 'a blunt honest man with no nonsense about him.' Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 16.

persona is constructed as an informed and educated male who has at times a wry or, at other times, a scandalised or, at yet other times, a bleakly disenchanted point of view; he clearly has considerable time to consider the world he narrates and to form his judgement upon it; he is socially and intellectually confident and he can have an easy, conversational, style, though this is by no means universal. In other words, the Dickens persona is a middle class Victorian, or in his earliest writing, pre-Victorian, gentleman, and, perhaps, the implied reader is, too. However, the Dickensian comic and satiric persona is by no means homogenous throughout his fiction. The Dickensian satiric persona can be, for instance in early writing, playful and lively, expressing scorn and ridicule in a vivacious tone. On other occasions, the tone is dark and stern, as in the satire of the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*, or bleakly dispiriting, shading into grotesque polemic, in the satire of the Smallweeds in *Bleak House*.[66]

In the early short fiction and non-fiction, the persona often refers to himself as 'we' throughout, which is the customary rhetorical posture of the non-fictional and journalistic writer, but also has the effect of implying mutuality and a sharing of the experience which the narrator is recounting. He uses direct address to relate to us, as confidential equals, his thoughts and feelings.[67] In 'Greenwich Fair' (1835), for instance, recounting, with affectionate amusement, the excesses of young people at leisure, he describes himself: '[i]n our earlier days [...] We have grown older since then'.[68] The narrator, like the questioning narrator of 'A Few Conventionalities' (1851), often addresses us directly, conspiring with the reader in a shared vision of the world.[69] In 'Astley's' (1835), a genial satire of the social behaviour of a family at the theatre and of the conventions of theatricality, the narrator challenges us, '[w]e defy anyone', and directs our attention, '[n]ext to him, perhaps, you will see', the 'perhaps' indicating the register of tentatively polite, gentlemanly discourse, which the narrator adopts as well as the vivid contemporaneity his confidential commentary evokes.[70]

The persona in Dickens's fiction is consistent with the persona of his non-fiction. In 'Horatio Sparkins' (1834), for instance, a satire of the Maldertons' social aspirations and self-deceptions, the narrator's voice controls not only the action but the

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[66] *Little Dorrit*, Ch. X, pp. 87-104. *Bleak House*, pp. 341-56.
[67] Highet indicates that the origin of the classical satiric persona can be found in the chorus in Attic Old Comedy which took on an authorial role and commented on the action of the play; this 'parabasis' (forward march) was intended to focus the audience on the key message of the play and was echoed in later satire by the strong direct address of the satirical persona. Highet, pp. 28-9.
[68] 'Greenwich Fair' (1835), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 135-45, p. 135-7.
[69] Charles Dickens, 'A Few Conventionalities' (1851), *The Works of Charles Dickens National Edition Vol. XXXV Miscellaneous Papers Plays and Poems Volume I* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1908), pp. 261-6.
[70] 'Astley's' (1835), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 128-35, p. 131, p. 134.

reader's interpretation of the characters, 'Mr Flamwell was one of those gentlemen of remarkably extensive information whom one occasionally meets in society, who pretend to know everybody, but in reality know nobody.'[71] The words 'remarkably extensive information', and the phrase, 'whom one occasionally meets in society', together with the ironic tone of the revelation of the difference between appearance and reality, indicate the discourse of the polite, sociable, socially superior, middle class gentleman, which is characteristic of the Dickensian satiric persona. At the end of this tale, following the dramatically comic revelation of the true identity of Horatio Sparkins, the narrator draws attention to the loftily detached mind directing the narrative, stating ''[w]e will draw a veil', as the novel-writers say, over the scene that ensued,' confident that the reader will share enjoyment of the mocking pose of affected scrupulousness.[72]

The mode of authoritative gentlemanly discourse is fundamental to the nature of Dickens's satire and to his debt to the satiric tradition. Worcester demonstrates that the satirist cannot present his satire from the position of a formal system of belief or from a committed philosophical position, where it is possible that the system or the position will not be shared by the reader.[73] The satirist, therefore, expresses a morality of basic ethical values, an inviting mutuality of 'common sense' against which to judge the subjects of satire.[74] The common sense that Dickens seeks to create and to share with the reader is that of an authoritative, sensible, practical, middle class Victorian morality, characterised by moderation, self-reliance and decency, and expressed with ironic detachment, as between intelligent English gentleman, exposing, 'unreasonable ways of acting and thinking'.[75]

The Dickensian satiric narrator, then, positions himself as a confident figure of bourgeois authority with steadfast assurance of the correctness of his views. Unlike the middle-class authority figures that Dickens's satire and his other comic and non-comic modes undermine, the satiric narrator exercises his middle-class authority with absolute faith in its rectitude. He adopts the authority of Highet's metaphorical roles for satire,

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[71] 'Horatio Sparkins', p. 417.
[72] 'Horatio Sparkins', p. 425.
[73] Worcester, p. 36.
[74] Worcester, p. 14. Coffey, p. 52. Manning also discusses how the Dickensian narrative persona gradually transforms into 'a voice that is more a body of moral precepts than a conceived character. The attempt is to place the standard in some objective realm in which it can be widely accepted.' Manning, p. 20.
[75] Charles Dickens, 'Insularities' (1856), *The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism Vol. 3 'Gone Astray' and Other Papers from Household Words 1851-59*, ed., Michael Slater (London: J.M. Dent, 1998), pp. 338-46, pp. 339-40.

those potently corrective figures of society's health or moral probity, the physician and the policeman.[76]

Both roles require intense visual observation and close attention to detail, either for the identification of symptoms in the diagnosis of pathology, or of clues in the detection of crime. Dickens's satiric mode has an appropriate visual intensity. Dickens exposes through physical description and accompanying moral commentary features of emergent modernity which are hidden or ignored but which have satiric point and therefore a moral dimension. This is the process of the physician or the policeman who diagnoses from a hidden symptom or who solves from a hidden clue. In 'Mr Bull's Somnambulist', the narrator is 'one of the medical attendants of the family' who investigates the symbolic somnambulism of Abby Dean, and who seeks to diagnose and cure the symbolic disorder as the author seeks to diagnose the diseased nation.[77]

Dickensian satire is the forensic art of the vigilant close observer. It is social surveillance in literary form. The powerful satirical description of the Veneerings' dinner party is articulated through the enumeration of physical details which, refracted through the rhetorical formulations of satiric style, take on the weight of symptoms of sickness. The material world becomes a comically queasy version of itself, where the great-grandfather is 'French polished to the crown of his head', where Twemlow 'went upon easy castors', and where Lady Tippins's left hand 'is particularly rich in knuckles'.[78] Veneering, reflected in the mirror, is 'sly, mysterious, filmy – a kind of sufficiently well-looking veiled-prophet, not prophesying.'[79] Similarly, Mrs Veneering has 'a corner of her husband's veil…over herself.'[80] Guests become dehumanised and distorted, sickly objects rather than people, like Podsnap, whose hair is more like his hairbrush than his hair, or Mrs Podsnap, who is 'like a rocking-horse, hard features, majestic head-dress', or Lady Tippins, whose face is 'like a face in a tablespoon.'[81]

The reader's introduction to Pecksniff in the second chapter of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, enacts a gradual satiric revelation of hypocrisy through the detection of material clues.[82] Pecksniff carefully marshals his own materiality to compose public probity. The narrator's satirical rhetoric interrogates the physical Pecksniff, however, and detects evidence that reveals the hypocritical opposite,

> [h]is very throat was moral. […] It seemed to say, on the part of Mr Pecksniff, "There is no deception, ladies and gentleman, all is peace, a holy calm pervades

[76] Highet, p. 26.
[77] 'Mr Bull's Somnambulist', p. 207.
[78] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 48, p. 54.
[79] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 11.
[80] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 11.
[81] *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 11.
[82] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, pp. 59-72.

> me." So did his hair, just grizzled with an iron-grey, which was all brushed off his forehead, and stood bolt upright, or slightly drooped in kindred action with his heavy eyelids. So did his person, which was sleek though free from corpulency. So did his person, which was soft and oily. In a word, even his plain black suit, as state of widower, and dangling double eyeglass, all tended to the same purpose, and cried aloud, "Behold the moral Pecksniff!"[83]

The emphasis in the Dickensian satiric mode on physical description and the moral weight carried by the observable is a reflection of Dickens's inheritance from the tradition of eighteenth-century graphic satire. Paul Davis surveys Dickens's and Cruikshank's debt to Hogarth, pointing out that Dickens had forty-eight engravings by Hogarth at Gad's Hill and that Dickens's themes, moral stance and literary techniques owe much to him.[84]

Graphic satire used stock characters who stood as representative of their type. Characters could be exaggerated into caricature or grotesques. Moral relationships between characters were indicated by physical arrangement and physical forms including pose, clothing, facial expression and the presence of emblematic physical objects. Graphic satires were 'pictorial dramas with an obvious moral', which could go some way to describe Dickens's own novelistic, not just satiric, methods.[85]

Graphic satire is a searching moral examination of materiality. The crowded events of Hogarth's *Gin Lane* (1751) reveal the social and personal evils of the ready availability of cheap and poisonous gin, a moral message directed at lower class vice from a position of middle-class satiric authority.[86] The advertisement announcing the print in the *General Advertiser* on 13th February 1751 emphasised its morally reformative purpose, 'the Subjects of these Prints are calculated to reform some reigning Vices peculiar to the lower Class of People'.[87] There is a barely conscious mother whose child is tipping into the 'area', a skeletal man near death, an old couple selling their last possessions including tools of the man's trade, a man hanging in his garret, and a child impaled on a pike: all symptoms in the bleak morbidity of the lower

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[83] *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 64.

[84] Paul Davis, 'Imaging *Oliver Twist*: Hogarth, Illustration, and the Part of Darkness', *The Dickensian*, 82 (1986): 158-76. In his later article Davis argues against critics who saw the indebtedness of Dickens to Hogarth as something which Dickens outgrew as his work matured. This line of argument sees graphic satire as 'reductive simplifications'. Davis, *Great Expectations*", p. 132-3. Both articles are essentially about the graphic rather than the satiric. Hunt also acknowledges Dickens's debt to the Hogarthian tradition of graphic satire, pointing out that not only did his illustrators come from graphic journalism, but that 'Dickens drew upon and was conditioned by the same graphic traditions that gave him his illustrators'. Hunt, p. 124.

[85] George, M. Dorothy, *Hogarth to Cruikshank: Social Change in Graphic Satire* (London: Allen Lane, 1967), p. 21.

[86] Hunt links Hogarth's depiction of buildings in *Gin Lane* to Dickens's description of Newgate in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Hunt, p. 133. *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 89.

[87] Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth A Life and World*, (London: Faber and Faber: 1997), p. 494. Mark Hallett and Christine Rider, *Hogarth* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006).

class's moral collapse seen through the satirist's diagnostic scrutiny. These are the dominating images of the scene, but the less obvious details also contribute to the moral force of the print: the snail that tells us how long the woman on the left has been leaning on the wall, the two young girls just starting their decline on the right, the child weeping beside a woman's coffin, and the crumbling, shored-up buildings with their terrible message of imminent apocalypse, all presided over by a distant and detached statue of majesty. This is satire that for the modern mind lacks laughter or that has laughter of only the bitterest kind.[88] It is satire as polemic, a shocking and horrifying indictment of vice in which Hogarth is the prosecutor.

William Hogarth, *Gin Lane* (1751)

Dickens's satire is, by contrast with *Gin Lane*, marked by laughter, but it nevertheless lies within this graphic tradition. Dickens's satiric methods are clearly informed by the graphic: descriptions are intensely visual, with emblematic weight

[88] Although Highet's reading of *Gin Lane* confusingly recognises both its realism and 'the accumulation of horrors [which] produces the exaggeration and distortion typical of satire', he recognises 'touches of sordid but undeniably comic humor.' He finds the central figure of the mother 'comical, with a satirical incongruity.' Highet, p. 228-9.

given to physical detail.[89] Evidence is found in Dickens's description of Doctor Haggage, the debtor prisoner who assists in the birth of Little Dorrit, and who could be read as Dickens's literary equivalent of a Hogarth caricature.[90] Dickens satirises the doctor's suitability for the task of assisting in childbirth and, through him, the poor provision of medical care in prisons. He presents the character in physical form rather than as a more subtly delineated psychological entity.

He describes the doctor's 'torn and darned' jacket, which points to the length of time the doctor has spent in the prison, and his periodic attempts to maintain standards. The jacket is a 'rough-weather sea-jacket', indicating the doctor's previous life at sea, but with the rough-weather aspect particularly appropriate for the doctor's current stage in his career; he wears 'the dirtiest white trousers', which highlight the contrast between the high ideals of the professional role of the doctor, in contrast to his currently squalid and declined state. Dickens's amused catalogue of the doctor's shabby clothes is preceded by a list of his less definable qualities, which have both a physical presence and a graphic, emblematic, quality, 'more [...] tobaccoer, dirtier, and brandier.'[91] The combination of tobacco and brandy indicates a dissipation which sits uneasily with medical responsibilities. In the same way that Dickens's characters 'gain individual definition through their emblematic roles', they gain satiric definition through their emblematic materiality.[92] The physical portrait manifests the moral portrait and the method of satiric graphic print in which materiality acquired moral force directed by the artist.[93]

The Dickensian satirical diagnostician or detective of this symptomatic, clue laden materiality is a secretive, obsessive, unnoticed observer who stalks and spies. He sees but he is not seen. He does not participate in what he observes. He reports to us and we become implicated by the content of his surveillance as we are implicated by his gentlemanly tone. He presents with wry observation his judgements to us, the favoured recipients of what he can see. In 'Thoughts about People' (1835), surveillance is the structural principle, not just for this short satire, but for the society to which these people belong.[94] Dickens implies that not being observed prevents social recognition,

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[89] Hunt explores the importance of visual imagery in Dickens's depiction of crowds and in his borrowing of the 'graphic device' of 'identifying people by objects or clothing' through which he exercises 'his fondness for literary phantasmagoria.' He also identifies 'emblematic scenery', Hunt, p. 127, p. 133.
[90] *Little Dorrit*, pp. 50-3.
[91] *Little Dorrit*, p. 51.
[92] Davis, *Great Expectations*, p. 137.
[93] Manning recognises Dickens's debt to Hogarth in terms of a conflict of physical shapes and forms, particularly the geometric opposed to the irregular, which accords with her Bergsonian analysis of comedy. Manning, pp. 229-30.
[94] 'Thoughts about People', pp. 251-4.

as if a person becomes fully social only when recognised as such, ''[t]is strange, with how little notice, good, bad or indifferent, a man may live and die [...] He awakens no sympathy [...] his existence is a matter of interest to no one'.[95]

The subjects of this piece are identified by Dickens's observation of them which is itself secret and unobserved. The sad figure of the shabby clerk, the suspicious misanthrope and the genial apprentices parading their fashion, are all identified through visual inspection. The clerk is noticed while the narrator is relaxing in the park, the misanthrope can be seen 'any where', though Dickens specifies the coffee house, the theatre, church and at parties, and the apprentices are not only scrutinised in the Strand but followed surreptitiously by the narrator until they have taken their places in St James's Park.[96] All three of these character types are subject to intense scrutiny, which results in exhaustive physical description of clothes, bodies and customary behaviour and, in the case of the clerk, intense imaginative speculation, as Dickens narrates the details of his life, down to the penny he gives his landlady's son for practising his sums.

Dickens's narrators have a compulsion to surveillance. In 'Criminal Courts' (1834) the narrator notes, '[w]e could not help stopping and observing'.[97] He implicates the reader in the process of observation. In 'Astley's', he asks whether 'any of our readers ever notice' the people who loiter at stage doors and in 'A Parliamentary Sketch' the use of the second person provokes an observational imperative, '[y]ou see this ferocious-looking gentleman'.[98] In 'The River' (1835) he advises us of 'the most amusing time to observe', and he instructs us to '[w]atch', '[l]ook at' and 'mark' the character of Dando.[99] In the harsh satire of working class conditions, 'Seven Dials' (1835), we are instructed to '[l]ook at the construction of the place.'[100] There is an image of intense visual scrutiny in 'Horatio Sparkins', when the women of the Malderton family are about to be presented with the true identity of Horatio Sparkins. A sign in the shop window is described as 'something like the aquatic animalculae disclosed by the gas microscope', which is analogous to the microscopic examination under which this sketch has satirised their pretensions.[101]

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[95] 'Thoughts about People', p. 251.
[96] 'Thoughts about People', p. 253.
[97] 'Criminal Courts' (1834), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 229-34, p. 230.
[98] 'Astley's', pp. 128-35, p. 133. 'A Parliamentary Sketch', p. 184.
[99] 'The River' (1835), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 122-8, p. 124.
[100] 'Seven Dials' (1835), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 90-6, p. 90.
[101] 'Horatio Sparkins', p. 425.

'The Streets: Morning'. George Cruikshank. *Sketches by Boz* (1836).

Obsessive Dickensian satirical scrutiny equates surveillance with social control. In 'The Great Winglebury Duel' (1836), Alexander Trott, mistakenly thought to be a nobleman feigning madness, is supervised for the night by a one-eyed boots who expresses his belief in the power of surveillance to police social and psychological aberration, 'the human eye had an unfailing effect in controlling mad people'.[102] In 'The Streets – Morning' (1835), Dickens presents a potent image of vigilant observation as social control. Describing the early morning streets of London he notes '[a]n occasional policeman may alone be seen at the street-corners, listlessly gazing', and in the accompanying picture by Cruikshank the small and dark figure of the quietly observing man can be seen in the background, poised at a street corner to enlarge his range of observation, and thoughtfully gazing in our direction, almost an image of the secret, satirical Dickens in police uniform.[103] There is something enjoyably sinister in the role of surveillance in Dickens's satire. It is silent, obsessive, secret and judgemental. And yet it brings laughter and moral enlightenment. It is a disturbingly voyeuristic pleasure.[104]

The scrutinizing and socially proprietorial gaze which the Dickensian satiric mode deploys, and which helps to define its authoritarian and conservative tone, is

[102] 'The Great Winglebury Duel' (1836), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 463-82, p. 478.
[103] 'The Streets – Morning' (1835), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 69-74, p. 68, p. 69. Orwell notes that 'The only officials whom Dickens handles with any kind of friendliness are, significantly enough, policemen.' George Orwell, "Charles Dickens", *Critical Essays*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1951), pp. 1-60, p. 21. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[104] John Bowen remarks on the role of eyes and observation in *Barnaby Rudge*, 'a remarkable play of eyes, faces and visibility throughout the book'. John Bowen, *Other Dickens*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 168.

matched by its educative function, which is also authoritarian.[105] Satire is an attempt to identify folly and vice, and an attempt to lead the reader to seek improvement of the world and amelioration of those deficiencies. The satirist, as moralist, educates the reader through laughter into a better understanding of the world and its deficiencies.

Dickens claims this morally educative function. In *The Pickwick Papers* he characterises the world as 'thirsting for Pickwickian knowledge', itself an ironic, even a satiric, observation.[106] Chapter 7 includes the unfortunate shooting incident in which Winkle's fraudulent claims to sporting proficiency and, by implication, Pickwick's own naïve, trusting, bourgeois idealism about his companions and about the world, begin to be satirically unmasked. The heading for this chapter underlines the combination of enjoyment and education which is characteristic of satire: 'with other interesting and instructive Matters.'[107] The heading for Chapter 8 is '[s]trongly illustrative' of its theme and Chapter 18 is, '[b]riefly illustrative of two Points'.[108] In Chapter 22, Mr Weller, senior, discusses pike-keepers and the reasons for their misanthropy, a conversation which the narrator characterises as 'blending amusement with instruction.'[109] Dickens's satiric look at the hopelessly optimistic attempts to make a success of the shop in 'Shops and Their Tenants' (1834), starts with Dickens noting that he enjoys walking the London streets, because he cannot do it without, 'deriving some amusement – we had almost said instruction' from doing so.[110] Dickens acknowledges his own role as educative satirist when he refers to the novels of Mr Simpson, in 'The Boarding House' (1834), which 'cannot fail to instruct and amuse the thinking portion of the community.'[111]

Satire, then, is not merely the exposure to laughter of what is wrong, but the educative assertion of what is right. Satire proclaims Dickens's sense of moral rectitude and here, too, identifies 'author' with 'authority'.[112] Dickensian satire avoids

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[105] Manning refers to the 'didactic basis of satire', though the context here is directed to her conceptualisation of satire as a thematic structure of 'ironic truth' rather than as a literary mode. Manning, p. 150. Kaplan asserts that Dickens's sense of the educative function of literature was present from an early age as his childhood reading gave him a sense that '[f]iction was [...] morally didactic, a powerful force for teaching goodness in the general sense of providing models of moral and immoral character and action.' In this sense, satire is a special case of literary didacticism functioning through laughter. Fred Kaplan, *Dickens A Biography* (London: Sceptre, 1989), p. 26. Coffey asserts the important educative function of classical satire. Coffey, p. 7.

[106] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 116.

[107] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 155.

[108] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 170, p. 317.

[109] *The Pickwick Papers*, p. 384.

[110] 'Shops and their Tenants' (1834), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 80-4, p. 81.

[111] 'The Boarding House', p. 338.

[112] There is a potential source of conflict between the inherent authority of the satiric persona and the non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian nature of the emergent heteroglossic novel of the nineteenth century, in which voices compete in polyphony, but no single voice may be

the temporising voice of ambiguity or ambivalence and expresses direct statements of clear moral interpretation, almost a cliché of the crusty reactionary. As moral educator, the satirist enjoys authoritative certainty about the issues he satirises. In 'Hackney Coach Stands' (1835), Dickens refers to innovations as 'mis-called improvements, awful signs of the restlessness of the public mind, and the little respect paid to our time-honoured institutions'.[113] Similarly, in 'Private Theatres' (1835), a satire of the foolish people who pay to perform in private theatrical performances, he deploys direct and scornful condemnation.[114] The performers are 'donkeys', who 'exhibit their lamentable ignorance and boobyism' in proportion to the extent that the role will enable them to 'display their imbecility'.[115]

Dickensian satire, then, is an aesthetic act of assertion in which the contemporary material world becomes a source of moral education.[116] The satirist has to convince the reader of the truth of the satiric vision and of his authority to make the satiric judgement. Dickensian satire is a mode in which shared laughter expresses the success of a morally persuasive act.

Why is Dickens not known as a satirist?

Dickens's satire, then, is a mode firmly rooted in the forms, styles, structures and the themes of the satiric tradition and in the adaptation of that tradition to contemporary social and political contexts. This chapter demonstrates the key characteristics of the satiric tradition which Dickens shared: that of a satiric mode which was largely urban and urbane, rooted in a vividly contemporary world, motivated by concerns which were powerfully relevant to contemporary modernity, inflected by class and education, articulated by emphasis on the visual and the emblematic, in a mode that is strongly moralistic, authoritarian, educative and conservative, and characterised by structural, rhetorical and thematic features. Dickensian satire appears

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paramount. Dyer refers to Peacock's fiction in which 'uniformity of language represents social uniformity' against which 'Peacock's prose satires are multi-voiced, and truth seems a collaborative project.' Dyer, p. 123. From the perspective that this study has argued, the satiric voice is one of the modes of Dickensian multimodal comic fiction that, despite the authoritarian tone of satire, remains multimodal. *Bleak House*, for instance, combines the satiric tone of the present tense narrator with Esther's markedly less satiric, though not completely non-satiric, narration.

[113] 'Hackney Coach Stands' (1835), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 104-9, p. 106.

[114] 'Private Theatres' (1835), *Sketches by Boz*, pp. 145-52.

[115] 'Private Theatres', p. 145.

[116] Worcester, p. 8. Sutherland, too, sees satire as 'an art of persuasion, and persuasion is the chief function of rhetoric', p. 5. Kernan describes satire as 'a type of propaganda [...] shaped to persuade us'. Kernan, Satire, p. 4. '[T]he satirist seeks to persuade and convince'. Arthur Pollard, *Satire* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 1.

in forms and is expressed through artistic methods that are clearly derived from traditional models of satire and this has not hitherto been fully recognised. This chapter therefore reinforces a key tenet of this study as a whole that Dickens's debt to traditions of comic writing is overdue for critical recognition. It also demonstrates the ways in which satire entered Dickensian novelistic aesthetic practice.

There are problems defining the satiric. Satire shades imperceptibly from humour into invective, diatribe, lampoon, parody and polemic. Even the classical satirists did not invariably share formal or rhetorical features. The approach to satire in this chapter has seen it as a mode that invites Aristotelian corrective laughter at the expense of a subject that can be perceived as representative of wider social, psychological, political, economic, industrial or cultural forces to which Dickens wishes to express hostility. Despite these potential difficulties in definition this chapter has taken satire to be a specific literary mode, with its own conventions, methods and aims which can be identified generally, but not exclusively, in specific passages. It has not provided a definitive account of satire or the Dickensian satiric mode but argued for Dickensian satire to be seen within a wider tradition, thereby clarifying important features that, like much of Dickensian comedy, are in need of critical exposure. Dickens owed much to the classic satiric tradition, even as his work articulates the absorption of that tradition into the nineteenth-century novel.

And yet, the relationship between Dickens and the nature of the satire which he deploys is not uncomplicated. There is a critical ambivalence in the treatment of Dickensian satire. The entry on satire in *The Penguin Dickens Companion* starts, '[a]lthough there is a good deal of incidental satire in Dickens's novels and journalistic essays, he is not usually thought of as a satirist.'[117] The word 'incidental' is telling, here, implying a peripherality to Dickensian satire in contrast to other modes which are perceived as central. The entry, however, lists subjects which Dickens satirises, including utilitarians, political economists, the Poor Laws, the 'hard-facts school', greed and selfishness, chancery, the Circumlocution Office and the nouveaux riches, a list which seems to challenge the idea of peripheral satire.[118]

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[117] Paul B. Davis, 'Satire', *The Penguin Dickens Companion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), pp. 437-8.

[118] Aaron Matz, in contrast, refers to 'those Victorian novelists most often understood to be satirists: Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope [...] the satiric quality of those novelists has been widely studied before.' Aaron Matz, *Satire in an Age of Realism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. xi. He does not provide evidence for the latter assertion in the case of Dickens, though he discusses Gissing's criticism of Dickensian realism in the context of understanding Gissing's realism and satire. Matz, pp. 94-100. George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898), *Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*, Vol. 2, ed., Simon J. James, (Grayswood: Grayswood Press, 2004). Matz undermines his own assertion of a distinct Dickensian satire by his formulation of it as conventionally unproblematic

From an earlier period of Dickensian criticism George Orwell, too, notes Dickens's wide range of satiric targets, and recognises the strength and focus of his attacks: 'he was certainly a subversive writer, a radical, one might truthfully say a rebel.'[119] But Orwell foreshadows the Penguin guide as he notes that 'Dickens attacked English institutions with a ferocity that has never since been approached. Yet he managed to do it without making himself hated'.[120] It is difficult not to feel that Orwell overstates the degree of Dickensian ferocity. He seeks to establish in his own way a canonisable Dickens, as other critics were at the time he was writing, based on a socially engaged conceptualisation rather than a Dickens who is merely a popular entertainer. Nevertheless, Orwell seems correct in that, far from being hated, or even noted, as a satirist, Dickens has become rather more affectionately known for his comic sentiment and pathos, despite the pervasiveness and potency of the satire. This paradox deepens when we consider how well Dickens is known for his socially reformist imperative, particularly, though not exclusively, of those policies and bodies who dealt with the poor and vulnerable. Although much of his literary pressure for social reform is satirical, it is not seen as his primary weapon.

On one hand, Dickens is an accomplished satirist. On the other hand, Dickens is not known as a satirist. Orwell attempts to resolve this contradiction by arguing that Dickens's satire focuses on individual morality rather than analysis of the fundamental systems of Victorian society, such as property ownership, capitalism, finance, and exploitative enterprise. Dickens's social criticism, 'is almost exclusively moral' and 'his target is not so much society, as 'human nature'.[121] Similarly, John Killham, writing about *Bleak House*, notes that the novel 'does not anatomise society; Dickens's eye is too much on quite personal faults'.[122] Orwell observes that 'Marx exploded a hundred tons of dynamite beneath the moralist position', by which he means that materialist philosophers account for social, political and economic development in just those terms that Dickens's moral satire seems to ignore.[123] In Orwell's and Killham's

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because expressive of 'Dickens's boisterousness' and 'comic mode'. Matz, p. xii. All subsequent references are to these editions.

[119] Orwell, p. 2.

[120] Orwell, p. 2. Orwell's line of argument echoes Gissing's: 'Dickens had written satire, and satire as pointed, as effective, as any in literature [...] as a satirist, however, Dickens never for a moment endangered his popularity.' Gissing argues that this self-protective effect is the consequence of a moral affinity between Dickens and his readership, 'What is called the "popular conscience" is on Dickens's side [...] this thorough understanding between author and public'. However, Gissing also argues that when Dickensian satire was found to be effective that it was attacked as 'exaggeration'. Gissing, p. 96, p. 77.

[121] Orwell, p. 4.

[122] John Killham, 'Pickwick: Dickens and the Art of Fiction', *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed., John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Publisher, 1962), pp. 35-47, pp. 39-40.

[123] Orwell, p. 18.

analyses, Dickens sees spiritual and moral distortions as the focus for satiric criticism, rather than the capitalist system itself, which then becomes no more than a context for those distortions.[124]

This study argues that despite Orwell's analysis there is a strong link between the nature of Dickens's satire and that of emergent nineteenth-century society. It is difficult to sustain Orwell's analysis when Dickens's satirical representation of Dombey and Merdle are considered, or institutional satire of the Court of Chancery or the Circumlocution Office.[125] In all these cases, and others, it is the fundamental structures of modernity and the social, political and cultural strains which those structures impose which are being attacked: global commerce, national finance, the antiquated legal system and government inertia. However, it is true that Dickens's satire lacks the scurrilous personal invective of earlier satire and the disgusting and disgusted focus on the bodily, and that his heteroglossic mixing of satire with other modes, including other comic modes, has the effect of ameliorating the satire.[126] When we think of *Oliver Twist* we think of Oliver asking for more, not the selfish and pompous indulgence of the workhouse board and when we consider *Nicholas Nickleby* we think of Smike rather than the MP Gregsbury.

Manning is also ambivalent about Dickensian satire. She recognises that satire exists as a literary genre with its own tradition and defining characteristics.[127] She

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[124] Knight argues that satire is not intrinsically moral, using evidence from Wyndham Lewis to assert the reader's resistance to the rhetorical imposition of a moral order. However, he goes on to argue that 'Insofar as satire is moral at all, it tends to create its own values [...] it must give them enough force to encourage readers to transfer them beyond the text.' In these terms, at least, Dickensian satire can safely be seen to express Dickensian morality. Knight, p. 5.

[125] Joseph Butwin's analysis of radical satire in the early nineteenth century leads him to conclude that 'I have found vestiges of popular, political laughter in Dickens.' He cites the Artful Dodger's comic performance in court as evidence of the defence that seditious laughter affords to overweening authority. Joseph M. Butwin. 'Seditious Laughter.' *Radical History Review* 18 (1978): 17-34, p. 32, pp. 17-8. *Oliver Twist*, Ch 43.

[126] Matz points to the impact of the heteroglossic expression of satire within other narrative modes in Dickensian fiction with his observation that, 'Dickens's satire typically zeroed in on a particular segment of society: Chancery, the Circumlocution Office, the provincial schoolhouse.' Matz, p. 58. An important effect of the emergence of satire into the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel is the loss of the traditional satirical trope of 'satire as purgation', with its 'obsession with the bodily orifices and with eating, urinating, and defecating'. Dyer marks the transition by identifying Peacock's oral focus, on eating and drinking though not purgation, which is also a feature of Dickensian characterisation and narrative. Dyer, p. 98. Frank Palmeri, too identifies the move from the purgative function of satire from the Regency period onward, and particularly with the accession of Victoria. Frank Palmeri. 'Cruikshank, Thackeray, and the Victorian Eclipse of Satire.' *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 44 (2004): 753-77 p. 754. Bakhtin emphasises the bodily aspect of the carnivalesque, both as ingestion and purgation. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), tr., Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 18.

[127] Manning does not explore precisely what that traditional formality consisted of, however. Gary Dyer, for instance, explores the transformation of both the formal verse satire and the Menippean satire into the nineteenth century. Dyer, p. 140. This study argues that elements of both traditional forms are found in Dickensian satire. In his analysis of satiric character, Gissing,

defines Dickens's understanding of satire as including the 'formal and traditional: satire is a literary genre devoted to the anatomizing of follies', but goes on to say that he did not work within this tradition,

> Dickens knew the classic English satirists and Juvenal and Horace as well, but he did not see himself as the inheritor of their tradition. Whatever influence he may incidentally have felt, formal relations to them are weak. Classical satire is a highly literary genre whose practitioners are very conscious and proud of its long tradition. In this regard, Dickens's work is not satire.[128]

Confusingly, Manning goes on to say that,

> [i]t is apparent that for Dickens satire is not necessarily literary: it is any form of truthful, ironic, and often bitter commentary upon life[129]

and,

> [i]n the sense, however, of the term *satire* as a mode of vision, defined less formally by tone and attitude, the work does have fundamental affinities with what is accepted as traditional satire.[130]

Manning's reluctance to see Dickens's formal connections with the classical literary and other satirical tradition results in a vision of satire which makes it difficult to distinguish what she may term the satiric from other comic modes,

> [h]ere "satire" seems to be a sort of ironic commentary, generally revealing a bitter or unpleasant truth [...] The satire is not verbal attack; it can be an ironic statement, but it is more frequently a presence, an incident, or an incongruous fact.[131]

Manning claims a definition of Dickensian satire that, in a sense, is non-satiric, because it rejects the formal and rhetorical features that constitute a classical formulation.[132] Manning positions Dickensian satire as an aesthetic of morality rather

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too, is uncommitted to a formal conceptualisation of satire that would have established criteria to assess Dickens's achievement. Gissing seems to conflate satire and humour, for instance: 'his satire has in some part lost its edge, and would have only historic interest but for the great preservative, humour'. Gissing, p. 95.

[128] Manning, p. 4, p. 7.

[129] Manning, p. 6.

[130] Manning, p. 7.

[131] Manning, p. 5. Northrop Frye's simple formulation is powerful but influential, 'Two things, then, are essential to satire; one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack.' Frye's definition counters Manning's assertions about the essential nature of a satiric target. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 224. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[132] Ronald Paulson, too, identifies a Dickensian 'satiric vision', but acknowledges, as this study seeks to do, that it is formal, rhetorical and structural aesthetic methods that place Dickens in a satiric tradition, 'satiric conventions tend to transform normative reality into what might be called a satiric vision. This would include [...] Dickens'. Paulson, p. 309.

than as a formal literary mode.[133] She sees it as expressive of irony rather than of anything identifiable more distinctly and formally as satire.[134] By contrast, this chapter has demonstrated that while Manning may be justified in asserting that Dickens did not see himself in a tradition of satiric writing, that does not necessarily mean that he was not in such a tradition. A more forensic examination of the satiric tradition may have provided Manning with clearer evidence to justify the looser definition which she favours, or, as this chapter demonstrates, Dickens was more indebted to the tradition than Manning allows. The contention of this chapter is that much of the evidence in fact argues that Dickens wrote largely within the tradition of satire though his satire forms part of a heteroglossic mix of modes.[135]

Further evidence can be found in Dyer's analysis of how formal verse satire of the Augustan age was transformed by the altered social, political and literary landscape of the nineteenth century. In Dyer's account, satire lost ground to more comic forms, became less personal in its attack and targeted incongruity, pretension, and eccentricity.[136] Dyer accounts for this change through the development of a middle class ideology, with those who shaped that ideology being predominantly female and family orientated and informed by growing Dissenting and Methodist views which saw satire as arrogantly assuming a divine role.[137] A developing critique of satire in the nineteenth century saw it as envious, cruel and cowardly, an obsolete remnant of an

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[133] This can be seen clearly in Manning, Chapter 2, 'Satire and Social Reform' and in the discussion of the novels from p. 52 onward which focus on the thematic targets of Dickens's satire, rather than the literary methods. Dickens is indeed a writer with whose profound moral sense infuses his comic and non-comic modes; a sense of morality is expressed in satire as this chapter demonstrates, but the chapter also demonstrates that moral vision alone does not identify satire.

[134] Frye explores the close link between irony and satire, but sees satire as a special case of irony, 'The chief distinction between irony and satire is that satire is militant irony [...] Irony is consistent both with complete realism of content and with the suppression of attitude on the part of the author. Satire demands at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque'. Frye, pp. 223-4. Simpson asserts that 'satire is characterised by multiple forms of irony.' Simpson, p. 72. Kernan accords with this line of argument, '[t]he claim has been made that all irony is satire. While this is obviously not so, it is true that nearly all satire makes use of irony'. Kernan, *Satire*, p. 81.

[135] Manning's critical positioning of Dickensian satire is symptomatic of the ideological forces which were in play at the time in which she wrote and which were examined in the introduction to this study. Like many critics contemporary with her study, Manning is concerned to minimise the critical impact of non-realist modes on what she prefers to present as psychologically and socially realist narratives. Manning identifies tensions between the Dickensian satiric mode and the demands of realist fiction. She contrasts the role of satire 'to develop a thesis' with 'dramatic uses of incident' which 'create an imitation of life'. What is for her a discomforting position is articulated in her use of the phrase 'breaches of novelistic realism', where it is apparent that realism is asserted as the Dickensian norm, and non-realist modes are an intrusion. Manning, p. 9. Introduction to this study, pp. 25-6.

[136] Dyer, pp. 7–8. Palmeri examines this transition from the perspective of the mid-century periodicals Comic Almanack (1835-53) and Punch (1841-2002) and accounts for it in terms of an emergent bourgeois 'capacious middle class identity'. Palmeri, p. 760.

[137] Dyer, p. 6, p. 150, p. 167.

earlier age, and saw the satirist as hubristic.[138] Thackeray, writing in 1854, makes clear how this new ideology changed satire into a more restrained, Horatian, mode, 'smitten into shame by the pure presence of our women and the sweet confiding smiles of our children'.[139] Importantly, Dickens wrote at a key point in the literary historical context of the satiric mode.

Manning's stance accords with Dyer's evidence on the context of satire in the early nineteenth century in which satire became absorbed into the heteroglossia of the modern novel. Dyer argues that the generic nature of satire changed in the early part of the nineteenth century. Its role diminished particularly as publishers in the late 1820s, faced with economic pressures that resulted from financial crisis in 1826, were keen to publish more profitable genres, to the extent that 'satire had almost ceased to exist as a distinct genre by the 1830s'.[140]

Dyer's argument echoes Ronald Paulson's, who explores at length the relationship between satire and the eighteenth-century novel, concluding that 'the novel [...] was by no means uninfluenced by satire, and yet was no longer what a critic could safely call satire', and that 'satire itself, with only the most general kind of form of its own, infiltrates all other forms.'[141] Knight, too, sees 'satire and the novel as massively overlapping genres. Satire is a parasitic form'.[142] Manning's perception of Dickensian satire as an expression of novelistic 'bifurcation' accords with Dyer's perception of the wider literary historical context.[143] However, this study has demonstrated that Dickensian satire is more than 'ironic commentary' or a 'satiric impulse', but a voice that is evident structurally, formally and rhetorically as well as thematically, though its appearance is episodic in his fiction and nonfiction. Dickensian satire therefore is evidence for the emergence of the Bakhtinian heteroglossic in the modern novel where satire is one of the heteroglossic voices.[144]

Manning is close to the heteroglossic conceptualisation of the novel in her argument that the supposed softening of Dickensian satire seen in the sympathy shown to otherwise satirised characters, such as Sir Leicester Dedlock or Merdle represents 'an evolution closely involved with literary form, for its essence is a blending of the

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[138] Dyer, p. 144.
[139] Quoted in Dyer, p. 167. William Makepeace Thackeray, 'Leech's Pictures of Life and Character' (1854), *The Irish Sketch Book and Critical Reviews*, (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1879), pp. 395-414, p. 399.
[140] Dyer, p. 13.
[141] Paulson, p. 8.
[142] Knight, p. 203.
[143] Manning, p. 9.
[144] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Heteroglossia in the Novel', from 'Discourse in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, transl., Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1981), pp. 301-31. All subsequent references are to Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination.*

impulses of satire and of the novel in a union that mixes without dissolving.'[145] Nevertheless, Manning is here asserting that 'novel' represents a realist norm, rather than a complex heteroglossic amalgam.

Dyer's argument asserts the essentially conservative rather than radical nature of satire as it grew into a moderated bourgeois form contained and constrained within heteroglossia. John Lloyd, producer of the satirical television series, *Spitting Image* (1984-96) asserts, perhaps reluctantly and with regret, that this is the role of satire. Referring to a newspaper that is traditionally seen as conservative in its political and social outlook, Lloyd comments in his discussion of the show's success,

> [b]ut the thing about satire is that it doesn't really work unless it accords with what people already think. So in that sense, it is much more like the *Daily Mail* than a lot of people would like to believe. And I also now think that if we did have any effect, it was more likely to have kept the government [*sic*] in power for longer, as we provided a pretty large-scale safety valve for a lot of people.[146]

From this perspective satire is essentially conservative, rather than radical. It ridicules vice and folly but the ridicule lances the boil and releases political and social tensions. It is essentially an ideological safety valve. Lloyd's perspective on late twentieth-century satire accords with Dyer's essentially ameliorative satire in the nineteenth century, a satire which is reassuring, even comforting, because it permits an aesthetic relief from an unhealthy or immoral society. It may be that despite the apparent force of satire as doctor or policeman that the actual impact of those two professionals, for Dickens at least, is limited to observation rather than cure or custody. From Orwell's point of view, Dickens seems to believe, 'an enormous platitude: If men would behave decently the world would be decent,' which is a good working definition of social amelioration.[147]

Nevertheless, Dickensian satire is an aesthetically and thematically powerful mode. And, importantly, there is a resolution to this paradox, a consistent Dickensian satiric theme throughout, an essential 'serious truth' that is revealed by the laughter his satire provokes.[148] This satiric moral truth is how Dickens's times of rapid economic growth, urbanisation, and increasing systematisation and regulation of life, what Carlyle referred to as 'the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word' –

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[145] Manning, p. 23. Sutherland, from a less theorised position recognises that '[w]ith Dickens [...] satire is only one of the many stops on his organ'. Sutherland, p. 123.
[146] 'Thatcher Years,' pp. 12-13, p. 13.
[147] Orwell, p. 5. Similarly, Gissing argues that 'Dickens never went too far; never struck at a genuine conviction of the multitude [...] Broadly speaking, he was one with his readers'. Gissing, p. 96.
[148] 'This combination of jest and earnest is a permanent mark of satiric writing [...] The satirist, though he laughs, tells the truth.' Highet, pp. 233-4.

are distorting both the individual human and the society of which the individual human forms a part.[149] Dickens had a moral vision of what human beings were becoming: 'the condition of England' was stagnant, distorted, ineffectual, corrupt and corrupting. Dickens's satire was not personal, though it could be, it was not political, though it could be, it was essentially ideological. It challenged the modes of thought and of understanding which were coming to be seen as the way to encompass modernity. Orwell argued later in his account of Dickens that 'it is not at all certain that a merely moral criticism of society may not be just as "revolutionary" – and revolution, after all, means turning things upside down – as the politico-economic criticism'.[150] He concludes that ''[i]f men would behave decently the world would be decent' is not such a platitude as it sounds.'[151]

This unity of moral vision can be seen in 'A Few Conventionalities'. Among the wide ranging targets of satire in this short piece are the formulaic language used in Parliament, the pretences required of both actors and audience during theatrical performances, the proprieties of public dinners and other social matters, and, more seriously, the conciliatory reflexes of newspapers following disasters. Dickens extracts humour and, towards the end, scorn, from his treatment of these targets, and from our realisation of their absurdity. The targets differ widely, but the satire is actually not, primarily, of these specific targets, but of the concept of the conventional itself, an unthinking acceptance of social custom and practice which leads us to fail to question what, under Dickens's guidance, we now realise is absurd.

Significantly, 'A Few Conventionalities' starts with a question from a child, a symbol, perhaps, of innocent enquiry, as one not yet corrupted by conventional and ritualistic modes of thought and behaviour.[152] Although the narrator, with irony at his own expense, cynically dismisses the child, his piece continues in the same, apparently innocent, questioning mode. We follow the narrator's train of thought as he gains a sudden flood of insight into the moral nature of the world. Of the following paragraph, some eighteen sentences, out of a total of twenty-three, are questions, with the effect of a persistent child – particularly since the early questions are dominated by 'why...?' – and the dominance of questions continues throughout the piece. The effect of the sheer weight of the rapidly accumulating number of rhetorical questions is unsettling. The questions challenge us; they direct us to the same implicit conclusions that we witness the narrator drawing. We may conclude that the piece is satirical at the expense, among

[149] Thomas Carlyle, "Signs of the Times" (1829), *Thomas Carlyle: Selected Writings*, ed., Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 59-85, p. 64.
[150] Orwell, p. 18.
[151] Orwell, p. 19.
[152] 'A Few Conventionalities', p. 261.

other specific targets, of the governing classes, social and artistic life, and the failure to impeach dangerous incompetents, but it is also, perhaps mainly, and unnervingly, satiric at our own expense. The satire shakes us out of our 'conventional' way, our lazy and ritualistic way, of accepting the world. Dickens makes us the target of our own satiric unmasking.

'A Few Conventionalities' displays many of the characteristics of Dickens's deployment of satire and is illustrative of his profound debt to the tradition of satiric writing. There is an array of targets, all with contemporary application, ranging from the relatively trivial – theatrical conventions – to the culturally profound – the rites of death – presented to us in a form which ranges from the genuinely amusing, for instance, the young Swiss maiden whose movements result in her resembling 'a beautiful white muslin pen-wiper', to the considerably more politically charged, '[i]f a public servant be impeached, how does it happen that there never was such an excellent public servant as he will be shown to be'.[153] All characteristics are united by Dickens's vision of the conventional, ritualistic, dehumanising, and mechanistic effect of his age on modes of thought and behaviour: 'why do we always murmur [...] in exactly the same tone, at exactly the same places, and execute our little audience conventionalities with the punctuality and mechanism of the stage itself?'[154]

The conventional, Dickens's satire reveals in this piece, has become a force by which we accept the absurd as normal, without realising that we have done so; we have falsified our sense of reality, and our understanding of ourselves. We have disguised the truth, and created a false consciousness out of social and economic imperatives. We live in a self-deceiving world, content in unconscious conspiracy to conform to accepted forms of behaviour and social interaction, instead of something which is truer, more spontaneous, more individual, and more rational. 'A Few Conventionalities' challenges our complacent, conventional view of the world around us, and forces us to see it in a new way: the scornful, moralistic, moralising, way of the narrator. The truth is hidden in plain sight and the vigilant observation of the satirist reveals it to us and we accept the authority of his moral vision. We are guilty of conventional, unthinking, modes of thought. This piece satirises us.

Dickens's satiric vision articulates the distortions of bodies, minds, relationships, social and governmental institutions, but what has caused those distortions is the systematic materialisation of thought and spirit. The focus in Dickensian satire is essentially ideological, rather than personal, though it can be personal; it is a satiric idea rather than an attack on a specific government, though it can

[153] 'A Few Conventionalities', p. 263-4, p. 266.
[154] 'A Few Conventionalities', p. 264.

be that too. That is why it perhaps seems to be ameliorative, when it is actually transformational. Merdle, Squeers, Bumble, Veneering, Podsnap, uncouth Americans, Chancery and the Circumlocution Office are subjected to Dickensian satire, but the real target of the satire is us for our acceptance of these monsters of modernity. In that respect Dickensian satire is like his other comic modes where it is the vivid aberration, the grotesquely enjoyable and the pleasure of the caricature that delight us and which educate us.

The pleasure that we derive from them means that we do not hate them as the satiric tradition demands. We are implicated in them by our pleasure. This is why we feel that Orwell overstated the ferocity of Dickensian satire: we do not hate the objects of the satire, the folly and the vice, as we should; we do not celebrate these aberrations as we celebrate other comic aberrations such as Cuttle, but we do derive pleasure from them, and not just at their expense. We enjoy the ambiguity of Merdle's position in his own household; we enjoy Bumble's foolish self-defeat; we enjoy the sheer exuberance of Squeers's vice. Dickensian satire insists that we look anew at the modern world and its follies and its vice and not accept that they are now conventional. Scrutiny should include ourselves who are implicated in folly and vice by our pleasure. Fancy, imagination and laughter are not just amelioration of the monolith, they are the Dickensian ideological alternative.

Dickens may not be known as a satirist but clearly he is one. He is the satirist of a nineteenth century which is emptying itself of love, imagination, and all the qualities that makes us human. We find Dickens's satire when genuine human impulses, sympathy, empathy and the emotional recognition of another as human like ourselves, are lost in favour of the false, the hollow, the inhuman and the inhumane. We find Dickens's satire when society becomes ritualised, when people are reduced to players in hollow ceremony and the living spirit is extracted from the world. We find Dickens's satire when people seek to suppress others, to curb them, to destroy their individuality, their self-power, and their command of their own destiny. We find Dickens's satire when the world empties itself of humanity.

Conclusion

'The Power to Disturb'.[1]

The opening of *Oliver Twist* exemplifies the complexity of the Dickensian comic and the distinctive interplay of the range of comic features which this study has demonstrated.[2] Oliver's birth in the workhouse is a bleak and pathetic event and yet Dickens is at his most characteristically Dickensian – in the formulation of the Dickensian comic that this study has argued for – in his intricate interweaving of the comic and the non-comic. Our reactions to this scene and to the events it depicts are, as a consequence of this intricacy, far from straightforward. The combination of the comic and the darkly tragic, or at least the darkly melodramatic, pathetic and miserable, as well as the intermingling and interaction of modes, including the humorous and the satiric, implicate the reader in the moral and emotional weight of the scene in a way that a modally simpler or more straightforward narrative approach would not.

Primarily, the scene captures Dickens's satirical reaction to contemporary events, particularly the utilitarian inspired New Poor Law of 1834.[3] In addition, we are aware of his deployment of characters whose lineaments are reminiscent of stock characters, or even caricatures, his detached and ironising narratorial stance, and his combination of humour and pathos, as means of exploring an area of experience that for Dickens and for his contemporaries was a shockingly vivid one, and one fraught with horror: child and maternal mortality. As Michael Slater points out, Dickens wrote the scene at the point at which his own first child, his son Charles, was born after an extended and anxious birth that lasted a day and a night.[4]

From the start the reader becomes implicated in the moral dynamic of the scene. An amusingly off-hand, and yet paradoxically cruel remark by the narrator playfully obstructs the conventions of the notionally historically accurate eighteenth-century comic fictions that commence in the hero's birth. The narrator refuses to identify the details of Oliver's birth, which occur, 'on a day and date which I need not

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[1] Grahame Smith, *Dickens and the Dream of Cinema*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 149. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[2] Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed., Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Ch. 1, pp. 1-3. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[3] 'The new law, like the old, accepted the principle that every necessitous person had a claim to relief; but the relief was to be given only under new and stricter conditions. First, [...] all recipients were to enter the workhouse. Second, conditions in the workhouse were made 'less eligible' (i.e. more miserable) than the condition of the lowest paid worker outside. [...] The rationale of the New Poor Law lay in the doctrines of orthodox political economy. [...] Edwin Chadwick, the first secretary of the central board and drafter of the *Report*, was a disciple of Jeremy Bentham'. J. F. C. Harrison, *Early Victorian Britain 1832-51*, (London: Fontana, 1988), pp. 86-7.
[4] Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens*, (New Haven: Yale, 2009), p. 94.

trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader'.[5] The combination of humour and an apparent narratorial stance of callousness are crucial here. Superficially, this is no more than a throwaway remark indicative of the lofty, educated stance of a knowing man of the world. But there is another sense in which the remark holds a potent range of meanings. The remark equates us with the 'I' of the narrator and we are drawn to adopt his world-weary, mildly scandalised and class inflected stance and the same detached and ironising view of the events. But the events described are not those which can easily be accommodated by such a tone. A mother is dying; her child may well follow. The reader is invited to participate in a wider range of emotions than would be evoked by simple pathos or simple comedy.

Even this ironising emotional incongruity is not a complete explanation of the impact of this episode. Desperate events are narrated in a comic tone, and we are unsettled by that discontinuity between event and tone, that gap between sensibility and understanding and between laughter and thought.[6] On one hand we are flattered that the narrator finds us as sophisticated as himself, able to enjoy our shared register of social and intellectual superiority. On the other hand, we are appalled by the misery that is described, by the squalor and the indifference which is evident in the characters of the surgeon and the nurse and, more disturbingly, in the implied emotional detachment of the narrator. While it is Oliver who is safely the subject of the humour because he survives, unlike his mother who is more a pathetic figure, we nevertheless become implicated emotionally in the narrative and divided in our reactions to what we read. We are gently and disturbingly pleasured by our reading of maternal and, potentially, infant mortality, while we are also made aware of this guilty pleasuring, and of the discomfort that it brings. Our comic enjoyment is a chimera of laughter and guilt, of pleasure and pain – the pain of others – and of the alienation of simultaneous emotional engagement and detachment. It is a comic pleasure that consists of much more than an ironic narratorial perspective.

Dickens develops this multi-layered comic narration throughout the chapter. Oliver becomes 'an item of mortality', a phrase which mingles, though also thematically contrasts, the linguistic register of the religious tract with the lack of human concern for the vulnerable child that is its subject, and Oliver becomes 'it' for the whole of the second paragraph.[7] Oliver struggles to breath for three and a quarter

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[5] *Oliver Twist*, p. 1.
[6] Howard Jacobson uses the dichotomy between 'laughter and thought' in his analysis of the integral nature of comedy to the novel. Howard Jacobson, 'Man thinks, God laughs', *The Guardian Review*, Saturday 9th October, 2010, pp. 2-4, p. 2. All subsequent references are to this edition. Jacobson's article is quoted at greater length below.
[7] *Oliver Twist*, p. 1.

minutes. As his life is held in the balance, and as his mother's life ebbs away, the narrator's tone is light and ironic,

> [t]he fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration, – a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence; and for some time he lay gasping on a little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this world and the next: the balance being decidedly in favour of the latter.[8]

While the tone is light and ironic, the reader is equally in no doubt about the serious position that Oliver is in. Nor are we in any doubt about the sympathetic attitude which we are to take towards his struggle for life, even as we smile at the narrator's register. In the same paragraph, Dickens makes a joke at the expense of the same middle class life style which he evokes with his narratorial stance. It is a joke, moreover, which plays on the many child deaths which even the middle classes, including those who were reading and the author who was writing this chapter, were potentially subject to,

> [n]ow, if, during this period, Oliver had been surrounded by careful grandmothers, anxious aunts, experienced nurses, and doctors of profound wisdom, he would most inevitably and indubitably have been killed in no time.[9]

The brutality of the word 'killed' in contrast to the list of 'careful' familial and professional attendees at the birth, and the sophisticated diction of 'most inevitably and indubitably' is comic, but it is also brutal. It is a cruel black humour that implicates the reader in pleasure at the death of children and yet, paradoxically, also alienates the reader from that pleasure with awareness that it is, shockingly, pleasure derived from the death of children. Oliver may not die, but many Olivers did and his mother does. It is a brutal, black humour that is expressed in the lightest of linguistic registers, in an ironically detached and sophisticated style that contrasts both with the harsh emotional events which are described and with the moral and emotional sympathy which the reader is clearly directed to experience: that this is sad and wrong. The scene ends with a more overtly satirical assault on the institutions of the New Poor Law, again presented in drily ironic narratorial sophistication that in this case borders on polemic,

> Oliver cried lustily. If he could have known that he was an orphan, left to the tender mercies of churchwardens and overseers, perhaps he would have cried the louder.[10]

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[8] *Oliver Twist*, p. 1.
[9] *Oliver Twist*, p. 1.
[10] *Oliver Twist*, p. 3.

The nurse and the surgeon who share the opening scene with Oliver are not sophisticated and psychologically realist portraits. They are, at most, shadowy evocations of character types, almost caricatures. And yet, they too carry their weight of narrative and thematic significance. It is the conventionally comic nurse with her green glass bottle and her eccentric style of speaking who, despite her comic role, seeks to comfort Oliver's dying mother, though with a comically black tale of her own eleven dead children. The surgeon, too, though he ignores Oliver's struggle for life in favour of warming his hands by the fire, also seeks to comfort Oliver's mother by placing her son in her arms. It is as if these comic characters, easily dismissed as empty targets of satire, take on an awkward humanity and we are no longer quite so sure how to read them. The scene is harsh but not without compassion. It is strange and unsettling. It amounts to more than the sum of its parts. It is a subtle blending of elements in a comic alchemy that defies straightforward understandings and resists simple definitions.

In order to understand this scene and its artistic methods and purposes, then, it is necessary to have a sophisticated understanding of the comic mode. We need to understand Dickens's biographical context as a new father, the historical context of the New Poor Laws and the generic context of early nineteenth-century prose satire in which Dickens chose to respond to that historical context. We also need to understand the literary-historical context of stock characterisation and narrative forms from romance and other literary and dramatic genres about which Dickens was so enthusiastic and from which he drew so much, as well as the forms, structures and methods of the prose fiction, including the comic prose fiction, of his childhood reading. As well as this level of literary critical intricacy, we could also read the scene from the perspective of theoretical conceptualisations of the comic: the Aristotelian, the Hobbesian, the Freudian, as well as insights that might be drawn from, for instance, the linguistic analysis of humour, which do not lie within the scope of this study. [11]

There are, then, many approaches to understanding the comic mode in this scene, including the theoretical, the generic, and the literary historical, but no single approach would do the scene justice. Any of these perspectives, taken individually,

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[11] Texts which deal with the linguistic and stylistic analysis of humour include Graeme Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004). Ritchie focuses on the concept of the 'joke' and implicitly raises interesting implications of the differences between the literary comic mode and the more discrete, self-contained and repeatable narrative form of the joke. Ritchie, p. 15. His argument is formed on the conception of the comic as the 'incongruous', which originates in Aristotle's 'the ridiculous consists in some form of error or ugliness' in *On the Art of Poetry*, though Ritchie traces it no further back than the eighteenth century. Ritchie sees jokes as ameliorative in their function of 'incongruity resolution'. Ritchie, pp. 46-50, pp. 54-7. Aristotle, 'On the Art of Poetry', *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans., T. S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 37. Paul Simpson's study provides linguistic analysis of satire in range of cultural contexts, including the literary. Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humour* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2003).

would illuminate the scene in interesting ways. However, taken individually, each approach would also tend to simplify our understanding of the nature and the impact of the comic mode, if for no other reason than because it would ignore the others. It is in the interaction of the comic with other modes, and in the nature of the comic itself, its variations in form, and its variations in tone between gentle ironising humour and harsh satire shading into polemic, and all of the points that lie between these extremes, that an examination of the Dickensian comic must lie. Full justice to the Dickensian comic mode can be done only by recognising how its complexity arises from an interplay of factors. We identify those factors by deploying a range of perspectives, theoretical, historical, and biographical, and by examining the interrelationships between those perspectives. The combination of formalist, theoretical and literary historical perspectives that this study deploys reveals the distinctively Dickensian comic, which includes the way in which none of these perspectives alone is sufficient to understand it. That is what this study has demonstrated.

Avatar and Icon: Dickens and Popular Culture

> It would be an inattentive reader, I think, or one disposed to overlook such 'redundant' details in search of predetermined matters of supposedly weightier significance, who would fail to laugh at the ubiquitous comic vitality of this text.[12]

Nobody thinks it strange that a 'serious' novel should win the Booker prize. However, with Howard Jacobson's win in 2010 with *The Finkler Question*, the story that dominated coverage was that a comic novel had won, '[i]t is a victory for that most overlooked genre on literary prize lists, the comic novel.'[13] Even before the announcement, Jacobson's prior lack of success in literary awards was accounted for by his mode of writing, '[o]ne obstacle to winning awards has perhaps been that his talents are predominantly comic'.[14] Jacobson is a passionate advocate of the comic mode in fiction and is critical of its modern reception,

> [t]o my ear the term 'comic novelist' is as redundant and off-putting as the term 'literary novelist' [...] talk of the comic novel is tautologous. If we are to be true to the form there will be only 'novels' and they will be effusive with wit and humour; [...] we have created a false division between laughter and thought, between comedy and seriousness, between the exhilaration that

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[12] Michael Hollington and Marianne Camus, *Charles Dickens* 'Great Expectations' (Didier Erudition-CNED, 1999), p. 59. The reference is to *Great Expectations*.

[13] Claire Armitstead, 'Howard Jacobson's Booker prize win is long overdue.' guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 12th October 2010. http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/oct/12/howard-jacobson-booker-prize-winner?INTCMP=SRCH. Viewed online 1st April 2010. Howard Jacobson, *The Finkler Question* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

[14] Lindesay Irvine, 'Howard Jacobson', *The Guardian Review*, Saturday 7th August, 2010, pp. 10-11, p. 10.

> the great novels offer when they are at their funniest, and whatever else it is we now think we want from literature.[15]

It is a central tenet of this thesis that the unwarranted division Jacobson locates between what he terms 'laughter and thought' is a defining feature of our critical and cultural understanding of Dickens. Jacobson's location of that division in the modern critical reflex to contemporary fiction applies equally to our modern critical understandings of Dickens's comic fiction. The introduction of this study demonstrated how that process of division is both reflected by, and finds its origin in, the Dickensian academic literary critical discourse. Moreover, the need to recover the integrally comedic in fiction which is implicit in Jacobson's account and in the attitudes which coverage of his success implied, applies also to Dickens. The preceding chapters of this study have demonstrated how that process of critical comic recovery in modern culture can take place specifically for Dickens. The importance of this thesis lies in broadening the range of future critical understandings of the Dickensian, but it also lies in acknowledging the extent to which our attitude to the comedic more generally needs to be refreshed and invigorated.

The central issue here is the canonicity of the comedic. Gerald Graff, in his polemical 'Taking Cover in Coverage', critiques the defining impact of university institutional structures on the academic understandings of what constitutes literature. He asserts that,

> [i]n deciding to call ourselves departments of English [...] and in dividing [this] national [unit] into periods and genres, we have already made significant theoretical choices. [...] the categories [...] operate as administrative conveniences and eventually as facts of nature that we take for granted. We need to recognize that the way we organize and departmentalize literature is not only a crucial theoretical choice but one that largely determines our professional activity and the way students and the laity see it or fail to see it.[16]

The clear implication of this analysis of the institutional organisation of literature is the tendency, if not to exclude the comic, certainly to scrutinise it on the periphery. It is not a period and it is not a genre. Comedy transects both, uncomfortably for 'the obvious necessity of some form of bureaucratic departmental organization and the specialised division of labor that that entails.'[17] The thesis is important, then, in understanding what Dickens and the Dickensian mean in modern culture, both popular and more elite and academic culture.

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[15] Jacobson, 'Man thinks, God laughs', p. 2.
[16] Gerald Graff, 'Taking Cover in Coverage' (1986), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed., Vincent B. Leitch (London: Norton, 2010), pp. 1962-79, p. 1964. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[17] Graff, 'Taking Cover in Coverage', p. 1965.

In the same way as our literary critical and academic culture has formulated a Dickensian that is largely blind to the comedic, so a similar process can be demonstrated in popular culture and here, too, a parallel process of comedic recovery is overdue. John Gardiner, in his analysis of the concept of the 'Dickensian' in the twentieth century, sets himself two questions at the start of his essay which are particularly pertinent to the blindness of our age to Dickens's comedy, 'what does the term Dickensian actually signify, and how did it come to have the meanings that it does today?'[18] He points out that the term indicates an application which goes beyond the immediately literary. It includes a conceptualisation of Victorian social conditions, as well as an emotional attitude to society that echoes both the Freudian and the Marxist imperatives discussed in the introduction to this study, 'full of concern for the underdog, the unhappy, the lonely, the overlooked'.[19]

He notes that versions of this conceptualisation of the 'Dickensian' could be seen in TV adaptations that run against the trend of contemporary political ideology that valorise the industrial and commercial imperatives of modern capitalism, such as the BBC's *Bleak House* in 1985, 'which [...] attack the culture of individual gain encouraged by Margaret Thatcher.'[20] Gardiner notes that other, less sombre, conceptualisations of the Dickensian, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company's adaptation for the stage of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1980), played a similar ideologically oppositional role.[21] Gardiner illustrates his assertion of the dark Dickens with adaptations from the 1990s, such as the BBC's *Great Expectations* (1999), as well as the same channel's *Our Mutual Friend* (1998), and Alan Bleasdale's adaptation for ITV of *Oliver Twist* (1999). Gardiner observes that,

> whether consciously or not, we have grown used to a more complex Dickens. Because it complements contemporary attitudes about ourselves and our relationship with the past, this view of Dickens has been widely popularized, especially on television. A darker sense of the Dickensian panders to our feelings for the prurient and the psychological [...] Indeed, it

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[18] John Gardiner. 'The Dickensian and Us'. *History Workshop Journal*. 51 (2001): 226-37, p. 227. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[19] John Keegan, supplementary comment to 'Obituary for Samuel Raphael', The Daily Telegraph, 12th December 1996. http://www.raphael-samuel.org.uk/archive/paperback-text.htm#TELEGRAPH1. Viewed online 5th December 2011. Quoted in Gardiner, p. 228. Raphael refers to Victorian housing '[l]ike the 'Dickensian' tenements and the basement dwelling, it was thought of as a breeding-ground for TB', and in his discussion of the film *The Elephant Man* (1980) directed by David Lynch he asserts that the film 'satisfies our expectation of what the past should look like. The settings are those which British cinema has accustomed us to accept as 'realistic' so far as nineteenth-century England is concerned. The townscape is thoroughly 'Dickensian', with narrow, dripping alleys, and cobbled, gas-lit streets.' Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 51, p. 382.

[20] Gardiner, p. 228.

[21] Gardiner, p. 228.

> seems that producers and directors genuinely welcome Dickens for the extent to which he 'anticipated' many genuine concerns.[22]

Gardiner here identifies a Dickens created through popular culture which reflects, in important ways, how we think about ourselves and how we create our relationship to the Victorian past. This creation parallels the equally dark Dickensian formulated through the processes of literary criticism which were demonstrated in the introduction to this study. In a clear parallel to the growth of Freudian critical theory that assisted in the entry of Dickens to the literary canon, Lean's films of *Great Expectations* (1947) and *Oliver Twist* (1948) are seen by Gardiner as important examples of this cultural evolution, as he writes of Lean,

> it is noteworthy that he [...] began an extensive course of psychoanalysis during the shooting of *Oliver Twist*. Many critics found the films perplexingly cold and intellectual, not at all like the Dickens to which they were used.[23]

Gardiner's historical and cultural account of the nature of the twentieth-century Dickensian implies that there is something in the psychological darkness and the social misery, and something in the concomitant absence or silence of the Dickensian comic mode that is valuable to us. As he observes, 'we are all psychologists now.'[24]

A demonstration of the modern transformation of Dickens which seems blind to the comic mode of the original is the narrative modernisation of *Great Expectations* by the Mexican director Alfonso Cuaron in 1999. Cuaron's film translates the narrative into a modern setting, with characters and a narrative line that echoes, rather than closely corresponds to, the original. The basic narrative is recognisable: Finn's (Pip's) meeting with, and support for, the escape of a criminal, Lustig (Magwitch), Finn's error in attributing his expectations to Miss Dunsmore (Miss Havisham), his love for Estella, and Finn's unhappy home life alleviated by Joe. Other aspects of the narration have been adapted for a modern, American context, while clearly retaining their equivalence with the original: the isolation of Pip's marshes is reflected in the isolation and poverty of Finn's home fishing community; Finn's expectations take the form of success within the New York art world which is depicted as shallow and celebrity driven, and the urban setting of the film is dark and decaying, except for scenes that contain Estella, and is the filmic equivalent of Dickens's London.

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[22] Gardiner, pp. 231-2.
[23] Gardiner, p. 235.
[24] Gardiner, p. 235.

However, under Cuaron's direction and the institutional pressures of the studio the developing relationship between Finn and Estella becomes the focus of the story, rather than the male relationships between, for instance, Finn and Lustig/Magwitch, or Finn and Joe. In this re-imagining of *Great Expectations* for an audience at the end of the twentieth-century the narrative becomes a plot driven romance, essentially a love story across a social and emotional divide, in which obstacles are eventually overcome and a happy ending achieved.

A fundamental consequence of these differences to the source text is the way in which the film diminishes the role of comedy. Cuaron has not sought equivalent characters for those who play key comic roles, such as Pumblechook, Wopsle, Wemmick or Herbert Pocket, all of whom, arguably, and certainly the first and the last, could be thought essential to our experience of the novel and to our understanding of its concerns. Similarly, in terms of structure, there are comic scenes which are central to the themes of the novel that do not have an equivalent in the film, such as the satirical abuse from Trabb's boy, the gentle ironising of Pip's pretensions that Biddy achieves, or the social comedy between Miss Havisham and her grasping Pocket relations.

The key comic sequence in Chapter 3, when the landscape and the livestock comically and grotesquely rebuke Pip as he takes the stolen food and file to Magwitch, is one without equivalent in the film. In the novel Pip's flight across the marshes to Magwitch dramatises his guilty conscience through the ventriloquising of the moralistic cattle that he encounters. The cattle are a darkly comic expressionist verbalisation of how the material and the adult worlds around Pip are antagonistic and authoritarian to his vulnerable and guilty childhood perceptions. It is expressed in comic terms because the bizarre, almost hallucinatory, experience indicates the apparently mad authority of the world that Pip finds himself to be living in and the prosopopoeic cattle personate that madness.

As a consequence of the absence of this scene, the relationship that begins in the novel with Pip's complicity with Magwitch and which develops into a rich relationship of secrecy, fear, respect and shared guilt is lost in the scenes between Finn and Lustig, which are relatively colourless by comparison. The only comic moment in the equivalent scene in the film is when Lustig discovers that Finn, in raiding his home's medicine cabinet, has brought his sister's contraceptive pills, which Lustig discards in contempt. Arguably, this is a modernisation of the Dickensian comic as the incongruity of the pills in relation to the apparently dangerous male criminal comments obliquely on the dysfunctional dynamic of parenting and substitute parenting which underlie both novel and film, as well as on the equally dysfunctional sexual dynamic of

Maggie (Mrs Joe) and Joe which has been established earlier in the film and which is also, though less obviously, present in the novel.

There are, then, few comic scenes which are in both novel and film. When scenes are shared the comedy is diminished. Evidence of this is Joe's visit to Finn/Pip. In the novel, the scene is a private one, in Pip's chambers, and the comedy expresses Joe's awkwardness in the presence of Pip who is conscious of being a gentleman with social roles and protocols that are obscure to Joe. The comedy of social embarrassment centres on Joe's mismanagement of his hat, which he insists on balancing on the chimney piece, and his references to Pip as 'Sir'.[25] The comedy of the scene is rich, as Dickens ensures that the reader sees Joe as the sympathetic repository of moral virtue despite – in fact, because of – his persistently repeated social ineptitude, a perception which only the older Pip can appreciate, 'I had neither the good sense nor the good feeling to know that this was all my fault'.[26]

The equivalent scene in Cuaron's film consists of Joe attending the first night of Finn's exhibition. Here the scene is bled of its sympathetic humour. Joe arrives at the public event as an unwelcome surprise. He is dressed in a hired tuxedo and he reveals, in front of Finn's snooty but influential friends and potential supporters, that he changed in a taxi. He is gauche, clearly out of place, and an irritating distraction to Finn who is obsessed by Estella and whether she will attend the event. The equivalent to the novel's surprisingly mobile hat is Joe spilling a drink over an important critic and then, in trying to make amends, smashing a glass, to which Finn reacts with anger and frustration. Joe is seen throughout the film as a sympathetic but largely ineffectual character, but in this scene he is reduced to an awkward anomaly and we do not enjoy the richness of response in this filmed scene as we do in the novel's equivalent, with its subtle comic relationship between narrator, character and reader. The novel's Joe, in his final address to Pip at the scene's conclusion, gives a dignified account of the consequences of their changed social relationship; the film's Joe, in his final words in the scene, which are intended to convey a similar message and create a similar moral resonance, lacks this dignity because the filmed scene lacks the novel's sympathetic comic dynamic.

The commercial, institutional and artistic pressures which constitute the cultural mechanism that mediated *Great Expectations* into a product of the cinema industry and which accounts for the film's structural and thematic deviations from the novel which virtually eliminated the comedy, are made explicit in Pamela Katz's

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[25] Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed., Angus Calder, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 245. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[26] *Great Expectations*, p. 244.

discussion of the film with Cuaron.[27] The discussion reveals the industrial and cultural forces in play including the commercial imperative for a generic placing of the film within modes of narrative that appeal particularly to a younger adult audience. In this conceptualisation the narrative becomes focused on romance and social ambition. For Cuaron *Great Expectations* was a 'rags-to-riches' tale shaped by 'unrequited love', and 'erotic obsession', intended to meet Hollywood's need for 'some kind of steamy romance'.[28] Cuaron's own artistic vision, however, was only one from a range of competing cultural imperatives to mould the film. His initial desire to see the narrative as a picaresque, 'more like *Candide*, a 'coming of age in society' story' was augmented by the need to raise the profile, during production, of the female lead, Gwyneth Paltrow, whose career was seen to have become increasingly marketable.[29] The interplay of these competing institutional pressures was not entirely one-sided. Cuaron was able to keep his preferred, slightly melancholy, ending, where Finn and Estella, and Estella's child, are together in the remains of Paradiso Perduto (Satis House), looking out to sea, in an imagined future together, rather than the high romantic ending, which Cuaron's colleagues wanted, in which Finn and Estella, without the child, rush into each others' arms and embrace.[30]

It is significant throughout the conversation that there is no discussion by Cuaron or Katz of the comedic potential of the novel. By implication, the comic mode is redundant in Cuaron's story of love across the social divide, if it is noticed at all. The conversation is not just silent on the need to minimise the comedy: it is silent on comedy. It is as if the film maker and the film critic are blind to its existence.

Cuaron's film, then, is both Dickens and not Dickens. The film transforms Dickens from a nineteenth-century novelist into a twentieth-century incarnation: a site of artistic endeavour, a commercial property and site of profit. In that process the text itself also becomes transformed. The constraints of adaptation, the pressures of conforming to cinematic genre, Cuaron's artistic vision as well as institutional and commercial pressures, result in a version of *Great Expectations* that is both a recognisable account of the novel, and yet is also not the novel. What has been retained, how those retentions have been mediated, what has been left out and what has been added, have resulted in a *Great Expectations* that is, paradoxically, both traceable to the authority of its novelistic origin, and yet separable from it. And, importantly for

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[27] Pamela Katz, 'Directing Dickens: Alfonso Cuaron's 1998 *Great Expectations*', *Dickens on Screen*, ed., John Glavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 95-103. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[28] Katz, 'Directing Dickens', p. 96.
[29] Katz, 'Directing Dickens', p. 97, p. 99.
[30] Katz, 'Directing Dickens', p. 100.

this thesis, the film-goer who is not acquainted with the text finds a Dickens who is a darkly serious writer and finds a story of social aspiration and romantic, sexual and emotional frustration overcome. This film-goer would, no doubt, be surprised by a description of Dickens as, in part, a comic writer, and of *Great Expectations* as, in part, a comic novel. The text, and Dickens himself, become humourless avatars, modern projections of what we want, or need, them to be, rather than what they are. It is a process in popular culture that is a remarkable parallel for the same process that the introduction to this study demonstrated in academic literary discourse.

Cuaron's film is, of course, not the first Dickens adaptation, but this discussion of blindness to comedy in cinematic Dickens establishes the relationship between Dickens and his cinematic adaptors throughout the mid to late twentieth-century with regard to the comic mode. The 'Dickens' and the versions of Dickensian fiction which cinema has created are by no means homogenous or consistent, and individual film makers have responded to the commercial and artistic imperatives of production at different times, in different ways and in response to different texts. However, there is consistency between film makers in their approach to Dickens and to his comic mode.

In a way that is similar to Cuaron, we can see this process of transformation at work in David Lean's adaptation of *Great Expectations*, which seems to reflect the comic mode of the original. The episode with the cattle, for instance, is filmed faithfully and in a strikingly expressionistic way. Similarly, when Pip first encounters Herbert, the experience, like that of bovine moral condemnation, is a bizarrely comic one: a middle class boy, whose first thought is pugilism, and who seems not only incompetent in that area, but who seems also to be comically indefatigable, morally, if not physically. The fact that it is comic is important here. Herbert seems like the other bizarre characters that Pip encounters at Satis House, not least those other powerful members of the middle class, Estella and Miss Havisham. Herbert's behaviour is a comic counterpart of theirs which, though more subtle than Herbert's, is equally aggressive, and is to become considerably more harmful than his ineffectual fisticuffs. Herbert's resilience in the face of obvious defeat comes as a youthful parallel of his later persistence in the face of a lack of gainful employment and an important lesson to Pip in cheerful persistence in the face of life's setbacks. Lean's depiction of the episode is faithful to the novel, creating an amiably enjoyable and eccentric scene which establishes largely what Dickens's own version set out to achieve in terms of Herbert's character and the overall themes of the novel.

Nevertheless, Lean's film creates a different reading of the role of comedy and of Dickens and the Dickensian than the novel does. The faithfully comedic elements are confined to the opening sections of the film which focus on the experiences of Pip

as a child and which reflect the disturbingly and comically surreal nature of the world from his perspective. From that point onward, Lean, like Curaron, films a version of the novel that is conventionally romantic.

In particular, Regina Barreca argues, Lean changed the focus of the key relationships, in a way which is similar to the changes that Cuaron made fifty years later, from a succession of male-male relationships – Pip/Joe, Pip/Magwitch, Pip/Herbert, Pip/Jaggers and so on – to a focus on the female characters, particularly the relationship between Estella and Miss Havisham, and consequently on the developing romantic relationship between Pip and Estella.[31] As a result, and in a way which again anticipates Cuaron, the ending of Lean's film becomes expressive of romantic melodrama. In Lean's film Pip is able to marry the virginal – because unmarried – Estella, having heroically rescued her both from Satis House and from the same error that Miss Havisham committed. In Lean's version, the novel becomes the story of Estella's redemption, rather than of Pip's, the story of female error – Miss Havisham and Estella's – rather than male error. The final third of the film is a much more conventional romantic narrative than the subtly ambiguous ending of the novel. The film's happy ending, with Pip melodramatically pulling down the curtains of Satis House and Pip and Estella walking together out of the gates into a bright future, is less in tune with the novel than even Cuaron's ending.

It is ironic that in the more successful earlier section of the film Lean is able to transfer the disturbing and surreal comedy to the screen, but that the less successful final section is characterised by the imposition of a generically conventional comedic happy ending by marriage. Joss Marsh points to how the cultural and politically gendered context of the post war period had an impact on the ending,

> Pip announcing his return to the Satis House shadows has more than a dash of the heroic serviceman of 1945-6, home from the front, to tear down the blackout curtains and claim his bride.[32]

The comic potential of the film becomes lost in the romantic melodrama. Like the viewer of Cuaron's film, the viewer of Lean's, in the absence of knowledge of the novel, would find it difficult to think of Dickens as, partly, a comic writer and *Great Expectations* as, partly, a comic novel. To that extent, Lean contributes to the twentieth-century Dickens who is seen not to have a powerful comic dimension. Barreca points out in her reading of the film, in a remark which might equally apply to

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[31] Regina Barreca, 'David Lean's *Great Expectations*', *Dickens on Screen* ed., John Glavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 39-44, p. 39. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[32] Joss Marsh, 'Dickens and film', *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed., John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 204-23, p. 217.

Cuaron, or indeed any film or television adaptor of Dickens's fiction, 'Lean didn't film Dickens's novel. He remade the novel into David Lean's film.'[33]

The twentieth century's new mass communication art forms, then, have created the potential for a new Dickens through the cinematic and televisual 'remaking' of his fiction. This process parallels the remaking, during the same period, of a Dickens appropriate for academic study that this thesis examined earlier. Both channels of formulation are inflected by ideological, commercial, and cultural pressures, perhaps even the same pressures, and the result is largely the same: a focus on a darkly psychological and socially troubled Dickensian, which is not a false representation, but which lacks a vigorous recognition of the contribution that is made by the comic mode. The enormous popularity of adaptations of Dickens's novels, their frequency and their popularity, endow them with enormous power with which to carve a twentieth-century Dickens from his fiction, inflected by ideology, late twentieth-century cultural contexts, and the imperatives of industrialised art forms.[34] The result is an avatar of Dickens and the Dickensian that incarnates not the past but the potencies of the present. In the twentieth century, for the first time, audiences could be given a 'Dickens' and a 'Dickensian' without recourse to the written text. Modern cultural mediation of contemporary ideologies and the economic context of industrialised art forms into film and television adaptations of Dickens is revealed by this study's delineation of the forms, nature and ultimately the suppression of Dickensian comic modes.

We are presented with, and we become collaborators in, a mediated Dickens that is dependent on choices made by the artists and institutions who manage the processes of mediation in the context of a commercial imperative. The cultural potency of film and television comes to supersede the 'authority' of the original text, as is identified in the roundtable discussion that included film experts John Romano and Kamilla Elliott in which they examine the differences that exist between 'reading' a novel and 'reading' a film.[35] These differences account for a cognitive potential that

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[33] Barreca, 'David Lean's *Great Expectations*', p. 39.

[34] The International Movie Database lists 323 titles of films and TV adaptations of Dickens's novels and stories which have been made since 1897, of which 39 date from 2000, including one film and one TV adaptation of *Great Expectations* and one film adaptation of *Oliver Twist* which are currently in production and due for release in 2012, no doubt to mark the bicentenary of Dickens's birth. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0002042/ Viewed online 9th December 2011.

[35] The full list of participants in this discussion were 'literary critics, Rob Polhemus and Murray Baumgarten, and the film experts, John Romano and Kamilla Elliott [...] The representatives from psychology and psychoanalysis, Estelle Shane, Muriel Brotsky, Jane Jordan, and Greg Bellow, are all practising analysts and/or therapists'. Gerhard Joseph also takes part in the discussion. He was at the time of publication Professor of English at Lehman College and at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and can, therefore, safely be assumed also to be a literary critic. Gerhard Joseph, 'Dickens, psychoanalysis, and film: a roundtable',

fixes a cinematic narrative more distinctively than reading the text would. They point to how film transforms our consumption of language, narrative, character, theme, artistic method and artistic purpose, and thereby has the power cumulatively to transform our understanding of the nature of the original text,

> **John Romano** [...] when I sit down to read a book, any book, I do it with a different frame of mind than the one I assume when I go out to see a film. [...]
> **Kamilla Elliott** When you read the cognitive process moves from the symbol on the page to the perceptual world you create in the mind. In film, you are looking at all these extremely vivid perceptual stimuli, and you are reading meaning into them. Reading is the inverse process to viewing. [...] When we come to a Dickens text we are likely to come with the concrete images already predetermined. [...] We may not have seen this particular novel adapted, but we have seen lots of Dickens and we know what Dickens, what Victorian, looks and feels like.[36]

Other writers on Dickens and cinema concur with these insights into the power of the cinematic to transform Dickens. John Glavin, in his discussion of the filmic qualities of Dickensian narrative in *Dickens on Screen*, refers to it as 'Dickens – or at least an idea named Dickens'.[37] Glavin expresses,

> this book's key thesis: that *the Dickens film now shapes Dickens's fiction*. Of course, Dickens's books *came* first (in time). They just don't come first (in meaning) any more. Baldly stated: all but specialists in Victorian fiction know Dickens's fiction primarily on and through the screen. [...] For everybody outside of English departments, including most of the people who produce the adaptations, Dickens's fictions don't generate Dickens's films. Just the reverse: it's those adaptations, for the big screen and the small, that generate whatever possibilities remain for reading the fiction.[38]

Dickens has become a concept, an icon of English literary creativity, and of the Victorian past. He has become a system of ideas within our cultural discourse, a system with its own potencies and its own potential to meet the needs of the many who have created it and of the many for whom it was created.

Smith, too, argues, using Robert Giddings' words, that what we experience as the cinematic Dickensian are distortions that are consequent on its adaptation to cinema,

> what we get on the screen is not Dickens. It may look like Dickens and occasionally it may sound like Dickens, but it isn't really Dickens at all.[39]

Dickens on Screen ed., John Glavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 11-26, p. 12, p. 25. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[36] Joseph, 'Dickens, psychoanalysis, and film: a roundtable', p. 25.
[37] John Glavin, 'Introduction', *Dickens on Screen* ed., John Glavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-8, p. 6. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[38] Glavin, 'Introduction', pp. 5-6.
[39] Robert Giddings, 'Introduction', *Screening the Novel: The Theory and Practice of Literary Dramatization*, ed., Robert Giddings, Keith Selby and Chris Wensley (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 15. Quoted by Smith, p. 133. Giddings discusses Noel Langley's 1952 film of *The*

Smith goes on to critique Christine Edzard's adaptation of *Little Dorrit* (1987). His starting point is Edzard's definition of her objective,

> what we wanted to do was to make Dickens come across as real, as a journalist's piece [...] Incoherence is unreal. What makes a thing real is making it believable and making it coherent.[40]

Smith's argument targets what he sees as Edzard's false objective, which is her denial of a complex and paradoxical Dickens – a Dickens who this study argues is most characterised by the comic mode – in favour of what she sees as a 'real', because coherent, Dickens. Smith counters Edzard's view of Dickens with a defence, if not of incoherence, then of the disturbing and alienating qualities of Dickens,

> one of Dickens's major strengths as a writer is a kind of controlled incoherence, a refusal to render the fictional world into neat and tidy patterns, creating instead a structure that admits mystery, confusion, uncertainty.[41]

While Smith does not here identify the comic as part of this process of 'controlled incoherence', it is clear implication of this study that the comic mode is one of the casualties of Edzard's 'journalistic' or 'real' version of the Dickensian.

The debate that Smith enters into with Edzard's *Little Dorrit* is essentially about the relationship between fiction and reality and, therefore, about a parallel relationship between cinema and reality. It is a debate which echoes the literary critical debate about Dickens's novelistic realism, or lack of it, in nineteenth-century commentators such as George Eliot, or G.H. Lewes or those in the twentieth century, such as Hardy, which were demonstrated in the introduction to this study. Edzard seeks a clear sense of reality and Smith is critical of what he sees as this simplistic and simplifying objective.

Edzard is not alone in her quest for a 'real' Dickens. While Edzard's concept of the real does not correlate simply to the concept of 'authenticity', there is a strong equivalence in the application of the terms to Dickens. David O'Selznick's and George

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Pickwick Papers, and continues his argument on the inevitably alienated relationship between original text and film adaptation, '[a] translation does not replace the original [...] translation is never a substitute for the original but rather a parallel text [...] Few novelists better illustrate this problem than Dickens. Dickens is unmistakable. Dickens's words, syntax, idiosyncrasy of dialogue, picturesque and masterly descriptions of scenes, recreations of moments in life, haunting observations of experience – these qualities are characteristic.' Robert Giddings, '*Pickwick Papers*: beyond that time and place', *The Classic Novel From Page to Screen*, ed., Robert Giddings and Erica Sheen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 31-53, pp. 32-3.

[40] Christine Edzard, quoted in Guy Phelps, 'Victorian Values', *Sight and Sound*, 57 (Spring 1988): 108-10, p. 110. Quoted by Smith, p. 142.

[41] Smith, p. 142.

Cukor's film of *David Copperfield* (1935) is one of the influential cinematic forces that have shaped the Dickensian of the twentieth century and is examined in Jeffrey Sconce's account of the film.[42] Selznick and Cukor, in the period preceding production, were at pains to prove the film's 'authenticity', a truth to what they saw as an essentially 'correct' version of both Dickens and of the novel, which echoes Edzard's search for a journalistic reality in her own film. Sconce details the extraordinary efforts undertaken to ensure that the film was 'authentic'. During a visit to England Selznick and Cukor met the board of the Dickens Fellowship, in order to discuss the key characters and to make suggestions for an ideal cast. They were also encouraged to consult manuscripts of the original novel and to confer with members of the Dickens family. The film's production and distribution company, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, also emphasised the extreme efforts made to cast the film, including the possible consideration of ten thousand actors for the leading role, and fifteen thousand for other roles, including two thousand screen tests. MGM's efforts to manufacture a sense of 'authenticity' undoubtedly served as promotion of their film, though it is significant that they chose the issue of 'authenticity', of perceived truth to an imagined real Dickens, for the focus of their promotion. Furthermore, as Sconce argues, the preproduction period and its publicity also illuminates Hollywood's troubled dependence on literature, particularly in the 1930s,

> [t]he MGM version of *Copperfield* presented an ambitious bid to render a once extremely popular entertainer turned canonized author into the language of a once reviled popular medium still searching for artistic legitimacy.[43]

In other words, the version of Dickens and the Dickensian which MGM created in *David Copperfield* was a reflexive attempt to validate cinema itself, through reference to the original novel and to a culturally validated Dickens. And the vision of Dickens and the Dickensian that most assisted in that process of cultural authentication, was a heritage model, 'its obsession with cultural pilgrimages and authenticating detail standing as tribute, not to Dickens the narrative populist, but to Dickens the literary legend.'[44] This process presents, then, a clear perspective on the twentieth-century Dickensian in which the paradoxes and ambivalences inherent in the humour are excised in the formulation of an iconic Dickens who represents what the twentieth century likes to construct as the nineteenth century.

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[42] Jeffrey Sconce, 'Dickens, Selznick, and *Southpark*', *Dickens on Screen* ed., John Glavin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 171-87. All subsequent references are to this edition.
[43] Sconce, 'Dickens, Selznick, and *Southpark*', p. 180.
[44] Sconce, 'Dickens, Selznick, and *Southpark*', p. 180.

It is clear, then, that the particular nature and contexts of cinematic representation of Dickens's fiction in the twentieth century has put pressure on the concepts of Dickens and the Dickensian and has muted the comic mode. Our understanding of those concepts and our understanding of the comic mode have been mediated to their detriment. We have constructed a Dickensian that is, in effect, a 'meta-adaptation' of Dickens, constructed from the range of adaptations of his fictions for the cinema, TV or stage, a meta-adaptation which has been shaped, and continues to be shaped by conscious and unconscious artistic, cultural, ideological, political and institutional mediations. A characteristic of this Dickensian meta-adaptation is that the comic mode is notable because it is largely absent.

Writing of Edzard, though using a phrase that can also be applied to MGM and to many of the twentieth-century formulations of the Dickensian on screen, Smith indicates the extent to which the twentieth-century Dickens is not just a formulation, but also a neutralisation of the potencies of the Dickensian, such as, though this is not stated explicitly, the powerfully disturbing energy of the comic that this study has demonstrated,

> the ultimate result of such films is consolation and complacency, a view of the world conveyed by a 'classic' work of literature whose power to disturb is nullified by the smoothing out of all contradictions.[45]

Dickensian comedy is not only central to our experience of Dickens's fiction, but it is also central to our study of him. This study asserts a counter narrative of the Dickensian in both academic and popular culture that includes the comic, and includes it with a potential that goes beyond the 'hearty fun' model of much early criticism, and recognises it as a disturbing and alienating force that plays a key role in Dickens's artistic purposes. This counter narrative is glimpsed in Juliet John's quotation of Peter McDonald's criticism of the theme park 'Dickens World' in her review in *The Dickensian*, in which he describes how, in this conceptualisation of Dickens for the early twenty-first century, 'the real meaning' of Dickens is being lost, because, '[i]t is making him too domestic and homely. The humour is deeply cruel and vicious. He is a massively powerful and disturbing figure.'[46] Dickensian comedy restores the 'power to disturb.' It is a serious business.

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[45] Smith, p. 149.

[46] Juliet John, ''People mutht be amuthed'?: Reflections on Chatham's 'Dickens World''. *The Dickensian*. 104 (2008): 5-21, p. 6. John also discusses 'Dickens World' in 'Conclusion Dickens Worlds Past, Present and Yet to Come', *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 273-289.

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