

Life in Dickens-World

Reading the Read Text

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Abstract

Such has been Dickens' popularity, that we see today evidence of the activity of his readers all around us. This is the read text of the Dickens-World, inexact and distinctive. What is it like and how did it come to be?

Dickens' public readings encapsulate a number of important themes. The model, or exemplar, that can take these themes forward is that of the Heritage, a term here used to describe both the physical evidence of the 'national past' and a treatment of it. The 'truth' of Heritage lies in the animated projection of the self into the arena of history, creating a performance that convinces by an affective adjacency.

A Heritage Dickens brand has been growing in North Kent for some years. It is expressed through the built environment, in museums and visitor attractions, and in events such as the Charles Dickens Festivals. With its mix-and-match approach to the novels, and its cavalier attitude towards history, its rationality is not immediately apparent.

However, the peculiar coherence asserted by Dickens' work, additionally promoted by serial publication and the presence of illustrations, means that his novels are being continually spun out into the space of the world where they can grow. And be read again. The Dickens Fellowship has celebrated this kind of reading for many years.

In this radical openness of the Dickens-World, each reader is compelled to seek sense in the performance of reading. This is a dynamic in which the individual is both participant and observer at the same time, ethically engaged but aesthetically active. The pleasure of encountering the determinate world of fiction in the fluid unknown of the lived life is held in joyful tension with the revelation of seeing the self fixed in the world of art.

Preface

References to Dickens' works, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the Oxford Illustrated edition. Additional material available in Penguin editions of *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* is also used, and references to these are given on each occasion.

A small amount of ephemera, such as Rochester Dickens Festival publicity, is referred to in the text. This is available to the general public at the Medway Archives and Local Studies Centre, Civic Centre, Strood, Kent.

The following abbreviations are used for Dickens' works:

<i>PP</i>	<i>The Pickwick Papers</i>
<i>OT</i>	<i>Oliver Twist</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>
<i>MHC</i>	<i>Master Humphrey's Clock</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>
<i>BH</i>	<i>Bleak House</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hard Times</i>
<i>LD</i>	<i>Little Dorrit</i>
<i>UT</i>	<i>The Uncommercial Traveller</i>

Part 1: The popular Dickens

Chapter 1: The world and the book

1. The book

The exhumed statue exposed to public view neither expects nor gets anything out of such publicity, seems in fact rather out of its element. But the rediscovered book, the manuscript extracted from its earthenware jar to be finally deciphered, are they not born again by an extraordinary stroke of luck? What is an unread book? Something that has not yet been written. Thus reading would be, not a rewriting of the book, but a getting it to write itself or be written – this time without the writer's intervention, without anybody to write it. The reader is not added to the book, but he relieves it of an author; and the readiness of his approach, the superfluous shadow that skims over the pages and leaves no trace, all that which makes reading such an apparently unnecessary activity, and even the reader's lack of attention, his superficial interest, his infinite frivolity confirm the now authorless book's present frivolity since it lacks the gravity, the toil, the anguish and weight and the substance of a lifetime, of a sometimes terrible and always terrifying experience which the reader abolishes and, with providential irresponsibility, takes for granted.¹

The abandoned book: cast upon the shores of the world, lost in the strenuous and inevitable instant of its making: rediscovered, writing itself through the agency of a reader who initiates it into meaning, who allows it in the life of a world to which it was unknown. What is this new book, a book more than new, a book that exists before it is even made, yet is made by reading activity – by an individual reading encounter? How is it to know itself in the world, in the medium of existence? The reader, inattentive, irresponsible, even – in an authorially unengaged sense – unfeeling, inaugurates the presence of the work in the life of the world. Inaugurates *a* presence. Another reader inattends elsewhere, finds room in that infinite frivolity for further diversion, rediscovers the book and gets it written over again. These instants of generation, or moments of transfer, in which meaning is caught from the insistent cacophony of oblivion, herald the life of the book in the world – dependent, authorless, multitudinous.

Of all writers it is perhaps Dickens who is most likely to attract the kind of critical language which gives the book – the new book, the read book – the self-sufficiency that

¹ Blanchot, Maurice, 'Reading' in *The Sirens' Song*, tr. Sacha Rabinovitch, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (Brighton: Harvester Press 1982), pp. 250-1.

privileges this work with the cultural weight of the ‘original’ – that, in Blanchot’s terms, might most efficiently mask the absence of the book with the work the reader has done to inaugurate it. This has something to do with Dickens’ technique and a lot to do with Dickens’ readers.

This all means we have to be careful with our language, even or especially when we are innovatory. ‘The world’ is the lived-in world, inhabited by people living the ‘lived life’ – the one we can touch and smell and taste. ‘Dickens-in-the-world’ is a kind of convenient shorthand for those aspects of the novels which seem to have eased their way through the borders which separate life from art. Of course, these borders, if they exist at all, are transitory, fluid and personal, but with such a slippery subject, it is vital that we can at least broadly identify the region with which we are concerned and gesture towards its distinctiveness. Thus the parade at the Rochester Dickens Festival is most definitely Dickens-in-the-world: as is an advert featuring a miserly Scrooge. What about a new stage production of *Great Expectations*? Or a scripted street act that happens at a specific location and time and quotes *Oliver Twist* extensively? Or one that does not? Strictly, according to Blanchot’s model of reading, even a ‘completed’ work of art requires the intervention of readers (who are definitely in-the-world) to get to be. Are not all our examples therefore Dickens-in-the-world? Or, at least, as much as they are not? And yet one would want to argue that the integrity of new works of art (for instance, the production of *Great Expectations*) to some extent must insulate them from the assaults of the world, even if they are not proofed against reading. A parade, by contrast, as we shall see, relies on a life-giving reading from its welcoming audience which is enacted in an open space of negotiation, the space of speech, of the ‘oral state’ spoken of by Roland Barthes.² This oral presence is the manipulable, perceived Dickens, the one who is wielded as an instrument of sense, of meaning. Essentially, the ‘Dickens-in-the-world’ amounts to the evidence we have for the Dickens idea – the visible Dickens, the living Dickens, the Dickens whom we meet. And the Dickens idea?

An idea is communicable, comprehensible, real: but not material. It is here a way of acknowledging that we cannot retain Dickens’ work inside our heads in all its profound and extensive material presence. We instead build and manipulate and share an idea.

² Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape: 1972), p. 109.

These ideas of Dickens are what re-emerge in social and academic and artistic interaction. The problem with this of course is that it is not hard to see how, in that case, the idea is all that exists; why qualify Dickens' work with an additional noun when there is no other way of perceiving it? Is not the Dickens idea just 'Dickens'? But any study that looks, as this one does, at reading and what readers do, needs to assume the existence of the unperceived work. How otherwise are we to isolate and so identify the contribution of readers? Even if we are to end up saying that the contribution of readers is to illuminate the work which otherwise remains in darkness? Or indeed to create that which is otherwise void?

If Dickens-in-the-world is the site where the Dickens idea plunges into actuality, then Dickens-World is where it has theoretical home. Dickens-World is the collective construction of readers' ideas: unperceivably extensive and impossibly corporate. Curiously, and critically, it includes extra-novelistic elements of which Dickens knew nothing: anachronisms, absurdities and artistic liberties that have become drawn to and are activated by the Dickens name. Here are the Dixieland jazz band and the Pickwick Special Train of the Rochester Festival, the jolly Fagin of Lionel Bart's *Oliver!*, John Jasper put on trial in *The Dickensian* for the murder of his nephew. This is important because elements of the Dickens-World begin themselves to be read as evidence for the Dickens idea which has informed it in the first place. It nourishes error. Its joy lies in the oblique.

Hence it is perhaps rather to be expected than otherwise that the location of a photograph in a national newspaper should be given as 'the spot by London Bridge where Nancy's body is discovered in Dickens' novel' – especially since the guiding spirit behind the article (on Roman Polanski's pickpocketing consultant for his 2005 film) is clear from its headline.³ On the other hand the confusion over one of Cruikshank's illustrations in a major critical study does grab the attention. This is not a minor gesture in passing; the writer is actually concentrating on the image at the time. The account of the picture, which includes the incorrect identification of the figure who 'clung for support to the copper' (*OT* p. 12), forms a central part of this section of his argument. 'Dickens parodies male mentorship at the opening of *Oliver Twist*... In the

³ Moggach, Lottie, 'How I learnt to pick a pocket (or two)', *The Times*, 6 October 2005, Screen Section, p. 15.

first illustration, “Oliver asking for More”...George Cruikshank represents the relationship through the shocked gaze of Mr Bumble as he stares at Oliver.⁴ All this despite the figure in the illustration being described unequivocally as the workhouse master in the text. Of course it is significant that *Oliver!*, the hit musical, merges the two figures of the master and the beadle, so that now for so many the spectacle of the boy asking for more is accompanied by a vision of Harry Secombe, as Mr Bumble, widening his eyes and booming ‘MORE!?’

Perhaps it was this kind of thing that was in the mind of George Orwell when he addressed the Dickens Fellowship Conference in 1940. *The Dickensian* reports upon his identification of a feature of Dickens’ work responsible for much of the diversity and vitality of that work in the life of the world.

To be a lover of Dickens...it was not necessary to know his work perfectly, as he was one of the very few writers who have a tradition that moves outside the realm of literature.⁵

Orwell’s address, in the assumptions it makes and the questions it leaves unanswered, as much as by its choice of language and central assertion, forms a useful starting point from which to set out into the Dickens-World. He certainly wants to say that one of the things that makes Dickens special, if not absolutely unique, is that some awareness of his art (which here he describes as a ‘tradition’) has freed itself from the domain of the printed page. More than that, it has exceeded the bounds of the ‘realm of literature’. What is literature’s realm?

We shall be talking a great deal of worlds and realms. Pierre Nora’s enormous work *Les Lieux de Memoire*, which informs much of Part 3 here as well as much recent work on Heritage and memory, has been translated so as to dignify the French ‘lieux’ with the formal and regal term ‘realm’. When Orwell chooses to refer to the realm of literature, he privileges this territory with an air of sovereignty, as a place where literature has some kind of power or influence over those who venture there. What does the realm of literature look like?

⁴ Dellamora, Richard, ‘Pure Oliver: or, Representation without Agency’ in John Schad (ed.) *Dickens Refigured: Bodies, Desires and Other Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1996), p. 58.

⁵ *The Dickensian*, 36 (1940), p. 210.

Partly, of course, this must be a professional point. This is the realm of those who study literature. Is not the convention that literature has a realm part of the realm of literature? Orwell wants to draw a contrast between those writers who are a presence familiar only to the English departments of higher education institutions, and writers like Dickens, who are in some sense also owned by the realm of ‘everyday life’. Book (those who work with books) and world (those who work with the world). But because of this, Orwell’s ‘realm’ is also about values, and – inevitably and essentially – about language. Those who inhabit the realm of literature talk in a different way to those who live outside – or at least they do while they are inside. There is also a history here. How far did Dickens himself spring from the realm of literature? Does he not have at least one foot in either journalism, or the stage (perhaps, more properly, in *acting*) or hack writing? The question itself is probably an anachronism. Certainly Dickens is an author who from the beginning had a strong tradition of readers (and listeners) who would never have thought of including themselves within Orwell’s idea of literature’s realm. For this is a realm shaped by language, whose borders are expressed in words. What does lie outside? What is everything that is not the realm of literature? And therefore – the essential question of this thesis – what might be the Dickens who lives there?

We must begin, in this part, **Part 1**, with Orwell’s realm and his gesture towards the great outside. Is the Dickens-in-the-world, the unliterary Dickens, the popular Dickens, distinct from the writer who inhabits literature’s realm, and who is subject to its language and values? How has this ‘tradition’ been shaped and how do we recognise it when we see it? One of the features of this public Dickens is undoubtedly the performed figure of the writer himself, as captured in R.W. Buss’s famous painting, and in many other images, souvenirs and illustrations that place Dickens and his characters together for our enjoyment. Buss depicts Dickens’ creations as tiny figures floating in the air above his head, the visible emanations of his dreaming mind. We could not encounter them without the presence below, whether Dickens is actually generating them or is merely a kind of host for their activity. But the Rochester Dickens Festivals, and indeed Peter Ackroyd’s biography, among others, are not so hierarchical. Both are happy to present Dickens and his characters in the same space (probably *not* within the realm of literature), whether on the page, or in the street. This is a public Dickens, a Dickens image, who engages with his creations as if he were one himself. Roland Barthes notes

how the author of the Work is converted into one of his characters – his written self – by the activity of reading:

It is not that the Author cannot ‘return’ in the Text, in his text, but he does so, one might say, as a guest...his inscription is no longer privileged, paternal, alethic, but ludic: he becomes, one can say, a paper author; his life is no longer the origin of his fables, but a fable concurrent with his life.⁶

The rest of this first part, in chapter 2, examines the figure of this Dickens as he returns in the enormous and elaborate Dickens Text. Looking at the construction of the celebrity author – examining how, exactly, that fable functions – suggests that there is a process which has led to the works themselves being celebrated in a similar way. For of course the work that appears like this has also been transformed: its borders ruptured and its elements shaken up together. The Pickwickians in *Rambles in Dickens-land* sweep past none other than David Copperfield on the Muggleton stage: ‘Who was that wan-faced, coatless urchin we passed just now in a whirl of chalky dust?’⁷ This is why we must approach the popular Dickens through its means rather than its ends: by a study of reading actions rather than a list of works.

Having placed ourselves, and our Dickens, firmly outside the realm of literature, we must then begin our long search for coherence. The trouble with the world, and therefore Dickens-in-the-world, is that it is very big. Again, we cannot produce a satisfactory account of this Dickens by stating what it is: we can only hope to describe how it works. Coherence, if it exists, will lie in process and happening, whereas depiction and statement will be redundant even as they are perceived. The processes of that perception, the movement from Dickens novel to Dickens idea, can fortunately be informed with the study of a model, in which the evidence text of the past is read to produce a fluid, popular, performable, notional reality. This is Heritage.

The Heritage model is the subject of **Part 2**, how it has been described in critical literature, how it operates in the public arena and how its major characteristics might be applicable to an attempt to understand Dickens-in-the-world. It leads us in two directions: first, to consider the distinctiveness of Dickens the writer, the impact of his

⁶ Barthes, Roland, *The Rustle of Language*, tr. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press 1989), pp. 61-2.

⁷ Allbut, Robert, *Rambles in Dickens-land* (London: Chapman and Hall c.1900), p. xxiv.

vision and his attempts to urge it towards artistic convincingness through a kind of coherence that favours character and motif rather than plot: and second, to examine the contribution of readers – including Dickens himself. Critics have for years acknowledged that Dickens is an unconventional writer, that he does not follow classic patterns of novelistic coherence and causal occurrence – or at least that when he does he is trying to impose them upon some other voice that we can recognise as different, whether complementary or antagonistic. Writers as diverse as Robert Garis, Susan Horton, and G. K. Chesterton have all placed this distinctiveness at the centre of arguments about authorial performance, the place of the reader and the idea of the work respectively.

However, more than anything, looking at Heritage in this context serves to foreground an idea of reading that emphasises the creative – even inaugurating – activity of readers which will prove central to any description of how Dickens can live and be sustained outside the secure and determined environment of the written work. An example from the Heritage sector may make this clear. According to the schools programme produced for the ‘Wooden Walls’ attraction at The Historic Dockyard in Chatham: ‘Pupils “meet” William Crockwell in the streets of Chatham in 1758 and join him on his first day as a dockyard apprentice.’ We can see from the quotation marks here that the work of fabrication lies not with the visitor attraction, but with the visitor. The past (William Crockwell) is genuinely present, but the interaction, the meeting, is itself virtual. There is a perfectly defensible logic here, which lies at the heart of many Heritage attractions – and is also at work in Dickens’ enormous readership. The meeting itself is a staged event which is not granted an unequivocal, plastic reality. Its distinctiveness (indeed, its importance) is that it is transitory and situated, unrepeatable (i.e. not something – not the same thing – lying in waiting for the next group of visitors), and tenuous. It is these things because it needs the one audience, and each one audience, each time, to enter the perceivable world and to be. It is, in fact, a performance. The performance of the visitor in these Heritage scenarios is the analogy that reveals the activity of readers who make and perceive and make the Dickens-World. We are fortunate in this case that the activity of Dickens readers and the evidence of their making has been carefully documented for a hundred years in the pages of *The Dickensian*.

‘To be a lover of Dickens...’ Orwell is exact here, and right. In speaking to the Dickens Fellowship, he knows he is talking not to people who (merely) love Dickens, but to those who are *lovers of Dickens*. The Fellowship consists of readers who wish or need to be identified with this activity of loving like they might be affiliated to a professional body, or wave a flag. It is a name. In naming both his audience and his subject, Orwell highlights something of the self-consciousness of Dickensians, who don’t just *do* things; they *are*. But their being *lies in* doing. They serve as an excellent example which can help us refine the notion of the kind of reading that has been suggested by the Heritage visitor and his or her active engagement with a manufactured (‘written’) experience.

Part 3 of this thesis explores how the in-the-world interactions of Dickensians combine with their having-read status (being part of the ‘tradition’) to establish and document the presence of the memorial in the everyday world. This is a memorial that owes its existence not to the past but to art, that is a witness to the sustained penetration of the Dickens idea into the world, a perpetually emergent and coded assault on the everyday.

Orwell outlines the qualifications needed to be a lover of Dickens. Or in fact, he implies them by contrast. Presumably, what makes Dickens remarkable is that lovers of almost all other writers are required to know the loved work perfectly in order to attain such status. This ‘perfectly’ in Orwell’s address is a sign of nerves, or perhaps tact. Of course, everyone is aware that knowing any work perfectly is not an achievable aim. Which begs the question: what then is the difference between knowing Dickens and knowing other writers? Is it just a matter of degree? Perhaps Orwell would have felt uncomfortable, especially in front of this audience, saying that to be a lover of Dickens it was not necessary to know his work (at all); and so allowed the rather meaningless adverb to creep in. In fact, as the exploration of reading Dickens in **Part 4** suggests, this ‘knowing’ is both a matter of degree *and* something different entirely. It is something different *because* it is a matter of degree. Dickens-World is so elaborate and extensive, and forms a counterpoint to the lived-in world that is so seductive and ‘truthful’, making sense on its own terms, that it has attained a level of currency where it is read like a work, or as part of the wider work. This is why, when we consider readers, we have to bear in mind the impact of the grown Dickens, the text that is found outside the pages of the novel, the erupted text, the text without end. Some of these readers may know the printed words extremely well, some hardly at all, but we must include them all in the corporate readership. Reading is partial and personal, disruptive and fragmentary,

whether it is the word, or an illustration, or a Mr Pickwick waxwork in front of our eyes.

The creative activity highlighted in this personal quest is the focus of **Part 5** of the thesis – titled, in acknowledgment of M. M. Bakhtin’s work on authorship, ‘Writing Dickens’. This is the inevitable counterpart of our model of reading. Thinking of writing brings us to a close with a consideration of how readers of the Dickens-in-the-world make meaning from such a slippery entity, so full of references elsewhere that it can appear all echo and no voice. Writing Dickens is the activity that produces a meaning won from a text exploded into the lived-in world, an erupted and continuous happening. In the peculiar and lively sense that is thereby made lies pleasure. And, of course, further reading. So Dickens’ work augments.

We are still left with that central problem, which must be addressed here before proceeding – even if the only resolution available is to determine to live with irresolution. If everything is reading, how do we begin to talk about reading, how can we *see* it? There is no question that this is a major challenge. If we are to know what reading does, we must attempt to identify the Dickens which has been mediated by other readers, initiated, brought into the light, vivified. Dickens is at once the best and worst subject for this kind of analysis: his mediated presence is enormously extensive and apparent – the material is virtually inexhaustible: but because of this, the trail of influences is complex and meandering, and the path back to a theoretical unmediated text is obscure. And it is only theoretical; it is not possible to approach the essential Dickens, the pure, the unread, the text undeflected by previous understandings. The book itself reeks of reading. The evidence before us, from the size of the pages, the shape of the typeface, the texture of the paper and the colour of the cover, amounts to a gallery of responses to the text thought to be appropriate by a previous reader – a reader, in this case, with power: an editor or publisher. The book in the world (and where else can we encounter it?) brings with it these difficulties.

It seems impossible not to conclude that the reductive energies that are necessary to break down the mechanics of perception and understanding, in order to frame them in words, are somehow rendered obsolete (or worse, incomplete), when we re-apply them to decode behaviour – that is, the lived response to the lived-in world. Here however we

are in good company. Even when we look at the great critical texts, such as Barthes' *Mythologies*, without which this kind of analysis would be unthinkable, the same problem occurs.

According to Barthes, myth, being 'a type of speech', is not a concept or an idea, but a mode or form. It is a method of communication, and thus 'not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message'. Crucially, it is however, 'a *second-order semiological system*', which means that it is concerned with material that has already been inaugurated into the realm of meaning. It works, in effect, with signs. So myth is not a way of speaking reality, but a way of speaking *about* reality, using material 'which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication' – in effect using signs as its raw material. Signs, which are the end point, the result, of a semiological system, become the signifiers, the portals, into a mythologised world. Barthes uses as an example a bunch of roses (the signifier) which signify his passion (that which is signified). The sign is not the roses themselves but the association of the two terms: roses-charged-with-passion. Myth would thus take as its starting point roses-charged-with-passion. And we can see how modern advertising might use mythologised roses in this way as a kind of a shorthand in a publicity image. This deprives the real roses of their individual presence in the world, of their complicity in an original act, it deprives them, in effect, of their history; they become empty – and yet the advertising company relies on the sign to remain visible and meaningful to give the form of the myth its relevance. This is why Barthes writes that 'myth hides nothing: its function is to distort.' Myths would become opaque, would die, if their originating signs became unreadable – indeed they do, as the action of time and fashion makes them redundant.⁸

Barthes' analysis is, of course, profoundly illuminating. But in taking the theory of myth into the world, we find ourselves in difficulty. Where does the mythological begin? Barthes himself acknowledges that 'the universe is infinitely fertile in its suggestions' (p.109). We think of the extensive nature of the mediated Dickens. Faced with this infinity, where are we to find the material that has *not* been already worked upon? Nothing comes to us unmediated; everything is in a condition of having been

⁸ *Mythologies*, a summary of pp. 109-15.

spoken. From a blade of grass to a tower block, all objects are replete with private, silently shared or loudly communal associations which are inescapable. This would imply that myth is not a matter of definition, but a concern of numbers and degree. *Numbers* are surely the great unacknowledged constituent of myth. Once we speak of ‘social usage’ (p.109), we are no longer solely in the realm of theory: or we are, but our theory is held in a reciprocating and unstable relationship with the paradoxes of the world. Myth is theoretically and rigorously present and possible at the front line of individual awareness; but it only becomes socially apparent and powerful with the support of numbers.

This is why we have to proceed with a distinction between the theoretically present naked work and that erupted text which we find clothed in readers’ perceptions. So we must return to the book, although it is read, of course, by editor, illustrator, Dickens-as-editor, publisher, and compiler; but we must also roll up our sleeves and be confident that we can identify the work of a Dickens readership in the evidence of the text-in-the-world. This is the mediated Dickens, a Dickens who is deflected, adapted, performed, cut, elaborated, celebrated, known: a Dickens who has been, and is, *read*.

2. The book in the world

After Dickens died in 1870, it became apparent that half his entire estate consisted of revenues gained from his skill, not as a writer, but as a reader and performer.⁹ Huge fame had long been a leading fact of his life. He had been extraordinarily well-known since the publication of the first few parts of *The Pickwick Papers* in the 1830s; and the reading tours and performances of the last ten years of his life saw his fame reach new levels of scale and intimacy. His own impersonations of the characters in his novels loomed large in the public perception of his work. ‘Until you have made Toots’ acquaintance through the medium of Dickens,’ wrote Kate Field of his *Dombey and Son* readings, ‘you have no idea how he looks or how he talks.’¹⁰

This remarkable statement is a witness at once to the power of Dickens’ readings and to their lingering resonance. While wanting presumably to pay tribute to a kind of

⁹ *Charles Dickens: the Public Readings*, ed. Philip Collins (Oxford: Clarendon 1975), p. xxix.

¹⁰ Field, Kate, *Pen Photographs of Charles Dickens’ Readings: Taken from Life* (Troy, N.Y.: The Whiston Publishing Company 1998), p. 43.

accuracy she has found satisfying in attending one of the reading performances, Kate Field manages to imply or assume much that is more interesting. She begins by reaching for an expression one would use when meeting a living, breathing person. We (readers) *make Toots' acquaintance*. Instead of the arguably more natural 'met', her (mock?) formality credits the fictional character with a kind of independence, as though he were really capable of refusing our friendship. Toots seems to come to meet us halfway. She then seems to want to emphasise that the remarkable thing about the readings is that one meets friends, or makes acquaintances, 'through the medium of Dickens'. We have to remind ourselves that these acquaintances only have their existence in the first place 'through the medium of Dickens'. Don't they?

Again, Kate Field reveals she has the same kind of attitude towards Toots that she might have towards her contemporaries. He exists, he is part of the world, he is simply *there*. Dickens provides an introduction, or perhaps more accurately, considering her vocabulary, a kind of channel through which our awareness is stimulated. But this is Dickens as a reader, making something of a work of art that he himself has created. If we are to take Kate Field literally, we should need to revise our impressions of *Dombey and Son*, a novel that apparently leaves us with 'no idea' of what one of its most endearing characters is like. There is Toots, somewhere, looking and talking like he does, and somehow the book that gives him life cannot lead him before our mind's eye. But she exaggerates, of course, wanting to communicate something of the immediacy, the convincingness, of Dickens' portrayal of an already current entity. This entity is so solidly conjured, that the performance renders even the originating text obsolete. Previous impressions of Toots are revealed to be so watery that they hardly amount to an 'idea' at all.

Kate Field is thus surprised into something of an admission. She senses such a strong addition to the text with which she is already familiar (the novel) that it virtually disqualifies its own origin. No doubt persuaded partly by the perceived authority of the figure on the stage, and the privileged view he is allowed of his work, she submits to the power of the read Dickens – here literally read – that sweeps away the book *she* had read in discovering *Dombey and Son*. Dickens' not-yet-written book (i.e. an unread one, according to Blanchot), having got itself written in the presence of Kate Field the reader, has now struck back with a new new version of itself, read and read by its

original author, who had been ‘relieved’ (Blanchot) of his responsibilities by that reader.

This is a process of making and re-making that has been a feature of Dickens’ work from the very beginning. When we consider that at least 25 plays featuring prominent characters from *Nicholas Nickleby* were pirated and put on the London stage before the novel was even finished, we can see straightaway that we are dealing here with a significant cultural force.¹¹ A force which has spread, diversified and augmented over the years. Dickens-World got away from Dickens as soon as he let it out of his head. It got loose and carried on growing.

This free Dickens, in an age of diffuse and diffusing mass media, is more important than ever. It is a text erupted from the ink and paper of the page, shaped and shared – at once collective and innumerable, discrete and corporate. It is very much a part of that Heritage environment promoted so forcefully in England. For instance: it takes perhaps four minutes to walk the length of that part of Rochester which tends to be referred to as the ‘historic High Street.’ During that time the visitor passes the following manifestations of the Dickens idea: Ye Olde Curiosity Restaurant, Havershams (sic), A Taste of Two Cities, Mrs Bumble’s, Little Dorrit Revival (which apparently sells ‘ethnic clothing and gifts’), Pips of Rochester, The Dickens Café, Peggotty’s Parlour, Mr Tope’s Bistro, Dodger’s Wine Bar, Copperfields, Hard Times, Fagin’s Café, Chuzzlewit’s Old Shoppe, the Great Expectations pub and Twist’s.¹² The Dickens Festivals – one in the summer and one at (when else?) Christmas – turn the city every year into a kind of spontaneous, rolling performance. They seem more popular than ever. The latest developments concern new displays in the Guildhall Museum, Rochester, funded and administered by Medway Council: and a huge new Dickens World in the Chatham Dockyard, built with private money and apparently complete with London slums and Mr Peggotty’s boat.

¹¹ Vlock, Debora, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), p. 30.

¹² In fact the latest addition (in February 2006), ‘The Dickens House Wine Emporium’, displays a shop sign which takes the writer’s image to the edge of legibility. The face is entirely absent: Dickens is represented by a blot of red wine that has spread to assume the dual signifiers of thinning hair and triangular beard. The eyes – his human presence – are thus faded to vacancy, and all that survives is the stain of a performed identity.

The imagery and rhetoric of the tourist business in north Kent has dealt in this Dickens Heritage idiom for a number of years – for so long in fact that we barely notice its peculiarities. When the programme for the 1979 Dickens Festival promises that it ‘switches the clock back to the colourful nineteenth century,’ when an advert in the same for 1984 promises to transport us ‘*back in time* to Dickensian days,’ it is beginning to seem rather picky to point out that time travel is a strange way of locating a work of the imagination, that, in fact, Dickens made all that stuff up.

The very first challenge that faces students of the free Dickens is how to describe the entity which they study. This territory has the peculiar quality of being a place everybody knows but no-one can define. This is because here we are dealing with the real world in all its qualifiable, contingent, eccentric and wilful variety. Time and again we will see literary or cultural theory offering us a firm grip on the wilder manifestations of Dickensian identity, only to have its basic tenets checkmated by the unaccountable happenings of everyday experience. We will see that very little that concerns that relationship between art and people’s lives remains constant or historically justifiable, or obeys observable laws. Since art can only make its way, can only establish an identity, through the perceptions of its audience, it is never the same thing from one generation to the next, even from one person to the next. But to conclude that nothing can be said about change and eternal movement just because they are change and movement is an unpardonable cynicism. This is the irresolution: an understanding which is poised in a kind of momentary equilibrium – or not poised at all, rather continuously two things at once, an impossible entity to which we are unable to assign a decisive shape, even as we are forced to acknowledge its distinctive presence.

What about the printed text? Is this not the key to it all? In the realm of the Dickens industry, ‘the authentic’ can refer both to the fidelity of adaptations to the original text (itself problematic), and to how expertly these adaptations manage notions of pastness. But these two meanings are often confused or conflated, because, of course, the authenticity of a work of art (even a contemporary one) is inextricably linked to its historical presence (its untranslatable *moment*). Can the naked work itself achieve such a distinction? Can it lay claim to what Walter Benjamin describes as an ‘aura’?

‘The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.’¹³

Benjamin relates the authority of art to the ‘historical testimony’ it offers, which has accrued to it over the years of its existence as part of a tradition: ‘at the time of its origin, a medieval picture of the Madonna could not be said to be “authentic.” It became “authentic” only during the succeeding centuries’ (p. 245).

It is this testimony which the viewer or listener experiences as an aura in the presence of the work. The aura is dispersed by the process of mechanical reproduction because it ‘detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition’ (p. 223). In other words, because its making is not dependent on any external temporal context – it has no *moment* set into time – it is not associated with the histories of making and looking which would give it the value and authority of an original. There is no cult attached to it.

Benjamin’s archetype of the mechanically reproduced art object is the film. This he sees as promoting ‘the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural Heritage’ (p. 221). He sees a democratising, unstoppable, anti-modern movement at work which desires to overcome the uniqueness of every reality by absorbing, even owning, its reproduction. He links this to the historical process by which the mode of human sense perception is changed by new technologies, and that the chief characteristic of popular cultural activity in his time is an understanding of the ‘universal equality of things’ (p. 223).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we may find that the intervening years have brought us to a rather different place. A century and more of mechanical reproduction has meant that Benjamin’s analysis has become deficient in two critical ways. First. Today we take no pleasure in the universal equality of things. In fact because we know that almost everything is reproducible – and that with greater and greater accuracy – our culture has more than ever a passion for the original, the unique. Today’s blockbuster art exhibitions make a mockery of Benjamin’s prediction that the nineteenth-century mass interest in painting would itself mark the end of that interest, because the behaviours associated with looking at paintings could not accommodate such large numbers. A can of Guinness boasts of its ‘authentic’ recipe: conservation

¹³ Benjamin, Walter, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1968), p. 222.

areas in our cities are set up to preserve the ‘original’ architecture and feel: the Antiques Roadshow warns us how to tell Chippendale from chipboard: towns and cities strive to discover (and promote) the fact that they were *the first* at something, anything: and what is the huge history boom on television but a manifestation – as in *Meet the Ancestors* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* – of our quest to find the originals of ourselves?

Benjamin’s own analysis might have suggested that this would happen: that the very reproducibility of the art object would lead to an augmentation of the power of the original. But the second gap in his commentary is the result of the subsequent action of cult behaviours, normally associated with the single inalienable object, becoming attached to that which is reproduced. Copying a work of art may isolate it from a tradition in the same way that performing Fagin may remove him from the context which allows us to respond to him as an original: and creating something as reproducible as a photograph means that it can be encountered by the viewer in any situation determined by him or her in a way which is not compatible with the work of art as cult object: but the last hundred years have witnessed the emergence of reproduced objects generating cult values of their own, deriving their *rituals* from the adopted behaviours of new art-seeking communities (going to the cinema, voting on Big Brother) and their *authenticity* from nostalgia.

We can go further. Not only is Dickens subject to innumerable reproductions through performance and adaptation; he is himself, in his printed text, a prime and early example of the mechanical copying and distribution Benjamin is writing about. He is, in fact, a copy with no original. No one in Waterstone’s will understand a request for *the Oliver Twist*. We all have to make do with just a copy.

So, just like a photograph, if we were to follow Benjamin, as a work of art a novel has only exhibition value, not use value. It does not exist in a context of tradition and ritual, not being a single thing which determines behaviours of visiting, experiencing, leaving, and indeed being without, not experiencing. A Dickens text can be with us always; it can be *shown*. But even Benjamin has to acknowledge the cult potential of the reproduction. Although he later condemns other writers for reading ritual elements into film, he claims that the reason that so much early photography is concerned with the depiction of the human face is that, because of its peculiar power, it offers, like no other

image, ‘a last refuge for the cult value of the picture’ (p. 228). In fact, as we can see today, this is no vestigial or decadent survival, but an awakening: a re-ritualising of the denuded photographic copy by an immersion into a new tradition derived from its content (the face), and from the authenticity which will accrue to it in after ages, created from nostalgia.

Perhaps we approach here something of the strangeness and peculiarity of Dickens and the place of his art in our culture. Novels are made by machine in their millions and read in as many different contexts as there are people reading them. In other words, as we have seen, they are lacking the fixed quality of the pre-industrial work of art. It is thus tempting to see novel-reading as by and large a private activity because it happens in the secret space of the mind and is not something we share while we are experiencing it. But the anxiety so created continually finds its outlet in performance. *Watching*, of course, is a vital form of performance, and one in which we discover our place. In a crowd at the Dickens Festival, alone in front of the television, we begin to know who we are as soon as we can contend with someone else’s idea of what we have experienced. In the extended encounter which is the annual parade of Dickensian characters up Rochester High Street, our receiving the greeting is as important as the performers delivering it.

And it is through these performances, or enactions, from Cruikshank’s illustrations, to Dickens own readings, to *Oliver!*, to Chuzzlewit’s Olde Shoppe, to Mr Pickwick’s Special Train, that the book-in-the-world is born and re-born, a work of art located in a new domain of tradition, linked not just to times and places – festival, visitor attraction, the television on a Wednesday at 9.00pm – but also giving the work a meta-textual quality which emerges as an enduring cult value to balance the transitory and mutable value of the reproducible text. For us today, this meta-text – Dickens-World – is more identifiable (and hence by definition more powerful) than that pertaining to any other artist. It has its icons, and it has what appears to be a self-sustaining life of its own. And so it addresses the great contemporary anxiety of the reproduced and elusive, with the fantasy of a profound immutable hidden in the printed text.

Chapter 2: A public presence

1. The writer

What do we mean when we say that Dickens is, or was, a popular writer? Even the numbers question is not a simple matter. Sales of *Pickwick* increased from about 400 to 40,000 per monthly number during its run, and, so the story goes, laid the foundation of Dickens' later success by making him a 'name', a presence.¹ But the impact of the relatively expensive issues went far beyond this economic profile. Ackroyd quotes the famous stories about the 'needy admirers' who 'flattened their noses against the booksellers' windows eager to secure a good look at the etchings and to peruse every line of the letterpress that might be exposed to view' and the locksmith 'reading *Pickwick*...to an audience of twenty persons, literally men, women and children' (pp. 196-7). In fact unless we lean on the idea of 'readers' to make it include those who experienced Dickens' work through listening (to friends, parents, colleagues or of course the man himself), through looking, through shopping, we are in danger of missing the crucial features of Dickens' popularity. Is someone who buys a *Pickwick* cigar a 'reader' of Dickens? How can we say no?

If we compare Dickens-World with those worlds generated by the devoted labours of readers of other novelists, it is not difficult to find the same set of characteristic behaviours. It would be rash indeed to pretend that it is only Dickens who is capable of inspiring the kind of reaction and interest which leads to the cultural happenings we see in Rochester and Broadstairs, on the television and cinema screen. At the 2003 conference of the Royal Geographical Society, two researchers gave a presentation describing their quest to 'find the location of one of English literature's most famous buildings'.² This is a description, apparently, of P. G. Wodehouse's Blandings Castle. These two researchers were also members of the P. G. Wodehouse Society, and certainly their urge to tie the fiction to the details of the real world will be familiar to anyone who has browsed through volumes of *The Dickensian*. As will the controversy and counter-controversy stirred up by the 'new' discovery. The pair's 'viewshed analysis' and 'layers of suitability' are not enough to impress other members of the

¹ Ackroyd, Peter, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson 1990), p. 196.

² Kirby, Alex, 'Zeroing in on Blandings', *BBC News online* website, (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3078912.stm>), publ. 4 September 2003.

Society, who pick apart their findings and (with perhaps a touch of irony) call for a 'public debate'.³

It would be hard to find closer parallels to Dickensian attitudes than in the activities of the various Sherlock Holmes Societies around the world. The same 'Victorian' milieu shot through with the conceit of the 'real': the same indulgent sense of nostalgia: the same weird combination of naivety and sensationalism: the same irrepressible urge to adapt, adopt and perform. Each year the Sherlock Holmes Society of Western Australia has a croquet day, which is (of course) played out in Victorian costume. There is the same attachment to locality (a statue outside Baker Street station) and there is a museum. There is a journal. There is *memorabilia*.⁴

The Holmes figure, complete with its hat-and-pipe iconography, would certainly qualify for the 'oral state' Barthes requires for the constituent parts of myth, passing into that realm where the image is so fixed it becomes free and self-sustaining. Is Dickens-World then part of something, or did it start something, or is it just *more*? In trying to determine how Dickens might be different, it is hard to avoid coming back to numbers.

In December 1844, Dickens gave a series of private readings of *The Chimes* to small audiences of friends. These were recorded by John Forster and one in a now well-known drawing by Daniel Maclise. The readings were very well received; Dickens was so pleased that, according to Forster, these events represented 'the germ of those readings to large audiences by which, as much as by his books, the world knew him in later life.'⁵ Forster here unconsciously outlines for us the special nature of Dickens' popularity. In emphasising the importance of the readings, and the way Dickens laid the ground for his great successes with these private gatherings, Forster overlooks the special nature of his assertion – or rather it had become such a commonplace even by the time he was compiling the *Life* that it can pass without further comment. Readings or books, the audience's desire is to know the man. One might be tempted to think that the readings were a way of getting to know the work – the books – but Forster makes it clear that they are two gateways to Dickens' essential presence, a 'knowledge' of which

³ Fletcher, John, 'Blandings Castle: Is it Apley?', *The P.G. Wodehouse Society* website, (<http://www.eclipse.co.uk/wodehouse/archive.htm>), publ. 5 September 2003.

⁴ Utechin, Nick, 'The Immortal Sherlock', *The Times*, 17 January 2004, Review section, pp. 2-3.

⁵ Forster, John, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. J. W. T. Ley (London: Whitefriars Press 1928), p. 363.

is the ambition of the world. It is not possible to think about Dickens' popularity as an artist without tackling the impact of his celebrity, which is at once distinct from, but irretrievably tangled up with, the world's idea of his work.

So when we consider Dickens, we could suggest that the programme of paid readings was not so much a way of selling his work as a way of selling writing. Dickens did writing: it was the way the world understood him: and perhaps his (and certainly Forster's) reservations were the result of a feeling that the public readings commodified not the work, but the working. There is something new here which, despite the world's awareness of a certain lineage (critics noticed the debt to Charles Mathews for instance) and writerly precedent (Thackeray's lectures), makes Dickens' shows different.

Audiences paid to watch Mathews do what he did, his profession, in public:

Thackeray's fame, although it certainly would have served to attract an audience, was incidental to the watched activity, the performance – a lecture. Dickens, however, although seen to be reading, because he was presenting his own work, was appearing as *writer*, and delivering a version of himself for public consumption. This is why contemporary accounts of the readings are divided between those which refer to the presentation of the work (in which Dickens undoubtedly showed great skill) and the feeling of connecting with the man – in fact, the celebrity. This is how the world knew him.

'It would be an *odd* thing.' Such was Dickens' speculation in 1846 during one of the discussions he had with Forster about the possibility of public readings.⁶ In fact it took only a few years of training audiences for it to seem the most natural thing in the world. Philip Collins quotes a number of late reviews which emphasise these *natural* aspects of the encounter between writer and public, the way it can be described in terms of normal human relations.

No-one thinks of Mr Dickens as a writer. He is at once, through his books, a friend.

It is not that the world knows Mr Dickens to be merely a great man; but we all know him to be a good man. And therefore, his reading is not looked on

⁶ *The Life of Charles Dickens*, pp. 424-5

as a performance, but as a friendly meeting longed for by people to whom he has been kind.

...what he is doing now is only the natural outgrowth of what he has been doing all the days of his life. To have heard these readings is to have witnessed the spontaneous expression of a great nature in the maturity of its genius.⁷

Here we see reviewers identifying the dual aspect of the experience of listening to and watching Dickens read. Indeed they come close to ignoring or setting aside the question of Dickens' talent (what makes him 'great') in underlining the significance of connecting with the presence of the writer. The emphasis on nature further serves to remind us of what a consummate performer Dickens must have been. Or, indeed, how much this kind of performance suited the person and artist that he was. Paul Schlicke notes the happy ability of Dickens to 'forge an activity which satisfied his deepest instincts' which was also commercially successful, in an age 'in many ways uncongenial to public entertainment.'⁸ Certainly there were two kinds of performance going on: the real fiction and the fictional reality. To see the novels (themselves a fiction – a performance – animated by the presence of an author) re-animated by their creator was clearly enormously appealing: but the feeling of (performed) nearness to the ('real') mind behind it all must have been intoxicating. It is Dickens' skill as a performed writer which leads people to speak of nature and naturalness - the spectacle of performed reality performing.

The strange thing about this is that the severe 'shortening' or simplification of the writer figure, the reductive way that personality – a real person – is shrunk into the embodied artist, is the prelude to a huge expansion of associations and growth that appear to take us far from the thing that triggered public notice in the first place. Obscure details of the life, which may have nothing to do with the initial work, become essential and essentially fascinating matter. A new figure – the celebrity – is grown from the seed shed by the dying writer. The canon of English literature is full of famous writers; the processes of celebrity are a re-making – producing an entity 'with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter.'⁹ Barthes' words about the mythological object, in tracing the key points that distinguish myth from the ordinary texture of everyday life,

⁷ all quoted in *Charles Dickens: the Public Readings*, p. liii

⁸ Schlicke, Paul, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Allen & Unwin 1985), p. 228.

⁹ *Mythologies*, p. 109.

serve to isolate two essential components of celebrity, which can be seen as a version of the mythologized self: it is subject to *usage* – which in turn implies *users*: and its development is a process of *addition* and assimilation.

2. The celebrity

We might say that celebrity is the commodification of individual behaviours. This keeps us clear of the nebulous idea of the ‘personality’ – or rather it reminds us of how the public personality is, and can only be, an assemblage of behaviours. A well-known person may earn a living writing books, or playing football, or starring in films. A public reputation is based upon that work. The work has a certain use value set by the society in which he or she lives and what kind of figure it puts upon the enjoyment of those activities by other people – reading books or watching football or films. Celebrity is what happens when the activity of recognition achieves a kind of independence of context, when it can refer back to itself, climb upon itself and enter a whole new value system where it can be consumed for its own sake.

This is the kind of process which helped Dickens to become ‘the visible embodiment of authorship at the end of the nineteenth century.’¹⁰ Curtis points out how Dickens was able to develop his public persona – his celebrity – across a broad front of media, through photography, engravings and his involvement in charitable projects, as well as through the readings. The personal distress caused by the break-up of his marriage was certainly augmented by his anxiety over the damage the affair might do to his standing in the public eye. So strong was this feeling that, in Peter Ackroyd’s words, he attempted ‘to write a book out of real people and real events.’¹¹ His desire to control everything that occurred in relation to his private life during this period led him eventually to publish a statement in *The Times*, and, later, in *Household Words*. He clearly believed everyone was talking about him. It is interesting that this was happening at the very time that Dickens was refining and promoting his performed identity in his first readings, in London.

¹⁰ Curtis, Gerard, *Visual Words: Art and the Material Book in Victorian England* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2002), p. 143.

¹¹ *Dickens*, p. 812.

Curtis shows how the images which Dickens controlled or directly commissioned show him with ‘a practical or business-like air’.¹² The Frith portrait of 1859 shows the ‘actual place of work’ (the study) and ‘serves to reinforce the image Dickens sought, of the genial yet successful working writer at his “job”’ (p. 149). The irony of course of all this is that the stronger, more compact and identifiable – the *shorter* – the image became, the more open it was to appropriation. Some of this was benign in intention, like the Children’s Journals quoted by Curtis which used Dickens as an example of perseverance rewarded, some – like American satirical cartoons – was not. Both show how Dickens’ celebrity ‘worked’.

It is very striking how many of our contemporary preoccupations with the phenomenon of celebrity can be identified in this relationship of Dickens to his audience. In fact, P. David Marshall allows the audience a critical role in the negotiations which take place to define and sustain the presence of celebrity in ways which strongly suggest the efforts made by the Dickens readership then and now. Using his analysis can help us identify the most striking aspects of Dickens’ presence in the life of his readers, especially as it is highlighted and exemplified in the public readings.

Marshall is careful to emphasise throughout that he sees the establishment of celebrity as possible only through consent and negotiation. It is not a simple matter of the culture producers directing interest (and money) towards commodities representative of their products. In fact, we can divide his theories into two strands: those which explore the role and development of celebrity – the individual known person – itself, and those which attempt to outline the energies and demands of the audience.

Beginning with ‘overtly public individuals’, Marshall indicates how they can ‘provide a sense and coherence to a culture’. They do this being, on the one hand, part of a system (‘culture’) but also, crucially, by retaining a heightened aura of ‘essential authenticity’ – in other words they are able to convince their audience that they remain real individuals. This is why ‘the celebrity is one form of resolution of the role and position of the individual and his or her potential in modern society’.¹³

¹² *Visual Words*, p. 146.

¹³ Marshall, P. David, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997), pp. ix-xi.

This feeling of authenticity is extremely significant in the development of Dickens' public presence. From this grows Dickens' own anxieties about his image: the hagiographic tendencies of *The Dickens Fellowship*: the sense of friendship, of knowing, that Forster noticed: even the quest to prove the elements of Dickens' fiction upon the pulses of the real world. Marshall briefly suggests a historical context for this new kind of overt, yet overtly private, public presence: the most surprising element of which is that somehow he misses Dickens – who seems to match every criteria – completely. Indeed Dickens is in the very vanguard of the kind of social change necessary for the modern conception of celebrity to become established.

In summary (p. 7), Marshall suggests that celebrity presupposes, or rather expresses, 'a debunking of customary divisions in society' and 'a new sense of the public sphere'. The nineteenth-century growth of the middle classes, increasing professionalisation, and the spread of economic power, led to the possibility of public notice beyond the traditional confines of the aristocracy or politics or the Church, while at the same time providing new mechanisms for the dispersal of this notice and its enjoyment as a leisure activity. Democratic change promoted a 'new representation of value' and enabled 'the empowerment of the people to shape the public sphere symbolically.' The quiet assault on values led such writers as Thomas Carlyle to attempt to determine this new power of making and link celebrity with tradition. Heroes and heroism made a more reassuring connection with antiquity.

Marshall sees all this bearing fruit in the 1920s. This is a tempting arena in which to site a sea-change, because of course of the impact of the cinema, or more specifically the film star. He notes the large numbers of new fanzines, obsessively detailing the lives of new stars, lives 'far removed from nineteenth-century delineations of heroism and invention', which 'had become reworked into a democratic myth of humble beginnings followed by hard work, discovery and stardom' (pp. 8-9). But let us return to Gerard Curtis and his examples of journals such as *Little Folks* and *Men Who Have Risen*. These very firmly placed Dickens in a context of struggle and triumph, using him as an example, even a lure, to promote the life of modesty and hard work. By 1912, even the *Daily Express* could claim that Dickens should serve as a model to the 'modern young

who “want to get on”¹⁴. This use of aspirational example is very similar to the case Marshall makes for the modern-day celebrity as a representative of, and mediator between, the self-perceived ordinariness of the lived individual life and the realm of fantasy or ambition. Both also presuppose a capitalistic context which promises to enable and sustain the dream.

With these kinds of examples, we can see how Barthes’ analysis of myth, and the social usage to which mythological objects are subjected, illuminates the public presence of the celebrity. Dickens the self-made man is a persuasive and convenient – and useful – figure. It is important, however, in this context, to diverge from Barthes’ metaphors for describing the transforming, or transferring, power of myth. He writes that: ‘Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, natural or not, which forbids talking about things.’¹⁵

This pre-mythical existence, which, in Barthes’ words, is ‘closed’ and ‘silent’, carries in this character a number of implications about what happens to an object when it passes into the ‘oral state’ – the domain of myth (and, perhaps, celebrity). By specifying that the object moves *from* a closed, silent existence, Barthes seems to be saying that these qualities are superseded, or overturned, by mythical presence. In other words, that *speech* – that kind of discourse which is represented by the inauguration of the mythological object (*‘myth is a type of speech’*) – enables a movement to openness. The oral state, according to this metaphor, would be a kind of revealing, a disclosure of nature, a transfer that permits the speaking of truth. Whether this is what Barthes intends or not, it is certainly not true of celebrity. As we have seen, the death of the writer – his ‘closure’ – is the prelude to the birth of a new being, whom we get to know through a social need. In a completely circular process, those aspects of the famed entity that seem relevant and interesting are those which are useful, which are those which are celebrated, which are therefore interesting. The celebrated thing is not the thing itself. It is as if the writer (for instance) suddenly becomes visible in a realm where previously he was unrecognisable. Now he seems to pick up associations and information nominally related to him (he lives in Kent, he has a large family) but which in fact are

¹⁴ *Visual Words*, p. 159.

¹⁵ *Mythologies*, p. 109.

not about him (*the writer*) at all. He is not knowable; his essential self remains shapeless and obscure. A new thing is made, a self which becomes a kind of performance, enacted – not merely by the writer – by writer, audience, society. This is the process of negotiation Marshall talks about – the corporate aspects of celebrity which are interdependent and creative, and which mean that the resulting artefact belongs to us all.

3. The text

Our quarrel (if it is such a thing) with Barthes' metaphor can continue to inspire progress once we begin to think about the text. The movement to the oral state: this shift from writer to celebrity, this change of register, explosion of association and meaning, this transformation, birth or realisation: what is it more or less than *reading*? When we read a book we do not unlock its secrets as though it were a box full of definitive objects which are forever replaced and revealed as every new reader addresses himself or herself to its pages. Reading is in fact the primary and primal activity of transfer. It is reading that transforms the text by adding meaning, bringing the work into an arena where it is apprehended, debated, ignored – in short, *recognised*. The textual shift between page-word and read-word, from work to the idea of the work, is dramatically analogous to the cultural development that generates celebrity. Reading is this kind of celebration, a performance that identifies the unidentifiable, that gives it the approximate shape of being. The unknowable work is transferred to a condition of having-been-read: and we learn to know the reading of that work. In the same way, the writer Charles Dickens is read as the writer 'Charles Dickens', an entity with the social usage Barthes identifies – an ever-growing corporate text.

According to P. David Marshall it is this kind of shift that comprises the final crucial element of the celebrity side of the celebrity-audience bargain. Except that Marshall claims that 'the celebrity element of the star is its transcendence of the text in whatever form.'¹⁶ We might want to modify this by adding '...in whatever form *it was originally created*', since, if there is one thing that the study of the after-life of Dickens' work shows us, it is the ease with which elements of artworks slip from text to text and never out of text – but this statement is important for isolating that which takes the well-known into the realm of celebrity. Dickens – or more exactly the public entity 'Dickens'

¹⁶ *Celebrity and Power*, p. 14.

– cannot be contained within the confines of his job – or more exactly, his ‘job’. We know of course, at least we trust, that there was more to the life of the man Dickens than writing: in the same way we need to recognise that writer and his audience found that more was required of ‘Dickens’ than a name on a distributed end product. We have already seen how the writer became a performed writer in the public readings.

But this leads us on to Marshall’s examination of the part played by the audience in determining the power of celebrity in society. The most important thing here for the study of Dickens is the notion of discourse. Celebrities are sites or battlegrounds where the ideas and idealisms pertaining to the individual and society are worked out and negotiated. They are ‘the production locale for an elaborate discourse on the individual and individuality that is organised around the will to uncover a hidden truth’ (p. 4).

And here again surely is the questing note which is sounded through the volumes of *The Dickensian* and in books such as *Childhood and Youth of Charles Dickens* or *A Week’s Tramp in Dickens-Land*: what we might (and shall) call a search for sincerity, or origin. It is with something of a shock that we realise that – of course – these things would not matter in the slightest if Dickens was not, genuinely, a celebrity: they are, by definition, to be found outside the published works. Which is itself a proof that ‘Dickens’ has slipped into some other text where they begin to matter. Because the nature of the celebrity is not entirely in the hands of the dominant makers of culture (Dickens himself, for instance, and his publishers), but is an area of negotiation amongst public, media and celebrity, to a certain extent we get the ‘Dickens’ we want or need.

This ‘Dickens’ however does not quite have the survivability of the printed text and is re-made as necessary. Marshall draws a distinction between the ‘selective tradition’ through which cultural artefacts such as books are sorted, and then preserved, and the ‘structure of feeling’ which describes the culture of a given present time, always elusive because it is not perpetuated by institutions (p. 45). This is to take the role of the audience a stage further by emphasising the oppositional nature of popular culture: culture is not produced by ‘everyone’, but ‘everyone’ makes their culture from what is produced. As Marshall puts it: ‘the audience *works on the cultural product in order for that form to make sense*’ (p. 46).

This takes us into a very interesting area as not only does it carry very strong echoes of Dickens' own feelings about his audience ('The audiences do everything but embrace me, and take as much pains with the reading as I do'¹⁷): not only does it serve to bring a kind of theoretical coherence to the free and open world of the Rochester Dickens Festivals: but it also highlights the peculiar spectacle of Dickens working on his own cultural product in order to make meaning out of it. Small wonder the readings loom so large in Dickens' later life and in the public idea of him at his death. Does not their very success reveal the existence of a gap between the intent of the writer Dickens and the cultural needs of his audience – one to be filled only by the intervention of Dickens as reader? In his selection, editing and presentation of his own work, he behaves like an epitome of his popular audience, making his meaning from that which has delivered to himself.

There is very clearly a political dimension to all this too. Horkheimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, also seize upon the film industry as marking a distinct change in the processes of culture and its consumption. They see the oppositional role of art undermined by the power of the celebrity, or rather the power of the movie 'system' as it is expressed through the celebrity, or star. The star is the system's investment in society which it can insert into its own productions to import its values into the closed arena of the artwork. The individual work thus loses its independence.¹⁸ We can see how awkward it might have been for Dickens – appearing as celebrated writer – to have used his previous work as a platform to re-animate his criticism of systems and society in the public readings. Hence the rigorous editing. The acknowledgement of his own celebrity, which the readings, unavoidably, must be to a certain extent, is itself a declaration of complicity with the dominant forces of society, the culture producers, the system, the status quo. Perhaps in fact this is the secret of the strange and complex success of the readings and part of their compulsive appeal to a great artist in the latter half of his career. They gave Dickens an opportunity to take advantage of his fame as writer, and at the same time to slip out of his celebrity, and stand with his audience, straining, *doing the work*, with them to make meaning out of the culture which was presented to them. As Dickens' fame grew into such an

¹⁷ *The Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 800.

¹⁸ Horkheimer, Max & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002), pp. 116-7.

unprecedented and pervasive entity, this was the dodge by which he could slip into the seat next to his public, like a friend.

It is essentially Dickens' celebrity which allows these things to happen. 'Dickens' can be freed from the context of book-writing, and enabled in fact to become visible. He can move from text to text; he has a kind of portability which is not simply a matter of numbers, but without the numbers involved in mass awareness, would not be possible. The public readings are the most intimate offered encounter of 'Dickens' the celebrity, the most detailed exposition of how he functions. It is important to see this as distinct from Dickens' operation as an artist on these occasions; he does not stop reaching his audience in the usual way – making them laugh, cry, reflect and so on. But it is his performance as 'writer' which draws on and elaborates his nature as celebrity, and in animating the discourse about the individual and society we have seen Marshall identify, he represents an organising structure for his audience's awareness. Finally, we can see that the actual nature of the performance means that at the same time he is able to step aside from both the artist and the celebrity, becoming not just the performing reader who delivers the given text, but the performed reader who wrestles it into meaning.

In these public events Dickens bore witness to that textual shift, that activity of transfer that lies at the heart of all reading. He enacted that process of addition which was transforming his art – and indeed his own self – in the arena of the world. He *celebrated* his work. But if all reading amounts to this kind of performance, of a creative activity that enables us to know the work through a process of construction, how are we to distinguish – on a textual basis – between the work as celebrity and the work which is merely well-known? Is there a difference? Or is it, again, simply a matter of numbers? The focus throughout is certainly upon readers, upon that usage inaugurated by the creative act of reading. The *obscure* work, being little read, is correspondingly little recognised and has little opportunity to grow through that recognition and the further readings of readings which inevitably follow. The *well-known* work has reached a critical stage where its read identity (i.e. its identity) is popularly manipulable and self-sustaining. The *celebrated* work is one for which an active process of animation re-engages with the world – a further textual transfer that calls our physical senses to witness new growth and impact. This is a continuum. A novel such as *Pride and*

Prejudice, enormously well-known, but not perhaps celebrated in the same way as *Oliver Twist*, is nevertheless, through adaptation and performance, further towards celebrity than a 'merely' famous work such as *Middlemarch*. Indeed the cultural assertiveness of the *printed text* of Austen's work forms a solid counterweight to its celebrated identity: whereas for books such as *Robinson Crusoe* or *Gulliver's Travels*, the reader-of-print, even as he or she tackles the printed text, senses the gross shadow of the work as celebrity stealing across the page.

Dickens' novels, some of them, lie at the very limit of this continuum, forming a bookend themselves to the works of less celebrated authors. In the long stretch of this range from obscurity to celebrity we travel from the unread, unknown and invisible to a virtual perpetuality of awareness derived from reading and the reading of readings. Indeed we might follow Chesterton and forgo altogether the convention of talking about Dickens' works in the plural and just see it as a work, a world ('this book [*The Pickwick Papers*] may most properly be regarded as a lump of Dickens'¹⁹). At the very end of our scale we run through all possible calibration and drop off into the realm of that which is 'Dickensian', grown from the read Dickens, huge and evolving, the essential work-with-a-usage. Here, beyond our continuum, in a logical and violent extension to the journey from obscurity to celebrity, we have an art that eschews a named origin in a particular work, which is not definitively 'adapted', not sourced or referenced – which strives to crash through performance into reality. Here we have the novel as *behaviour*.

Here, also, lies our subject. We began by acknowledging the force and authority of this Dickens that has dropped off into the world, and traced its power both to the energy of numbers and the assertions of authenticity it makes through new cult associations. This has led to spectacular growth and a solidity which balances, or even supersedes, the presence of the printed text. These developments, and the process of negotiation that leads to them, suggest strongly that the proper focus of any study which addresses the nature of Dickens-World must be readers and reading activity, and indeed that read text (if we can identify it). To characterise and account for this art-in-the-world, or, perhaps more precisely, art-as-a-part-of-the-world, is the challenge: and Heritage, being the past-in-the-world, will be our model.

¹⁹ Chesterton, G. K., *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons 1911), p. 17.

Part 2: Dickens in the world

Chapter 3: The Heritage Theory

1. Connecting Dickens

If we can allow the concept of Dickens-World enough strategic weight for it to hold together long enough for us to see how it is made, we can at least discover something of the way it works. In springing from the experience of Dickens' readers – and, as ever, the term is used in its broadest possible sense – it naturally derives its shape from the whole range of that experience, and is not artificially confined to whatever we may judge strictly Dickensian. And when we consider what may make a significant extra-novelistic contribution to the presence of the read Dickens, we find ourselves tackling the notion of Heritage. 'Heritage' (here always with a capital H) is a term generally taken to refer to a certain way of presenting the past, especially the preserved visible evidence of the past, and is associated with interpretative reconstruction, performance and the consumption of history as a commodity. What does this have to do with Dickens?

First: the geography of Dickens' art certainly suggests a connection. The novels assert their meanings in environments that are frequently recognisable as much as they are distinctive – London and Kent of course in particular – and the abundant detail of Dickens' vision makes it tempting to draw equivalents from the work to the world. In the same way that the preserved fabric of the past provides a backdrop to our imagining of history, the streets and buildings of the 'real' Dickens Country appear to be momentarily deprived of Dickens characters, as though it is only an accident that we have failed to catch them in the flesh. Because it is the past which has shaped the world, we use the world to find our way back to the past. Similarly, there is a sense in which it is easy to believe that England is scattered with fragments of Dickens' novels, 'survivals' of the essential matter of his art. The world can read like an evidence text for the whole story we discover in the printed word. Heritage, as a mediated and fragmentary account of the past, has an relationship to historical narrative that works in a similar way.

There is also the Dickens Fellowship. Here the un-booked Dickens has thrived for more than a hundred years. This organisation has in many ways provided a template for a way of enjoying Dickens that is marketable, flexible, active and concise. Third: we cannot ignore the particular qualities of Dickens' art, which appears to lend itself to appropriation, relying on its memorable (even memorialising) tendencies, its humour, its friendliness, the structure of its world and 'mythic' characters. Fourth: Heritage has provided a model for a pseudo-historical understanding of Dickens' novels, a reading dimension surprisingly long-established, and almost certainly recognised by Dickens himself.

2. Heritage and meaning

We need to keep in mind always that no-one has a responsibility for meaning, for worth. No one organising mind has manipulated the public manifestations of Dickens' work, in order to promote a 'greater understanding' of his work. The only thing that has powered the expansion of Dickens' World has been enjoyment - and in that lies meaning. Over and over again we will see how coherence is derived from specific situated factors that cannot be imported from the academic disciplines of history and literary criticism. We will find that the sense which lies in enjoyment lies at the heart of Dickens-World, as it lay at the centre of his art. Its power lies in its readers.

Heritage is doubly important when we consider the public idea of Dickens' art. First, there is the analogy: Dickens-World is the public face of a territory we might consider to be more traditionally the preserve of literary critics, academics and artists (Orwell's 'realm'), and in Heritage we have a phenomenon which, although ill-defined, seems to derive much of its authority from its relationship to a traditionally professional and academic arena (History). Second, there is a direct relationship: our appetite for period clothes and foggy streets and stage coach travel, as realised or dreamt of in the Dickens-World, clearly indulge a passion and need for an emotional engagement with the past.

Although it would be unwise to be drawn into a definition of Heritage at this point, since it is the kind of phenomenon which is best seen at work in all its complexity and not imagined in isolation, we must at least consider the general territory under debate. In fact, one of the contentions of many writers is that Heritage can be defined as far too

many things, whereas to history pertains a certain inalienable quality – of truth, of relevance – which means that it is always identifiable. We might at least say that history and Heritage share a common raw material - the past. By analogy, there is no biographical or literary material that is by definition off limits to the manifestations of the read Dickens, even if, taking into account specific historical contexts, some of it is not particularly suited to this or that interpretation. We need only note Dickens' own careful revisions of his work for his public readings to see how historical sensitivities have influenced public performance. Some of those omissions – those relating to the theme of 'social criticism' – are very much a part of the perceived image of Dickens' work today.¹ And the ways that we 'know' the past (documents, oral testimony, artefacts, landscape) are equally susceptible to the treatments that lead to the tensions of history or the assertions of Heritage. Magna Carta: memories of the Blitz: the FA cup: the Lake District: these are just some of the perceived entities where we can glimpse most easily the differing emphases of the two approaches. But if we are left with no distinctions of source material or inspiration, where do the paths of history and Heritage diverge, if they are not, after all, the same thing?

A historian may look at a washboard and see a range of evidence pointing down a number of broad avenues of historical enquiry. Take the manufacturer's mark: was the company using imported wood? Where was it from? Who was their workforce? What else did they make? Take the signs of wear and tear: who worked with this object? Where did they use it? Did they own it from new? How did they learn the best techniques? In the same way a Norman castle may provoke all kinds of historical questions as well as providing an answer to other enquiries about the day-to-day business of medieval life.

Then again it is equally possible to read the washboard as a symbol of family life, hard work, thrift, even love, as the visitor or audience brings their own experience to bear on their understanding of the object. The associations such an artefact can accumulate over a lifetime through a wide range of different media are almost endless. This is a process of affirmation rather than discovery, of connecting rather than exploring. In the same way, a visitor may identify the castle as a piece in their own Heritage identity, where it

¹ *Charles Dickens: the Public Readings*, p. xxxvi.

speaks for the feeling (if indeed nothing more specific) of living in the midst of old things in an old country, lending their life a kind of patina by which they know themselves and others. What happens when an object becomes a Heritage entity and what does it say about Dickens?

The Heritage moment occurs when our encounter with history takes on the character of a performance. This happens because of the projection of the self into the arena appropriate to historical discourse. Each visitor who feels the nostalgic yearning towards, for instance, our washboard and its place in the pre-electric home, is enacting some profound drama where artefact and consciousness meet and contend - not technically and critically across the barriers of time but pseudo-spiritually, within the whole narrative of the same event. The satisfactions of Heritage relate to this feeling of wholeness: it is belonging, it is the 'we'. This 'we' enjoys perhaps its largest and most obvious expression in the construction of nationhood: Heritage is a fine example of those incidents of personal resolution when the perceived worlds of what is inside (identity) and what is outside (artefact, building etc.) collaborate in staging a trope or motif in which such an abstract concept can find a reality. The coherence of this moment is clearly not one susceptible to the strictures of historical accuracy: its truth relies upon the situated and personal dynamic that the visitor or reader enacts with the raw material of history.

So we will not find the meaning of Heritage in bricks and mortar or pen and ink: only in those mechanisms of performance which construct a local truth. The read Dickens also, being the 'evidence' which mingles with the matter of the lived-in world, derives its authority not from any authenticity which we can relate to the inaugurating text, but in the countless infinitesimal narratives of inclusion it provokes among readers, as their contingent selves are enacted within the minute frame of a determinate and whole artistic achievement.

It is also important to note that one area where we can confidently map the divergent stories of history and Heritage is in their own histories. Heritage, in this sense, is a relatively recent phenomenon, often related to industrialisation, or modernity, and reflects a change in attitude towards the past. It is tied to ideas of nationhood and seeks to find expression in contemporary cultural discourse. Thus it is part of a longer term

process of change, as well as being subject to more short-term variations. 'The national past is above all a modern past...it is defined...in relation to the general disappointment of earlier historical expectation...[and] around the leading tensions of the contemporary political situation.'² This change, like many public phenomena relating to cultural activity, can be first identified in the work of small groups of people before the patterns of behaviour adopted are protected or promoted by legislation and so become part of the mainstream. Robert Hewison prefaces his brief survey of independent conservation organisations with just this observation. 'Usually the state has been the second, not the first, on the scene, and the spread of the conservation movement can be followed through the chronology of the foundation of key voluntary bodies...'³ These range from the Commons, Footpaths and Open Spaces Preservation Society, which was first convened in 1865, to the Fountain Society, founded shortly before Hewison was writing, in 1985.

It is preservation which links these organisations, their energy and effectiveness springing from the sense of urgency encouraged by the perceived rapid march of time and its accompanying material decay. Society's attitude to old things, and their usefulness, seems to have undergone something of a revolution during the past 150 years. Any idea of the nature of Heritage must include an actual or metaphorical commitment to preservation, and an appetite for what we might call the adjacent past. This is why the characteristic expression of the Heritage industry is the importing of the 'living past' into the present, as though preserved moments of past time can be bounced into the living world. The past, however, is not something which can be merely preserved. No matter how lightly we may try to intervene to protect and display the evidences of the past, this evidence becomes a kind of projection, altered beyond recognition by the random and directed processes of selection, by the power of context, and by the force of definition. A country house or a museum object is as full of reconstructed meaning as a staged battle.

So when we consider the Heritage, we may expect to encounter a diverse range of material – songs, landscape, objects, buildings – which in some sense stakes its claim

² Wright, Patrick, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso 1985), p. 2.

³ Hewison, Robert, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen 1987), p. 26.

for relevance on its present pastness, its trick of persuading us that it demonstrates another world in the world. It is not so troubled by accuracy as it is by affect. It is a didactic art, and one which transforms the past in order to make it visible in the present. It has something of a chequered reputation amongst academics and cultural commentators, not least because of the way it has been promoted as the great hope of local economies devastated by Britain's industrial decline, and many have commented on the cynicism of governments who have seen in the debris of her manufacturing industries an opportunity for a new relevance. There is much politics here, and what seems urgent, upsetting or radical in 1987 can become the accepted face of the changed nation in the space of a very few years.

3. Restoration and community

Robert Hewison does not leave us in much doubt as to his opinion of the malevolent influence of the projected past characterised by the new Heritage. There can hardly be much equivocation over a book entitled *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*. The words are chosen carefully: Hewison sees a very clear progression – or rather a deterioration - from the idea of a nation which makes things to that of one which keeps things. One industry gives way to another. There is a kind of spiritual subtext here. Even Hewison does not pretend that people's obsession with Heritage has itself ruined manufacturing. He makes clear the desperate state of his chief example – Wigan – in the 1970s, when, because of almost a century of decline, thirty per cent of the area controlled by the Borough Council was classified as derelict. And yet... When the first signs of interest in Wigan's industrial past began to appear in 1984, when a group of students restored part of Bankes' Pier in the canal basin, Hewison claims that 'It was all part of a decision by the Labour-controlled Metropolitan Borough Council to turn its back on the industrial past, by restoring its features' (p. 16).

Restoration here is a way of ignoring history. To restore is to return something to a previous state of being, to bring the shape of the past into the present. Wigan turns away from what there was by historicising what there is. This, for Hewison involves some kind of illegitimacy. The important question is what are the terms on which he arrives at this judgement? In what is this restoration lacking? The true connection with the past would be made were Wigan to continue a programme of investment in its industries to

allow them a developed expression in the present. There would thus be an organic connection with the activities and identities of long ago, a narrative explainable in historical terms. Hewison's subtext here hints that some kind of violence is done to a community's sense of history by the peculiar character of the Heritage industry, that, paradoxically, the very act of 'saving' the evidence renders it useless for the purposes for which it is ostensibly saved. It cannot be judged with the same criteria we may apply to historical debate; Hewison's paradoxical summing up of a phenomenon which can turn its back even as it turns towards us is an indication of the new registers of meaning sprung into existence by the Heritage treatment of the evidence relating to the past. What are these new meanings?

Mr Luce [Minister for the Arts in 1987] recognised the social significance of these developments [the growth of museums]... 'they are a source of reassurance and stability... the answer to an apparent human need for roots when all about us is changing so fast.' (p. 84)

Although Hewison disagrees with the lessons to be drawn from this phenomenon – calling the new museums, in his commentary on Mr Luce's words, not 'signs of vitality' but 'symbols of decline' – he seems to have no quarrel with this assessment of the appeal of the Heritage boom. What is most interesting about this conclusion is only implied. There are many ways of searching for and identifying our 'roots'. 'The Way We Were' at Wigan Pier, along with many other Heritage attractions, invites us to do this as part of a public act of engagement with a shaped environment. Its title is revealing. There are other, more private, more equivocal, answers to this human need. 'Heritage' is a public measure of who we are. It does after all, owe its existence to an assertion of community; it is a statement in the first person plural. Very few of us are likely to visit a country house to express a personal connection with the history of the estate and its owners; but this Heritage only makes sense to us – it only 'appears' – if we can see in it the shape of belonging. Because we do not individually inherit an attachment to the preserved environment (it is not mine), we can only have access to its meaning through an understanding of its corporate relevance (it is ours). Thus the Heritage positions itself to speak to the constructed identities of its perceived marketplace, to which it seeks to add. There is no doubt that in one sense the term 'Heritage' exists because of the reluctance of those involved in the writing and teaching of history to release the weightier term 'history' for more general use. 'Heritage' thus

finds itself as unapproved as ‘legend’ or ‘myth’. These are narratives which may have an interest in their own right, but must not be mistaken for the real thing. ‘Heritage, for all its seductive delights, is bogus history’ (p. 144).

Raphael Samuel, on the other hand, makes strenuous efforts to bring this kind of communal historical awareness into the mainstream of approved knowledge, as something to be reckoned with. History, according to *Theatres of Memory*, is ‘an activity rather than a profession.’⁴ He condemns the ‘tribal sense of who is, and who is not a historian’, as hierarchical and restricted, and as allowing ‘no space for the knowledge which creeps in sideways’ (pp. 4-5). Amongst this extra awareness he includes geography and the sense of place, and literature. Above all this is a knowledge which is constructed as part of a public engagement with the world. ‘The starting point of *Theatres of Memory*... is that history is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even... a historian’s ‘invention’. It is rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands’ (p. 8).

This social dimension is reflected on the smallest scale by the everyday business at Heritage attractions, sometimes indirectly, merely by being open to the public, sometimes explicitly, through staged events.

4. Joining in

If a sense of belonging, of community, lies at the end of all Heritage journeys, then active participation is the means by which visitors reach their destination. The new Heritage is often contrasted with the passive nature of the unreconstructed, old, ‘dusty’ museum. No display is worth its salt these days without some element that can be promoted as ‘interactive’. Hewison is quick to focus on that most interactive element of all at Wigan Pier – other people. He notes that: ‘A team of seven actors and a director are the first professional performers in Britain to be permanently employed in bringing such a display to life.’ Along with a group of other visitors, he is invited into the ‘cottage’ of a recently deceased miner, to pay his respects. The participation thus involves a kind of joint staging, and physical action, as well as an emotional connection. The ‘meaning’ here lies not in the passive reception of facts, but in a kind of negotiation

⁴ Samuel, Raphael, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso 1994), p. 17.

enacted inside a frame of reference that brings visitor and Heritage together. This does not mean it is any less muscular or didactic. ‘She invites us to share her grief and put a hand on the coffin as we file out. Implicated, even moved, we do so.’⁵

Patrick Wright acknowledges the power of such experiences but pulls back from postulating a model of a cultural and political elite imposing in a rigorous and simple manner a ‘national history’ upon mass populations. The self-evident draw of old buildings and objects in museums cannot be explained away merely because people are under what Wright characterises as the ‘false spell’ of the concrete remainders of the past. ‘Cultural tradition does not (except in the very crudest of reductions) exist only to be explained and administered as ideology. Similarly, and for all the manipulation, the sense of the ‘unique’ in modernity cannot be written off as merely elitist.’⁶

Meaning is there to be won from the physical evidence of history – the meaning of Heritage – and it is not determined solely by political muscle. It is something which is characteristically made out of an active, communal engagement with the material. There is of course no ‘clean’ evidence, nothing which has not been shaped in some way, and this shaping is invariably, inevitably carried out by those with access to funds. Grant schemes, which have brought a more directly competitive scenario into the arena of public money, naturally, through their funding criteria, affect the nature of the Heritage which is preserved and the form in which it is presented. Indeed, for David Lowenthal, ‘Every act of recognition alters survivals from the past. Simply to appreciate or protect a relic... affects its form or our impressions.’⁷

However, this presentation of the physical evidence is but the beginning of a process of negotiation that leads to meaning. Heritage attractions really do rise and fall according to their usage these days – visitor numbers are religiously recorded, and, invariably, forwarded to funders as indices of progress or decline. This is why Patrick Wright refers to the ‘*achieved experience* of national Heritage’ (my italics) – a double emphasis

⁵ *The Heritage Industry*, p. 18.

⁶ *On Living in an Old Country*, pp. 79-80.

⁷ Lowenthal, David, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985), p. 263.

encapsulating both the empirical nature of this knowledge and the effort spent in its realisation.⁸

5. Heritage time

The adjacent past and its tool, restoration: the promotion of a community of understanding: and the dramas of participation and achievement – these concepts are joined and underlined by the curious and characteristic Heritage manipulation of time, both in the sense of historic ‘period’, and in the ongoing moments of the clock. Partly this is a matter of the nature of the evidence. ‘Whereas the recorded and remembered past can convey the sense of a sweep through time, most tangible survivals yield only arrested moments.’⁹ It is tempting to think of the adjacent past as fixed, ‘arrested’ in this way. This leads to a number of features of the Heritage which have been commented on by many writers.

David Lowenthal’s assertion that ‘The high visibility of relics...leads many to over-estimate – and over-value – the stability of the past’ (p. 243) concerns only the ranking of evidences (and the related impact of ‘high visibility’), and assumes without comment that ‘relics’ are a text which cannot avoid describing the past as a stable phenomenon. Odd, then, that we think of relics, along with ruins, as objects which stand as a witness to the ravages of time, and how the passing years bring change and decay to all things. A relic is, after all, a remainder, something left: how can it avoid suggesting the whole from which it survives? And, in speaking of the whole, surely it must at least gesture towards its presence *in history* – the life it has led through time? In fact, Lowenthal glosses over this issue, central to the double presence of the Heritage, and important for how we interpret our Dickens texts.

‘Every relic...exists simultaneously in the past and in the present’ (p. 241). Although this statement appears to assert just that double presence we require to make sense of the impact of Heritage meanings, it is rather too cavalier with the notion of *existence*, and therefore in exactly what sense the relic belongs to the various divisions of historic time. Indeed it is impossible for any relic to be *in the past*. The essence of the relic, whether we are considering a ruined castle in 2005, or looking back at ‘the reality’ of

⁸ *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 75.

⁹ *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 243.

saints' bones in the thirteenth century, is that *in the past*, it was something else. Our 'looking back', although apparently directed at the relic, deprives it of its being: if the relic appears the same as it is in our present, as we look back, it vanishes, undefines itself – it becomes a *whole* and so subject to a kind of eclipse. We can only come to an understanding of the relic power of the relic by imagining ourselves in the present of the relic in the past. Only in this way can the relic be 'real', be itself. So the Heritage significance of our relic relies upon the fact that it does *not* exist simultaneously in the past and in the present, but that it somehow manipulates the idea of existence to create a second present, or presence, that informs and animates the first. We climb the tower of a ruined castle; we may engage with it as a historical source, as a document that allows us to judge the narrative of history. But we may also be influenced by its feeling-of-age, its national symbolism, its striking location – all of which could, in combination with the assumptions we bring to the visit, lead us to this Heritage space of the second present.

Critics have devised a number of ways of describing what notions of Heritage do to the concept of historical time. They divide broadly into attempts to locate the place where Heritage has its being, and therefore what we have to do to get there: and ideas that concern what that place is like, how it works. Raphael Samuel, in talking about 'popular memory', makes a distinction between a history that demands a sense of movement through time and a kind of static past. This memory 'has no developmental sense of time, but assigns events to the mythicized 'good old days' (or 'bad old days') of workplace lore, or the 'once upon a time' of the storyteller.'¹⁰

Similarly, Patrick Wright notes how history, when 'restaged and reappropriated' as the Heritage past, can be appreciated for its 'timelessness'.

This paradoxical sense of timelessness where one could be forgiven for expecting to find a stress on historicity and change is in part a measure of endurance... However, it can also reflect the immobility which descends on the present when history is eternalised and worn self-consciously as finery over the merely ageing body of society.¹¹

¹⁰ *Theatres of Memory*, p. 6.

¹¹ *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 78.

The 'immobile present' is perhaps where we could find our vanished relic – whose Heritage meaning consists not in its referring to a past whole of which it is a fragment, or to its eclipsed past self, but to a determinate image of itself in a secure unchanging moment. A utopia in fact. But this is not a utopia that exists as 'a vision of possibilities which reside in the real, but as a dichotomous realm existing alongside the everyday' (p. 78).

Strictly, the dichotomy here must refer to our idea of present time, rather than this realm itself, which is one and profoundly whole. It describes the split in our contemporary existence that means that a relic can be doubly with us, not in the past, but apprehended twice in the ongoing present. A relic refers to history, through which it changed, decayed, and became itself: and it lives in the present, preserved but still imperceptibly decaying: but it also exists in this momentary everlasting utopia of Heritage meaning. Here is timelessness, 'frozen solid, closed down', and finished. 'In order to become spectacular – something separate with which the public can commune in regular acts of appreciation – history must in one sense be something that is over and done with' (p. 78).

This is why Robert Hewison feels uncomfortable with 'The Way We Were' at Wigan Pier. By 'turning its back on the industrial past', the local authority elbowed history into the dichotomous realm, the 'other side' of the split present, that has no progressive connection with the past, only an analogous link to its own currently perceptible self. From this comes a refusal to acknowledge the remoteness of the past and a feeling instead of 'symbolic recovery'.¹² Because the years have been stacked into a kind of Trajan's Column of occurrence, forever at hand and forever repeating, the displays at Wigan are, for Hewison, pernicious, and 'evidence of the persistent fantasy that it is possible to step back into the past' (p. 83).

We do need to bear in mind that the completed past is complete only in the sense that it is predictable, that we have decided on its shape. Terms such as 'frozen' time or even 'timelessness' can imply that nothing ever happens in the fixed 'Heritage' present. But the doing that is 'done with' refers to the work of inauguration that establishes

¹² *The Heritage Industry*, p. 21.

understanding. Once a visitor presumes to *contend* with the established past, it dissolves, it becomes history. But within the uncontended arena, there is a kind of narrative time operating. The olden days are full of activity, although its expression tends to be emblematic and circular rather than progressive and linear. This is of course the life in ‘Living History.’

‘I-Spy’, Frank Cottrell Boyce’s essay about growing up in post-war Britain, emphasises both the persuasiveness and the unreality of the ‘other present’ – in this case a politically and socially exclusive ‘proper Britain’ (a Heritage Britain) that was enshrined in the I-Spy phenomenon.¹³ These pocket-sized booklets encouraged participating children to look for ‘a canon of good, true and beautiful sights’ by presenting illustrations of examples which could then be ticked off as seen. Some sights were deemed more worthy of note than others, and received more points. When the entire hierarchy was complete, the booklet could be sent off to ‘Big Chief I-Spy’ who would acknowledge the achievement. The writer makes two interesting points that help to illuminate the workings of the dichotomous realm.

First, he notes the ‘pair of neatly dressed young Aryans’ wearing Indian head-dress on the cover of the first *I-Spy Annual*. This theme binds the I-Spy community together. Children are cast as Native American trackers roaming the world looking for clues and traces which may interpret its meaning back to the ‘Big Chief’. Boyce imagines his young self as participating ‘redskin’, and considers that it must be significant that here was a figure that ‘had no historical connection with the landscape through which it was supposed to travel’ (p. 16). We have already seen how the Heritage present makes its connections through analogy rather than the progressive and contingent processes of historical time. Clearly, this other, non-linear, dynamic does not disqualify meaning (the success of the I-Spy books show that they perpetuated a very strong and accessible kind of coherence), but it does affect its nature. Boyce recalls that the most frequently mentioned high-scoring sight (figuring in five of the Big Chief’s works) was the ‘organ grinder’ (p. 10). Unsurprisingly, he is unable to remember coming across many on the streets of 1960s Liverpool. Here is a further illustration of the power of the dichotomous realm. Its coherence and urgency are independent of *usage*; it is detected as strongly by

¹³ Boyce, Frank Cottrell, ‘I-Spy’ in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: the Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, II (London: Routledge 1989), pp. 9-17.

those who are excluded from its pleasures. The ‘ideological construct’ of the I-Spy environment, although partaking of a flavour of the past, is perceived by the author as a present to which he is denied physical access, even while he feels its sense.

Second, Boyce considers ‘the possibility that the I-Spy books were alienating in form as well as content’ (p. 13). This is interesting. On one level the organ grinder, as an ingredient of an approved Britain, is itself a weapon of exclusion. Its absence from the streets of thousands of redskins living in an *improper* Britain ensures that they are divided from their sense of who they are. But the writer here also suggests that the very shape of the books, and the activity that they promoted, served a similar function. What might it be about I-Spying that creates a feeling of being irretrievably outside the very world that is under scrutiny?

The writer links this sense of alienation with the nature of modern society, and how the world of I-Spy sits over against it in a kind of opposition: ‘...these works reflected and exploited the alienation experienced by all members of a consumer society’ (p. 17). I-Spy alienates, and at the same time exploits that alienation. We can only conclude that it is the impossible nature, the very *inaccessibility*, of I-Spy Britain that makes it attractive, or even that makes it necessary for all those young consumers. What is this accessible/inaccessible axis that appears to be a central feature of the author’s reaction to this phenomenon of his childhood? In fact, the apparent contradiction here is the key to how the whole thing works, and accounts for the peculiar effect of this type of text. The physical force of the evidence is a comprehensible structure comparable to other Heritage meanings. Its emotional power comes not from a well-argued narrative but from *nearness*. This is an affective coherence which works because of the peculiar nature of historical objects, those accessible features of the lived-in world which seem at the same time to have a presence elsewhere, in a place Wright calls the ‘dichotomous realm’. But this very feeling, this otherness, is a kind of absence felt in the nearness of the immediate. Thus, as well as generating a political sense of alienation through its content – asserting its formulations as a proper Britain outside the experience of the majority of the nation’s children – the form of I-Spy, in encouraging ‘homeless’ redskins to attach a loosed sense of belonging to a prescribed set of authentic objects, brings them up close against the felt absence of the ‘reality’ (the strong meaning) of

objects, even as those objects assert themselves in the present. In effect, they are subject to a kind of instant nostalgia.

6. Authenticity and nostalgia

Here we have encountered two final concepts we can examine in a Heritage context in order to help us understand the read Dickens: authenticity and nostalgia. These both concern the dynamic nature of the visitor/reader experience. Authenticity is a kind of authority. The *I-Spy* books rest their claim for attention on their manipulation of truth, their assumption that it resides in those very objects chosen, because of their authentic nature.

Guinness Original is still brewed from an authentic recipe. (beer can)

Notions of authenticity are in the air when we begin to consider the experience of enjoying Dickens-in-the-world. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we need to examine a number of authenticities which are contributing to the satisfaction of those who encounter the read Dickens. What are we looking for? The mark of the authentic is something which is founded upon itself, which at first sight would seem to exclude all copies, adaptations and performances, deriving as they do from some other. What is this word ‘founded’? The central characteristic of the read Dickens is that it refers elsewhere: it is a double interaction with our selves and our read selves. But how does the *authentic* differ from the *original*? Is it to do with this ‘founded’?

There is some essential displacement here. The authentic is not ‘itself’ but merely founded upon it. Could Guinness *Original* possibly be brewed from a recipe that was not authentic? Could authentic Guinness be made from the original recipe? In the latter case, we might find that the original recipe, including nineteenth-century hop strains and local malt, produces a taste entirely inauthentic and not like the perceived ‘real’ Guinness at all. As Patrick Wright says: ‘...it should be recognised that the meaning of historical and cultural authenticity differs widely from one situation to the next.’¹⁴ The authentic is important in studying Heritage, both literary and historical, because once again, it describes a situated process. Paradoxically, it is precisely because it is not

¹⁴ *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 79.

heritable - but mutable - that it has such importance in defining the texture and presence of the Heritage, and the way the past arrives in the present.

Something of the direction of the word 'authentic' on our can of Guinness is betrayed by the use of 'still'. It appears to imply that even in these times, when traditional patterns of behaviour are supposed to have been abandoned (paradoxically, or perhaps inevitably, because those behaviours are valued more than ever) in favour of vast and anonymous industrial processes, Guinness somehow still respects the old ways. We note the link between perceived decline and modernity, already raised through Robert Hewison and others, and how, so often, the Heritage gestures towards a generalised, pre-modern existence. No matter what else has changed, Guinness *still* preserves a link with a time when people did things properly. You can be sure that, in buying it, you are buying the taste of the permanent present, the 'old' present that has become replete with Heritage meaning. 'Authenticity' is the house brand of the dichotomous realm. It resonates, but does not refer. It is a kind of affective intelligibility.

Theodor Adorno describes how jargon can be used as a tool to debase meaning and reduce it to mere language. Broadly defining the authentic as 'what was essential to a thing, in contrast to what was accidental', he concedes that 'in many cases the distinction...lies with the arbitrariness of definition... Language uses the term 'authentic' in a floating manner.'¹⁵ We see that this 'floating' is the lightness of vacancy, as Adorno shows how authenticity becomes a matter of words. The jargon is not so much a servant of the meaning of the authentic: it is identified with it purely and directly.

While the jargon overflows with the pretense of deep human emotion, it is just as standardized as the world that it officially negates; the reason for this lies partly in its mass success, partly in the fact that it posits its message automatically, through its mere nature. Thus the jargon bars the message from the experience that is to ensoul it. The jargon has at its disposal a modest number of words which are received as promptly as signals. (p. 6)

So if we think again of our can of Guinness, we can of course see that the Heritage message (here is a product distinct from the gross and impersonal modern) is itself a

¹⁵ Adorno, Theodor, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, tr. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), p. 122.

standardised gesture reeking of industrial marketing. It so proves itself in two ways; its popularity leads to the mass consumption anathema to the traditional: and its very operation somehow leads to emptiness – specifically preventing ‘experience’ (empirical reality) from intruding upon its assertions. ‘Without judgement, without having been thought, the word is to leave its meaning behind’ (p. 12). The jargon on the side of the can is, in a sense, all-of-a-piece; it can be recognised, and enjoyed as a species of affirmation, without needing to mean anything. Or rather, its ‘meaning’ takes on the character of *form*. This is why Adorno talks about religion that has ‘shifted into the subject, [and] has become religiosity’, or refers to ‘religious customs cut off from their religious content’ (pp. 22-5).

Heritage is history as *form*. It is the seductive shape of the traditional, and only the shape, commanding attention with its patina of immediacy and assuming truths through the passion of its currency. ‘The categories of the jargon are gladly brought forward, as though they were not abstracted from generated and transitory situations, but rather belonged to the essence of man, as inalienable possibility’ (p. 59). The ‘given’ that is the dichotomous realm – established and affirmed by the countless decisions made every day by consumers throughout Britain – is able to assert the vital energy of its presence through a felt essentiality, unaffected by concerns about accuracy or justice, and actuates those feelings through a jargon (visual as well as verbal) of instantaneous effectiveness.

There is one more point Adorno raises about the character of authenticity that will prove useful; perhaps surprisingly, he claims that ‘authenticity...sides with want, over and against satisfaction and abundance. In spite of its eager neutrality and distance from society, authenticity thus stands on the side of the conditions of production, which, contrary to reason, perpetuate want’ (p. 112). How strange that, having established the ‘automatic’ message of the jargon, and outlined its mass appeal, Adorno should claim that the end of all is an insufficiency that reigns where we had thought to find fulfilment. An aside of Patrick Wright’s is helpful here. In assessing the impact of the language of Heritage, he asserts that ‘despite the many problems implicit in the institutional restaging of history there is at least the possibility that real cultural creation...can occur in the public appropriation of historical remains.’ The aside suppressed here, which at once qualifies and characterises the main clause, is that the

cultural possibilities of Heritage are limited to those ‘of a kind connected to mourning’.¹⁶ We have already touched on how the presence of the dichotomous realm is shown by a strange absence at the heart of modern experience – found in those objects whose meaning seems to lie elsewhere, not in the past but somewhere adjacent to the present. Here again is the suggestion of loss – ‘want’, ‘mourning’ – in connection with desire. This is nostalgia.

Nostalgia is not merely the pleasure of remembering what is lost; it is the pleasure of having lost what is remembered. It places those things which are precious to us in a zone of safety where they cannot be disturbed – and they cannot be disturbed because they are gone forever. It is the joy that attends ruins. Paradoxically, despite what has been written about the accessibility of the present past, or the nearness of the dichotomous realm, nostalgia relies on the fact that the past remains essentially irrecoverable – that the staging which brings it to ‘life’ is understood *as* a staging which closes upon our delicious grief. In making a Heritage past that affects us by analogy, rather than one that convinces us by the authority of its narrative, this self-consciousness – again a kind of double-seeing – ensures that deferral is itself part of the immediacy of perception. There is a drama of displacement here. The appeal of a museum event entitled ‘A Victorian Wash-Day’, is *at once* that it is directly experienced with the hands and eyes and nose, that it makes sense in some generalised never-was called the ‘olden days’, and *at the same time* is placed beyond experience into the land of the lost. ‘Thus we mourn worlds known to be irretrievably lost – yet more vividly felt, more lucid, more real than the murky and ambiguous present.’¹⁷

In ‘Painting Deepest England’, Paul Street, when underlining the situated nature of the comprehensible past, a feature with which we have become familiar, observes that nostalgia ‘can be actively constitutive of meaning within a particular set of relationships of power and knowledge.’¹⁸ As an example, he notes that among the paintings that were included in John Linnell’s debut at the Royal Academy in 1807, were some scenes of Kensington gravel pits – later to become the area of London known as Notting Hill.

¹⁶ *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 80.

¹⁷ Lowenthal, David, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), p. xv.

¹⁸ Street, Paul, ‘Painting Deepest England’ in Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase (eds.), *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1989), p. 70.

These did not sell. They were eventually sold in Liverpool (where perhaps a geographical distance stood in for a chronological remoteness). Their time came in London in 1847, when the gravel pits had long disappeared under houses and streets, and they were sold, having acquired a certain atmosphere of loss. There might, of course, be other reasons for a surge in the popularity of the artist's works at this time, although with the great railway termini just beginning to disturb large areas of London and accelerate the pace of change in the city, the force of a new nostalgia could have been significant. The effect of the sense of loss is reassuring because there is no danger of the landscape being anything but lost: the paintings become a kind of mimic recovery which at once brings the past close to the viewer, while asserting its removal forever.

Adorno links authenticity with desire because he recognises how it is the tool of nostalgia and how its satisfactions are - not linked to but - *exactly the same experience* as its eternal deferral of satisfaction. The jargon is the empty signal that 'automatically' achieves a response. In the context of the past and writing the past we might consider the definitively non-structural wooden beams in a 1930s pub, the plastic iron bollards (complete with armorial device) in the pedestrianised High Street of our town, or indeed the Dixieland jazz band in the Dickens festival parade. All these are jargon. They are the pure language of history that has no meaning, only effect, or one whose meaning *is* effect. To paraphrase Adorno, we could say that they are historicity without the history, valued for the distinction of their surface, as 'words that are sacred without sacred content.'¹⁹

These concepts or ideas – generated by or proved in the Heritage discourse of contemporary Britain – are some of the tools which will help us to identify, describe and analyse the presence of Dickens' art in the lived-in world. What have we discussed? The revived past – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the remade past - and its lively presence in contemporary experience: meaning as expression of community, meaning urged into corporate relevance: the notion of active belonging and performance as a way of understanding – of reading: the dichotomous realm – time operating in no-time, forever present: and the gesture of authenticity, provoking the pleasures of the lost.

¹⁹ *The Jargon of Authenticity*, p. 9.

Chapter 4: A Heritage Dickens?

1. Thinking the brand

The heritage marketplace is crowded with brands and branding activity. The evidence ranges from the smallest detail of street furniture, through individual visitor attractions, to complete towns and cities. Even entire regions, in all their diversity of landscape and population, are shaped so as to shelter under the protective arm of the corporate image. Raphael Samuel enjoys County Durham – which is ‘The Land of the Prince Bishops’ – and South Shields – which is ‘Catherine Cookson Country’.¹ Some areas are fortunate enough to be provided with an identity that naturally coheres around a particularly site or theme. That part of East Sussex which includes Hastings and Battle is – of course – ‘1066 Country’. Other regions may find they need to try harder (and pay more). These brands are expensively researched and assembled, and promoted with considerable vigour. The stakes are high. The increasing number of retired people with money and time, and the high mobility of young families looking for school holiday entertainment mean that the income generated is considerable, once all indirect benefits are taken into account.

To take a brief survey of the strategies with which local authorities bid for our custom is to plunge into an area of discourse where the treatment of the past is capricious in the extreme. Abbreviated to the point of incoherence, and then puffed up with such huge investment (financial and ‘emotional’) as to suggest levels of contact and immersion quite extraordinary, the past-as-product is a vital factor in the emerging identities of the Britain we visit. The challenge always (for branders) is to balance expectation with distinctiveness. We discover that somehow everything will be entirely as we expect, while remaining quite unlike any other place we had ever conceived of visiting. This is the white heat of the Heritage idiom, forging that identity apparently so specific (being derived from the inconceivably diverse past) and yet slack enough to admit the personal dramas of engagement that allow us to belong.

Medway Council, a unitary authority in Kent formed in 1998, has, within the last few years, launched a brand that terms the region ‘The Historic Capital of Maritime Kent’. This is in itself a marvellous example of the passionate vagueness that lies behind so

¹ *Theatres of Memory*, p. 159.

much Heritage branding. To begin with, it is not exactly clear to what the brand refers. Is it the local authority itself? Or some other region with similar but crucially different features – be they geographical or political? Since this by-line is not accompanied by the council logo, but by a new design which includes sails, a crown and some fortified architecture, perhaps this is Medway the *place*. Here is a noun that has something to do with the Medway Towns (a term with a considerable history) but which has not, up to this point, been much in use. We learn, however, that it is a Historic Capital. The deployment of the word ‘historic’ serves a wonderfully apt dual function: in the first place it adds value and worth (the capital has the weight of history to persuade us of its legitimacy), and, second, it situates the application of the claim (and the reality of capital-hood) safely back in the past, where it is difficult to question. This also avoids any awkwardness about the status of ‘Medway’ and ‘Maritime Kent’ in the present.

This brand is worth noticing because it is one of the ways the young authority is moving forward and away from the separate historical identities of its immediate political predecessors – Rochester-upon-Medway City Council (RUMCC) and Gillingham Borough Council. One of the most serious branding difficulties with the union of these two bodies in 1998 was that RUMCC had worked very hard on its tourist brand and, what is more, it appeared to work. This brand was Dickens.

In many ways, although superficially as unlike to Wigan as two places could possibly be, Rochester is also an excellent example of those post-industrial trends identified by Robert Hewison. Especially if we consider Rochester as one conurbation with neighbours Chatham (same MP since 1918: same local authority since 1974) and Strood (almost within touching distance and linked by a bridge since Roman times), the years of the twentieth century saw a slow but devastatingly irreversible industrial decline. The cement industry, which in 1900 was by far the largest employer in the Medway Towns and one of the most important industries in the South East, was a victim of its own limited resources (chalk and mud); the barge building business, so dependent on cement money for survival, suffered in proportion. Aveling and Porter, of Strood, the largest traction engine factory in the world, was left behind by new technological developments. The river itself, so long a reliable source of income for the licensed fishermen of the towns, was succumbing to pollutants and the subsequent reduction in fish stocks. Short Brothers aircraft factory, occupying at first a prime site on the

riverside, and then at Rochester airport, moved to Belfast in 1946. The Chatham Dockyard, highly important to the area in terms of jobs and local identity, finally closed in 1984, after some years of downsizing and adjustment.

Suddenly, with its industries in decline, and assailed by the enormous growth in motor traffic, Rochester found itself reborn as a place-in-the-way, somewhere to get through, a location dreaded by coast-bound motorists seething over the inadequacies of the A2. Political changes – and new roads – seemed to promise a new beginning. RUMCC, formed from the old boroughs, saw tourism as a largely untapped source of income for the area. The castle and cathedral spoke largely for themselves and could be relied upon to go on attracting the same kind of enthusiasts and historians as they had for decades. What was needed was a new identity for the towns which would give them some weight in the burgeoning (but crowded) Heritage marketplace of the South East. Dickens seemed ideal. He was hugely (and internationally) famous: he embodied many positive virtues – hard work, benevolence, charity, hospitality: and he was linked to the area both through his life and his art. There was also a precedent. The Dickens brand, as it emerged in the late 1970s, did not come out of nowhere – or rather, out of the no-where, no-space of the novels' printed text. Those books, like *The Dickens Country*,² which mapped out both a geographical territory, and a mode of action, had been around for almost a hundred years: and the Dickens Fellowship had laid the foundation for a corporate response to the work and the life: but most persuasively perhaps there was the Dickens Festival Pageant of 1951.

Much of the spirit of this event can be imagined from the souvenir programme. The mayor's address, which introduces the timetable of festivities, at once announces the strongly memorialising energies of the festival committee. Indeed, there is a suggestion that the performances that are about to begin are merely a stepping stone to 'a permanent memorial – a Dickens Theatre.' This is interesting for showing clearly the medium thought to be most appropriate for communicating the Dickensian feeling – but also because no Dickens Theatre was ever forthcoming, and the eventual modern festival instead committed itself to a more open, street-based, participatory mode of operation. The 'Synopsis of Scenes' included in the programme, which describes the

² Kitton, Frederick G., *The Dickens Country*, 2nd edn. (London: Adam and Charles Black 1911).

main event, a scripted performance in the castle gardens, is untroubled by book-boundaries, since it begins with ‘Mr Pickwick arrives at Rochester’ but also features ‘Nicholas Nickleby at School’ and ends with ‘A Masque of Dickens’. There is also some choreography, outlined in the programme, which seems to aim to provide the kind of generalised historical ‘colour’ that comes to the fore during the contemporary festival, and which television, for instance, does so well. The Pageant was also the catalyst for a burst of signposting. The mayor explains: ‘for your delight, we bring before you some of the immortal characters of his books – characters so real that we, in this city, have fixed memorial plaques to the houses where they “lived”’. This initiative was continued, and perhaps with the Dickensian nature of the centre of Rochester partly in mind, the High Street was declared a conservation area in 1975.

The annual Festival began in 1979. Less scripted than the 1951 Pageant, it attempted to recreate something of the community feel of a small post-war town, and market it through the colour of Dickensian happenings. These included readings, acting, fancy dress competitions, parades and guided tours. The Charles Dickens Centre opened shortly after, in an Elizabethan house and garden once the school of Rosa Bud, no less. Although the authority included the town of Chatham, once Dickens’ *actual* home, this concept was always a Rochester thing, being seen as the home of his imagination and perhaps therefore corresponding more closely to the popular idea of the Dickens-World.

In 1998 RUMCC merged with Gillingham Borough Council to create the new unitary authority of Medway. The very success of the original Dickens brand meant that a change of emphasis was necessary; something more inclusive was required – Dickens was too powerfully associated with Rochester alone. Hence the maritime theme. European money also lay behind the move – grants were available to link with towns on the continent which could claim similar geo-historical features. Dickens, although an international figure (certainly one of the reasons why he was adopted by RUMCC in the first place), could not be ‘shared’ in the same way.

And yet Medway has hung on to Dickens. Part of this is of course sheer pragmatism. He is not getting any less popular and visitors bring money. Part of it seems to be as a result of some lobbying. The Dickens festival was cut to three days, then the fourth day was allowed back in on a semi-official basis (Rochester traders were very upset at the cuts),

and in 2002 it returned with full sanction. The 2001 Christmas Dickens was perhaps the busiest in the history of the event; at one point 200 coaches were counted in the city's coach park – and these were almost continually being replaced with new arrivals. And although the Dickens Centre was closed and broken up, amid considerable local protest, in 2004, that protest has led to additional Dickens features being developed in the Rochester Guildhall Museum. Even more strikingly, enormous sums are currently being spent on a new Dickens Experience to be located on the Chatham Dockyard site, complete with a walk-through environment representing Victorian London.

How might we describe this corporate Dickens – created to appeal to as wide an audience as possible? Is it useful to talk about a popular or mass-market version of the author? Louis James makes a distinction between the 'the cultivated reader' who 'sees character within the framework of a particular story' and 'the popular imagination' which 'is interested in character conceived on a simple, well-defined plane, which exists independent of a complex literary form'.³ We have seen that Dickens himself felt that a new version of his own art was required for his public readings. In fact, as we know, all we have are versions, or readings. Are there characteristics that we can reserve for the contemporary 'Heritage' Dickens? If there are, why this Dickens and where does it come from? What is its relationship with the idea of the living presence of his art? Are they the same thing? For, despite the dressing up and the recreations on stage and screen, much can be read about the notion of Dickens as a modern writer. The man himself had a healthy disrespect for history and even a book like *Oliver Twist*, for all its topical concerns, Hogarthian impulse and Newgate air, belongs to our world, when *Barchester Towers*, say, definitely does not.

2. Art and community

In *Dickens, Novel Reading and the Popular Theatre*, Debora Vlock disputes the idea of reading as a private activity; or more specifically, tackles the notion that the nineteenth-century novel, in taking shape in an individualistic inner space, pertains to an internal reality only, and does not happen 'in the world.' Her method is to draw a distinction between the identity of the novel in the early Victorian period and today, arguing that the very close relationship novels (and many authors) had with the stage, meant that the

³ James, Louis, *Fiction for the Working Man 1830-50: a study of the literature produced for the working classes in early Victorian urban England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin University Books 1974), p. 52.

reading public understood them in a middle space between theatre and drawing room, that in some ways the world of the novel reading was public and collective, rather than, or as well as, private and domestic. This phenomenon leads to the existence of what she calls an 'imaginary text' to distinguish it from the physical print of the novel. She disputes the assumption of a historical evolution from early modern physical spectacle to fully modern psychological conception. She draws a distinction between the novel's printed page and the 'actual Dickens experience' – and concludes that Dickens 'was a collective idea.'⁴

Vlock concentrates on the early nineteenth-century theatre. But this public aspect of a private activity is surely with us always and especially so today and especially when we consider Dickens. Is an 'imaginary text' merely text that has no home in print? How can it be shared by contemporaries and acknowledged by critics? Furthermore, the Dickens text has never been so complex and insistent. The theatre – even in a London where Dickens was able to go and watch a different performance almost every night for 3 years – could hardly have played a larger part in people's lives than television does today.

We have noted that Heritage relies on a peculiarly communal context: that in fact it is that context, being a performance in which a projected image of the self is given force and direction by its moment within a perceived environment. For Vlock, what makes the imaginary text worth noticing is that it is created out of corporate activity: her implication seems to be that there was something unusual about early nineteenth-century England, Dickens, and the audience for drama, that produced a specific phenomenon. What is unusual can only be to do with the force of numbers. Although Vlock, by contrasting her imaginary text with the actual printed word and the activity of reading associated with it, appears to wish us to concentrate on the *imaginary* nature of her formulation, really the word of the two we need to grasp is in fact 'text'. No-one could possibly dispute that nineteenth-century readers, like modern readers, were using their imaginations, and that they therefore had some imaginary idea of the world created by Dickens' art. More interesting is that Vlock privileges this reading activity with the word 'text'. That she does this without needing to draw our attention to it, preferring to

⁴ *Dickens, Novel Reading and the Popular Theatre*, p. 11.

elaborate upon the un-actualised character of that text, is all the more revealing. This text persuades us – still, today – of its own status (its right to be named) through force of numbers, its popularity, which in turn means that the evidence for its existence is all the more compelling. It is simply more noticeable. It has currency. Just like Heritage, its actuality lies in the energy and direction of the market.

This Dickens text, labelled ‘imaginary’, which is essentially the result of reading activity, by audience, hack writer, actor and stage manager – which is the Dickens who exists through being read: is the Dickens who re-emerges into the world: is, in essence, the *read* Dickens – can itself only be read through the performances made by readers. This is the watching, the (stage) acting, the staring at the new monthly number in the window, the buying the Pickwick cigar. To acknowledge Vlock again, this is where the imaginary text emerges into the light. In the same way, we can examine the nation’s built Heritage for evidence of an imaginary text which says who we think we are. And, *vice versa*, the market exploits the existence of the text to speak to us things with which we already agree.

What can Heritage tell us about the nature of this text? It shows us how the activity of reading creates its own text that we read. As Robert Hewison is invited into the miner’s cottage, the experience he enjoys contains that very invitation. He reads a character who establishes her presence through an interaction with himself; so that to come to an understanding of her meaning, his reading of her becomes something that he reads. She cannot *be* without his nearness and the nearness of his community of visitors. It is an excellent illustration of how the energy of reading, especially, here, the energy of reading in company, drives a process of selection, emphasis and innovation.

Vlock herself quotes *Structural Transformation* by Jurgen Habermas, who points to the way in which the opening of public museums, concert halls and theatres ‘institutionalised the lay judgement on art: discussion became the medium through which people appropriated art.’⁵ This process of ‘appropriation’ is nothing more nor less than reading, and a reading activity that, as the word suggests, displaces the thing read and establishes its meaning in another context – which itself develops that meaning.,

⁵ quoted in *Dickens, Novel Reading and the Popular Theatre*, p. 20.

which is then read. This is how the Dickens text begins to grow under the influence of the milieu Vlock outlines in her book. If the term ‘imaginary text’ has any merit, it at least forces us to acknowledge the elusive nature of the real Dickens – the only Dickens there is – that which is read. But this is still not quite satisfactory. If all Dickens is the read Dickens, what distinguishes those plagiarised *Nickleby* plays from the text signed ‘Charles Dickens’, from Phiz’s pictures, from the film made in 2003, starring Christopher Plummer, Barry Humphries, Alan Cummings *et al*?

Critics have developed a particular language with which to negotiate this difficulty. Louis James had no problem in assigning Dickens ‘a central place in the development of popular literature’ while at the same time maintaining that ‘comparatively few lower-class readers read Dickens direct.’ The final adverb sets aside the kind of reading accessible to the lower classes. James reaches for a professional metaphor to complete the idea: ‘Working-class fiction was apprenticed to Dickens plots and characters, and by plagiarisms experimented in the popular taste...’⁶

The popular Dickens (a plagiarism?) is generally described as the junior partner in the overall shape of the Dickens-World. This has something to do with the intention of the author - that writer’s reading which is reflected in the production of the book, its physical shape and presence. There are many references to how careful Dickens was not to offend his middle class readership and although later cheaper editions of his work perhaps broadened access to it, in the early days he wrote very clearly for a particular market. But at first it was left to plagiarists and adapters to satisfy the appetite of those in some way excluded. There is no question that today many, many people enjoy Dickens without reading much or any of his texts ‘direct’.

By bringing an understanding of Heritage, and its relationship with its visitors, to bear upon Vlock’s analysis, we can see that in fact there is nothing essentially distinctive about the theatre that generated – more properly, *grew* – the Dickens text. The key is the presence of a community of readers, who become a part of their own read text. The distinctiveness lies in Dickens: and it is to his peculiar achievements that we must now turn.

⁶ *Fiction for the Working Man 1830-50*, p. 82.

Chapter 5: Character and coherence

1. Context

Context in Dickens – that is, authorial context, the context written into the work – is ever associated with persuasiveness, with moral force and with truth, and it is largely of two kinds. First, we cannot ignore the accumulation of physical detail that assaults us in the pages of his novels, the way that the concrete structure and presence of the environment serves to illustrate character as well as provide an arena in which character can be. But, and second, Robert Garis is in no doubt that the leading component of the context in which the action of Dickens' novels takes place is the voice of Dickens himself. There is not 'the slightest suggestion of an attempt to hide the presence of the artificer: our sense of his presence does not gradually disappear as we become aware of the objects his language is embodying.'¹ Reading activity happens on the understanding that Dickens is the star, the major attraction, the conjurer who demonstrates the action. Our near attendance upon his energies conditions our response. What we never lose – until perhaps we adapt and perform and appropriate – is that sense of the mind riding its own wave of making, so intoxicating in Dickens and so much a part of the experience of reading him.

For example, if we look at *Nicholas Nickleby*, we can see this joy, this delight, at work. Squeers is one of Dickens' characters who manages to be truly frightening, morally repulsive and entirely delightful at the same time. He is distinctively individual enough, and has the paraphernalia required, to serve as a performing entity in the manner of the festival characters. Indeed the Charles Dickens Centre in Rochester had a display which depicted a Dotheboys schoolroom where a silhouetted Squeers ran through his w-i-n-d-e-r speech. Despite the funny lines he came across as overwhelmingly threatening: the dark shadow of his profile, the continual cracks of the cane on the desk, and the positioning of the visitor amongst the trembling audience of boys meant that there was never much space for a wider interpretation. In *Nicholas Nickleby* however, the placing of Squeers in the context of the school, so tight in its rules and logic and tiny little ways, as all schools, even good ones, are, and in the bosom of his appalling family, about which we are continually reminded even when he is away from home, means that his power is augmented and deepened. And with this comes that other context of the voice

¹ Garis, Robert, *The Dickens Theatre* (Oxford: Clarendon 1965), pp. 7-8.

of the author, providing that distance which gives us access to the delight in making where Dickens' imagination thrives.

When Squeers returns to Dotheboys, he gathers his pupils together in order to read a few letters and generally let the boys know that nobody wants them. Dickens first tells us that the schoolmaster enters the room and 'proclaims' silence, and then he gives us a few words which may be this calling for silence, or may be something additional.

Let any boy speak a word without leave,' said Mr Squeers mildly, 'and I'll take the skin off his back. (*NN* p. 92)

There are a number of wonderful things about this piece of text which make it ring with delight. Dickens is careful to call the schoolmaster *Mr* Squeers here (he uses the more familiar 'Squeers' as well elsewhere) to underline the air of formality, of menacing politeness, with which Squeers re-acquaints himself with his wretched pupils. We also note that, despite what Dickens has just told us, there is no order given here for silence, only a bald statement of what will happen in certain circumstances – lending a grim air of inevitability to the whole proceeding. This positive statement (instead of negative prohibition) further serves to indicate that in fact Squeers will be quite contented should these things come to pass. But it is the word 'mildly' which so vividly reveals the presence of the author and his creating energy, and which contributes to that strange feeling of delight we feel bursting through the horror. Clearly, the words spoken are not mild, and on one level, Dickens is building on that sinister soft approach with which he has begun characterising Squeers' return. But he does not write 'quietly' – which would not in itself be a contradiction (someone could certainly speak these words in a low voice). So we have an author's comment here, not simply a stage direction. If an actor was playing these lines, and spoke them 'in a mild fashion' the effect would be entirely different. There is a kind of tension here which is not to do with the atmosphere of the scene itself, in other words with what is actually happening in the schoolroom, but with the serious, joyful game between author and reader, between the artist and the world.

Dickens was well aware of the importance of context: aware, consciously, as an editor, not merely (and wonderfully) as part of his total creative activity. He liked to emphasise its impact, drawing attention to background, or setting, as a leading factor in creating

the feeling of verisimilitude that persuades the reader to submit. In response to a submission from Emily Jolly he wrote:

The more you set yourself to the illustration of your heroine's passionate nature, the more indispensable this attendant atmosphere of truth becomes. It would...oblige the reader to believe in her. Whereas, forever exploding like a great firework without any background, she glares and wheels and hisses, and goes out, and has lighted nothing.²

It is interesting that Dickens ends his metaphor here with a rather back-to-front assessment of the relationship between character and context, as if the heroine is merely a tool for the illumination of that incidental background that supports her. Does Dickens really mean that the reader's gaze is directed to the frame and not the image? More probably, he is mixing his metaphors – the firework is what we observe, not the shadows behind: but the light of understanding is cast (or should be) by the character in its proper setting.

That 'attendant atmosphere of truth' is never far from Dickens' mind when he is editing or advising. The ambition to create an 'embedded' feeling in the work, also emphasises, by contrast, the 'newness' of the characters of the Dickens-World, their freedom, and therefore their 'originality' – subject as they are not to Dickens any longer, but to the reader, or the figure of the reader-as-author whom we will consider in Part 5. It is this reading-context, the context of meaning-making, and how its structure is prompted by the (original) author through the whole shape of the work, that reveals Dickens' distinctiveness. If we are to look in detail at how the world in the novels is constructed (and indeed how that 'attendant atmosphere of truth' becomes so persuasive) we need to read with an eye that is attentive to the circular and emblematic forcefulness of Dickens' 'background': how it is the deeply embedded qualities of elements of his world that paradoxically lend those elements a kind of self-sufficiency – how indeed the reader is led to form an idea of the work which holds itself together in ways that make it peculiarly manipulable and plastic, while retaining all the seductiveness of the work on the page.

² *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The Pilgrim Edition, volume 8, ed. Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon 1995), p. 336 (30 May 1857).

2. Types and the typical

Dickens' use of motifs created out of individual behaviours and his feeling for stereotypes is extremely important in understanding the Dickens idea, or text-in-the-world, today. The way that his imagination seems to orbit the *people* in his fictions, intensifying around them instead of being evenly dispersed throughout the matrix in which they are embedded, perhaps means that they can the more easily be extracted and given life elsewhere – in adaptations and museums and adverts and festivals. They import their behaviours whole and recognisable. This gives them the kind of self-sufficiency that we associate with stereotypes.

But types are not universal – they are dependent on the distinctive properties of a culture in terms of both definition and dispersal. Aspects of personality we may recognise, but then we are typing in a very different way to a Victorian readership. In fact Dickens is now much more likely to be read as a *generator* of types, a glass through which we view a world populated with people and places and institutions which we can judge in relation to the prototypes expressed in his pages.

Debora Vlock writes about the presentation of Dickens' novels as a gallery of types. She emphasises again the continuities between understanding the early Victorian novel and understanding the stage. Thus she characterises Dickens' imaginative world as one of 'non-narrative signs' – voices, postures, gestures and so on.³ These are demonstrations of a notion of behaviour which is independent of the actions of time implicit in a plot. She also asserts that many of his characters are drawn from stage stereotypes which would have been recognised by Dickens' contemporary audience. Types by definition are a collective notion and therefore require a mechanism of confirmation and dispersal, whether that be theatre or television or the novel.

But focusing on the medium must not obscure the significance of Vlock's observations about Dickens' method. It is here that the foundations are laid for an imaged world that will prove irresistible to enacting or performing readers in the years to come. Certainly Dickens was adept at using and adapting and developing types – was so skilled in fact that his types (like Captain Cuttle, Jo the crossing sweeper, Mrs Gamp) tend to obscure

³ *Dickens, Novel Reading and the Popular Theatre*, p. 3.

their own origins in stereotype and play at being original and originator for subsequent generations of readers.

Once again there is a close match with Heritage. Types – and with Dickens we must begin to include the typing of action, and perhaps think of the real ‘plot’ of his novels (the meaningful action) as a gathered series of emblems or motifs - represent a kind of coherence which is antagonistic to the overall completed shape of the successful work of art. In the same way that the Heritage texts we have considered – such as ‘I-Spy’ and ‘The Way We Were’ – ignore or disrupt the causal coherence of history, types operate a kind of sense that asserts itself independently of the narrative presence of the work.

What Dickens picked up from the stage was not simply a series of templates for characters, or indeed actions, but a way of asserting his vision. His most well-known characters proclaim their type-hood enthusiastically; they are self-typers who stamp out a clearing in the thicket of the Dickens plot as it twists and turns to a conclusion. There is an interesting aside (barely an episode) in *Dombey and Son*, which occurs while Walter takes Captain Cuttle into his confidence – with the aim of persuading him to break the news of his departure to Sol Gills. Walter affects a bravado in order to soften the blow. ‘How does that tune go that the sailors sing?’ he says – ‘the sailors’ taking us straight into the shared realm where types have their being. He sings, and Captain Cuttle joins in the refrain. But, almost as though they have, through this behaviour, trespassed on someone else’s territory, there is a response from over the road.

The last line reaching the quick ears of an ardent skipper not quite sober, who lodged opposite, and who instantly sprung out of bed, threw up his window, and joined in, across the street, at the top of his voice, produced a fine effect. When it was impossible to sustain the concluding note any longer, the skipper bellowed forth a terrific ‘ahoy!’ intended in part as a friendly greeting, and in part to show that he was not at all breathed. That done, he shut down his window, and went to bed again. (*DS* p. 211)

Walter and the Captain have conjured up so strong a flavour of the sea, that some peculiar alchemy produces this fantastic waxwork, which lurches forward and then withdraws as though on a spring. Here is a true type. The skipper is drunk, has a sentimental attachment to song, uses marine terminology and is of stentorian heartiness. The comic touch here relies on his sketchiness, his abrupt presence and economical

realisation, which lends his appearance in the novel something of the character of a comedy ambush. It works because of the inherited notions a reader brings to the text, ideas about stage sailors and jolly tars. Captain Cuttle on the other hand, works to establish his own type of one, which he continues to assert, oblivious, or even in opposition, to the ups and downs of the plot. Throughout his career, Dickens was absolutely fearless in his use of material that would surely have terrified lesser writers because of its cheap popular origins. From Pickwick (irascible and foolish old gentleman) and Sam (chirpy cockney) to Jasper (melodramatic villain), Dickens' energy transforms the received, the general and the diffuse into the intensely specific, creative and creating. So Captain Cuttle is equipped with a hook, of course. But whereas the individual features of standard inherited types become almost invisible, un-actual, with no function that operates in any detectable universe – i.e. they are all-of-a-piece – Dickens' types dare to imagine themselves to be real. The hook is so much a fully operational part of Captain Cuttle that it serves both a physical and profoundly symbolic function, grounded in strenuously habitual patterns of behaviour. He informs Walter that, on such a serious matter, he must be allowed to “bite his nails a bit”.

Thereupon the Captain put his iron hook between his teeth, as if it were a hand; and with an air of wisdom and profundity that was the very concentration and sublimation of all philosophical reflection and grave inquiry, applied himself to the consideration of the subject in its various branches. (*DS* p. 212)

The spectacle of the Captain biting his nails is one of the magnificent absurdities often exhibited or performed by the best-loved of Dickens' characters, who seem to want only opportunity to visit their typed identity more fully upon the world. Miss Havisham is not merely a jilted woman, but one who has warped the whole of her world to express her sense of who she is and what has happened to her. These figures warp the intelligibility of their novels too. The Captain surrounds himself, and is surrounded by the author, with language that extends his identity (via the narrator) through the imagined world. He does not find it ‘difficult to assimilate new ideas’: instead he cannot ‘take a perfectly new cargo on board’ (*DS* p. 212). Although it is he, himself, who declares himself “aground” when mentally troubled and undecided, Dickens backs him up by further informing us that he subsequently ‘got off into the deepest of water’ (*DS* p. 213).

In this way Dickens' characters appear to bleed into the world around them, over personal possessions and their intimate interface with the public world, so that it is as much a part of them as what is inside their head. In *David Copperfield*, poor David himself gets a taste of this when he escapes from his new stepfather and searches through the house to 'find anything that was like itself,' only to be terrified by Mr Murdstone's dog - 'deep-mouthed and black-haired like Him' - which has been installed in the yard (*DC* p. 43). It is as if, such is the pervasive intensity of Dickens creation, all the *Murdstoneness* he needs to express cannot be contained within the physical frame of a human being and erupts into habitable world.

With their self-typed habits, verbal refrains and a sense of identity delivered through repeated behaviours, in a world that seems to have caught them like one catches a cold, Dickens' 'new' types often become a problem for a novelist who naturally enough decides that a particular work of art – a linear narrative – needs to be brought to a conclusion. How can any resolution take account of a character like Captain Cuttle? Action – genuine action that leads to a different place – liberates types, it renders them invisible, they fade into the passing scenery along with everything else. They can only be turned off; which is why Dickens' novels are full of convenient absences (the Micawbers), sudden deaths (Miss Havisham) and unconvincing conversions (Mr Dombey). There is also Bailey. This smart-talking boy-man from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, who first appears at Todgers's boarding house, but who is far too entertaining for Dickens to leave there, is a kind of uber-urchin who has gone civilised. There is something of the Dodger in him. He makes eyes at grown women, disorientates the gentlemen with his slang, and (in another wonderful illustration of the miraculous absurdities that occur when Dickens' types dare to take themselves seriously) actually goes to the barber's to have his (non-existent) beard shaved.

'Go WITH the grain, Poll, all round, please,' said Mr Bailey, screwing up his face for the reception of the lather. 'You may do wot you like with the bits of whisker. I don't care for 'em'. (*MC* p. 461)

Dickens finds jobs for Bailey to do in order to try to keep him tied to the movements of the plot. But he remains the same hilarious and bizarre creation he is when we first meet him, utterly unadapted and indifferent to his new roles. He ends up working for Montague and is on the rumble when the carriage overturns with his master and Jonas

Chuzzlewit inside. He is thrown over a hedge into a field. Dickens makes a pretty serious effort to convince the reader (and perhaps himself) that Bailey is dead. In fact he describes Jonas ‘stooping down over the body’ and later reveals the surgeon’s opinion that ‘Mr Bailey’s mortal course was run’ (*MC* p. 651-2). This is later corroborated by Poll Sweedlepipe, who even adds the detail that ““He never spoke afterwards. Not a single word”” (*MC* p. 751). The plot of the novel thus appears to kill him definitively (bodily, and essentially – by depriving him of his self-assertive, self-defining patter), and to extinguish his identity. But not even death can quite restrain the vitality of Dickens’ characterisation. Bailey, or something like him, fights his way back into the book.

At a general gathering of major characters at the end of the novel, Poll appears, ‘half-laughing and half-crying’, with tremendous news. This news is exhibited to the assembled company:

A something in top-boots, with its head bandaged up, staggered into the room, and began going round and round and round, apparently under the impression that it was walking straight forward. (*MC* p. 813)

This creature is the rather gruesome outcome of the battle between character and plot, between the two kinds of coherence that struggle for supremacy during Dickens’ novels. The reanimated Bailey, tottering around like a zombie in a cheap horror film, picks up his performance beyond the grave, having convinced his author that the kind of intelligibility demonstrated by his presence in the work should overcome the demands of the overall reach and direction of the story – that, indeed, in the *eschaton* represented by the end of the novel, Dickens should be empowered to disable time and the laws of nature in celebration of an apocalyptic resurrection.

Almost as though he guiltily acknowledges the awkward power of his own method, Dickens here feels it necessary to disable Bailey a little, to ensure that the narrative action of the novel has at least marked him in some way. But Bailey’s own essence, his comprehensibility, is not affected. He still does, or attempts to do, the same things. He is a perfect illustration of the resurfaced image or re-enacted past that is the invariable stock-in-trade of the Heritage industry. He is not produced at this point in the novel to shed some new light on the momentous events that led to the murder of Montague; his

causal connection with the action is simply not important. We cannot use his testimony as evidence for revising our knowledge of 'history'; he does not help us understand what has happened. Instead, we just need to be near him. Dickens restores him to us as Wigan Borough Council restores the features of the industrial past, severing for ever their connection with the processes of history.

It is worth saying too at this point that Dickens' public talent was forged in the crucible of serial publication, a medium to which he remained faithful all his working life. Although perhaps not inevitably favouring the character-based kind of artistic coherence described above (a writer might rely on tight plotting and cliff-hangers to sustain interest), we can certainly see how Dickens' particular strengths particularly flourished under this influence. The very genesis of *The Pickwick Papers* lay in a plan for the episodic manipulation of known types for the purposes of amusement (and illustration); the notion of a story that bound the characters to progressive action would have seemed unnecessary at best: at worst, economically disastrous.

As we might expect from what we have learnt about the Heritage, it is of course of almost equal importance that we are *unable* to identify the types in Dickens' fiction. They are other, we do not recognise them, they are fascinating and important. It is a part of our complicated relationship with the past in which difference and sameness are always at war. Dickens is strongly identified with a period for which this conflict is particularly marked – because it is so recent, because it is in many ways so well-documented. The near past is often the battleground of various popular conceptions of history and perhaps the 1930s and 40s have now in this country replaced the nineteenth century as the most high-profile – but nevertheless the National Curriculum and hundreds of museums around the country bear witness to the Victorian period remaining an arena filled with a range of mass learning activities. This is the domain of the 'olden days' and it has its own icons, logic and values. Mangles, coal, child sweeps, top hats, big dresses, horses, steam engines, The Cane, urban squalor, a queen dressed in black. And, of course, Dickens.

This lovely strangeness is all the more appealing in Dickens' novels – and in those multi-mediated versions of the text through which they are submitted to mass experience – because of the sheer volume of detail with which it is asserted. Dickens'

characters, too, maintain their own particular non-linear coherence through the aid of detail realised in the physical world. There is clothing, like the Dodger's, which proclaims both his privileged position in Fagin's gang and underlines something of the oddness and pathos of a child old before his time. There is gesture, which enacts and re-enacts the perfunctory dramas of engagement a character makes with the world, like Mr Chadband, who 'never speaks without first putting up his great hand' (*BH* p. 262). With every show of this hand, Mr Chadband begs a moment of our attention – apparently to what he is about to say, actually to what he is, what Dickens has made him. No matter where the story has taken us, the gesture brings us back to a still point where character asserts its force.

This kind of coherence has a strong parallel in the Heritage idiom, that sense expressed by the presence of a costumed servant at Hampton Court, or the distressed timber panels nailed over the new pine door to the gift shop. No rightness here defensible by argument: only nearness and affect can signal appropriateness. In the same way, types in Dickens' novels are not simply a matter of the author importing received (*historic*) material into the work; they are a method of contending with the reader and asserting the comprehensible identity of the work. Furthermore, his characters, although so well-prepared for their new freer lives in the Heritage world, bear further witness, when re-born, to the strategy of feeling that envelopes them in the novels. They bring part of their environment with them, part of that 'bleed' into the fictional surround. They have props. These props are an indication of both how Dickens' novels habitually objectify or externalise character: and how the poetics of his vision encompass all aspects of the world, animate or inanimate, in the same structures of feeling. Juliet John draws attention to the importance of the aesthetic of the early nineteenth-century popular theatre, and its appeal to Dickens as an arena of demonstrated behaviours. Melodrama values surfaces and spontaneous emotion and sets out to prove the triumph of the communal over the individual – by defeating a duplicitous and secretive villain.⁴ It also deals in recognisable types – *shared* types – and is thus an instrument of cohesion. Theatrical props serve as visible analogies of a character's relation to the world and because of this give each attitude, each gesture, a temporal shadow, a depth which comes from living *through* time rather than simply being laid on top of it.

⁴ John, Juliet, *Dickens' Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), pp. 28-9.

Props provide an interface with the action of the novel, but allow characters to *be* repeatedly without moving forward – or perhaps while moving forward, but remaining forever the same. These props work as if each character has slipped a little piece of context into their pocket, or has cut a frame out of a scrolling background to hold still behind them in order to give the illusion of stability. In the film of Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* we see this reinforced by musical interventions in the action, where a song gives characters an opportunity to stop the world and meditate upon questions essential to the whole work.⁵ This stopping is of a kind familiar in Heritage scenarios in that it may include its own brand of action ('Consider Yourself' has the Dodger introducing Oliver to London, and 'You've got to pick a pocket or two' shows Fagin and the boys demonstrating their livelihood) but this action is emblematic and circular rather than narratively significant. It is in fact the time that obtains in the no-time of the dichotomous realm.

Mrs Gamp often features in the publicity for the Rochester Dickens Festivals. Her presence is interesting because in this purely visual medium, she is deprived of her strongest marker – her absurd comic patter. She thus reaches into the world of the novel to find a prop which will support her assertion of identity and deliver a genuine comic presence. She carries a teapot, and the teapot has the word GIN written on it (as in the programme for the 2001 Christmas festival). This she drinks from, by pouring the liquid straight into her mouth out of the spout. Her florid face, mobcap and apron complete the picture. Why is she shown in this way? Dickens tells us that 'it was difficult to enjoy her society without becoming conscious of a smell of spirits' (*MC* p. 313). Thus biology conveniently serves to write her behaviour on her physical appearance. The festival Gamp wears clothing that owes something to the figure of the stage servant, which gives an observer a general idea of her class, at least. The teapot is a prop which has had to be adapted to the rigorous demands of the dichotomous realm – Dickens' original joke is too caught up in the narrative context. In the novel, it is included in a list of Mrs Gamp's 'household matters' which she stores 'in a little cupboard by the fireplace'. This cupboard is compared to nature, since it contains coals at the bottom and 'spirits' at the top. The spirits are stored, 'from motives of delicacy', in a teapot (*MC* p. 748). Thus Mrs Gamp's pretensions to gentility, as hopeless as they are joyfully absurd, are

⁵ *Oliver!* Dir. Carol Reed, Columbia Pictures, 1968.

projected into the physical world. The joke concerns the concealment of the spirits and the spectacle of their use. “‘Betsey,’ said Mrs Gamp, filling her own glass and passing the teapot, ‘I will now propoge a toast’” (*MC* p. 753).

But this motif is too extended to be pictured or enacted in Festival-time. It needs too much narrative. This is why Fagin *wears* a string of colourful handkerchiefs, as a kind of gesture towards an emblematic episode (made so famous by the *Oliver!* musical). Mrs Gamp has not been served by a similar advantage. In the dichotomous realm, a teapot is a teapot is a teapot. Unless it has GIN written on it. The prop thus attempts to carry its significance out of its narrative context, but in so doing (like the unDickensed Squeers of the Charles Dickens Centre) changes its own nature and the comedy of which it is a part. Here we have a Mrs Gamp for readers who do not know *Martin Chuzzlewit*. She becomes instead a figure of bizarre eccentricity, of mere *colour*, in the way that Heritage relies upon jargon and signs of oldness.

There is an irreverence in those festival posturings which displeases many who see themselves as students of Dickens’ printed text. The feeling is that something is damaged, or taken away or falsified. But there is no pure reading of such rich and complex fictions. There can hardly even be any true plagiarism. As soon as we bring our world to bear on understanding Dickens’ novels (and how can we not do so?) something new is made. In the same way, the Rochester Nancy of many Dickens Festival publicity stills is an extraordinary can-can dancer of fluorescent orange flounces and vertiginous cleavage who makes Cruikshank’s more sober creation look like somebody’s auntie. This is because another idiom has got mixed in here – that of Toulouse-Lautrec and the music-hall courtesan – so that somehow she is judged as being more recognisable thus. Raphael Samuel notes how the Christine Edzard *Little Dorrit* became a vehicle for an obsessive delineation of the look of early nineteenth-century London.⁶ These two phenomena spring from the same impulse. They represent a search for coherence that operates outside, if not in opposition to, the causal justifications of storytelling. They rely on recognition to establish a collective basis for asserting a vision which is forever completing itself. Indeed, as Dickens says of Mrs Gamp:

⁶ Samuel, pp. 401-12.

The extent to which she availed herself of the vinegar, and supped up that refreshing liquid with the blade of her knife, can scarcely be expressed in narrative. (*MC* p. 413)

3. Motif

How does the coherence represented by *motif* work in Dickens? How does it transfer to Dickens realised in the lived-in world? Two examples in particular can be seen year after year demanding attention – demanding interpretation – in the midst of the Dickensian happenings that make up the Rochester festivals. There is always *dirt*: and people are always, eternally, *arriving*.

Dirt is a transient notion. As different places through different periods of history evolve and establish their cultural and social norms, dirt means different things. It is part of that ever-changing complex structure of prejudices which forms our idea of place: and our awareness of its meaning has of course a part to play in our idea of history. Think of the Hollywood Western and the evolution of its heroes from Roy Rogers to Clint Eastwood; or compare Errol Flynn's Robin Hood with Mel Gibson's William Wallace to see how the popular idea of medieval Britain has been informed and transformed by dramas of dirt and cleanliness.

For the 2001 Dickens Christmas festival, Medway Council issued a poster showing a collage of images centred round the figure of a Dickens look-a-like. There was a Pickwick, a child, a suggestion of a row of shops, and a strange apparition of a woman in a frilly shirt and three-cornered hat, like a cat-walk pirate from 1982. An extravagant black smudge covered her nose and part of her face. This is dirt and it is there to be read.

In fact, of course, it is emphatically *not* dirt. Far from being the matter out of place that pollutes or corrupts the cleanliness of the world, it is replete with intention and artifice, and has neither the random dispersal nor the moral offensiveness which defines the dirtiness of dirt. It is instead a performed entity, both the result of reading and a text itself, rooted in that fertile (dirty?) land where the Dickens text is read, grows and is read. If we were to attend the festival itself, we might find this figure associated with other clues – long-handled brushes, small boys, more 'dirt' – that might lead us to

conclude that she has something to do with chimney sweeping. But how can she be a sweep? Her gender, her clothes, her Charles II wig all argue strongly against this conclusion. She is an excellent example of the complex readings demanded of students of the read Dickens, who are required to judge a kind of primacy of texts in a universe where some seem to matter and others are merely background noise. As we have seen proved by the Festival Gamp, the issue of recognisability is critical, as characters assert their identity in a world that works according to entirely different criteria to that which has inaugurated their presence.

This mark (the dirt) is in fact a kind of writing; a mark that is not itself but is to be read as a text signifying something else, although its physical resemblance to the signified would suggest that this is not a *word*. Or does it? It is (presumably) make-up pretending to be soot, which, if we read it correctly, tells us the face under the dirt belongs to a sweep, who at the same time cannot be a sweep, cannot even be an imitation of a sweep, in fact takes care to disqualify her character from adopting a sweep's identity. The dirt is thus seen to be a knowing lie, a performance which needs to be to be read as such. Is this not only not-dirt but not even stage dirt? Perhaps it is a kind of play stage dirt, part of that *colour* which aims at nearness and difference at the same time.

Dickens own general attitude to dirtiness is demonstrated very clearly in the small scene in *Hard Times* when Stephen Blackpool returns home to find his alcoholic wife returned in his absence. To begin with Dickens establishes Stephen's moral worth by noting the condition of his home with approval: 'though the atmosphere was tainted, the room was clean' (*HT* p. 67). Domestic order was ever a cardinal virtue with Dickens. Stephen's wife, however, is presented as a complete contrast, as much an affront to the physical surroundings of the room as she is a blemish on Stephen's integrity. She is a 'creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy...' (*HT* p. 67). How strange then that publicity for an event associated with Dickens' name should use stage dirt as part of a rhetoric of appeal for a modern audience. What has happened here?

For Dickens dirt was an important signifier for neglect, of buildings, of cities, of children. His language changes if he is reaching for words to describe the honest grime associated with work. Thus the workers in the Doyce and Clennam factory in *Little*

Dorrit are ‘swarthy with the filings of iron and steel that danced on every bench’ (*LD* p. 267), as if they are being enveloped in some elaborate performance led by the machinery. It is washing, the removal of dirt, which sets us apart from our environment, natural or otherwise, from the mud of the streets, from the soil of the farm, from the animal kingdom. This is why the lack of hygiene in Mrs Mann’s baby farm is a double failure: she is perfectly aware she is neglecting her duty to the Parish, which pays her to look after the children, because she stalls Mr Bumble at the gate in order to give Susan a chance to “‘take Oliver and them two brats up stairs, and wash ‘em directly!’” (*OT* p. 6). But she is also failing in her wider moral duty, as Dickens’ comment makes clear when he notes the occasional inquest on children ‘scalded to death when there happened to be a washing, though the latter accident was very scarce, – anything approaching to a washing being of rare occurrence in the farm...’ (*OT* p. 5).

There are sometimes factors which make the relationship between authorial approval, the reader’s sympathy, and dirt in the novels more complicated. The episode in *Bleak House* where Ada, Esther, Mrs Pardiggle and her children visit the brickmaker’s cottage shows just how carefully Dickens could manipulate our awareness of the cultural significance of dirt. Brickmaking was a muddy business, as the muttered conversations of the resentful workers make clear to the interfering visitors. Their grumbling dramatises a local class antagonism in a rich but powerfully economical metaphor. Esther overhears them complain ‘about gentlefolks minding their own business, and not troubling their heads and muddying their shoes with coming to look after other people’s’ (*BH* p. 106).

Inside the house, however, the significance of the mud is changed, because it is no longer a part of a working context, it is in the home, it has not been washed off, it contaminates. This is why the brickmaker himself is ‘all *stained* with clay and mud...’ as he lies on the floor smoking (*BH* p. 106). So here is neglect, but Dickens does not allow us to condemn the man in the way we might the meanness and inactivity of Mrs Mann’s baby farm. The brickmaker’s own defence is very strong. He unconsciously underlines the previous snatches of conversation by claiming that the place is “‘nat’rally dirty, and it’s nat’rally onwholesome” – in other words its condition is inseparable from the way that the family are forced to live - and refers to the example of his daughter washing clothes in the corner: “‘Is my daughter a-washin? Yes, she *is* a-

washin. Look at the water. Smell it!’” (*BH* p. 107). Here Dickens gives us a picture of an individual striving to do right (be clean) but deprived of the power of doing so (the water is filthy). Esther herself corroborates the testimony, noticing ‘a bold girl, doing some kind of washing in very dirty water.’ Dickens allows us to agree that a dirty home is wrong, and then shows us the complacency inherent in that assumption.

What kind of dirt do we have enacted upon the face of our poster character? The professional component seems to be intended, even if its denial seems equally intentional. Is it a bid for sympathy? *Bleak House* had something of a surprising afterlife on the Victorian stage. Surprising because the larger complex novels of Dickens’ middle and late periods do not seem to have generally lent themselves so readily to popular stage adaptations as *Pickwick* and *Oliver Twist*, for instance. *Bleak House* became a hit as the story of *Poor Jo*, especially as played all over the world by the actress Jennie Lee, in an adaptation written by her husband J. P. Burnett. Richard Fulkerson explains how, although no script survives, the structure of the production can be imagined from the information given in playbills of the time.⁷ With an eye on Mrs Gamp and Squeers, it is interesting to see how Jo changes in his move from page to stage. Of course in both media, he has his props, those objects through which both author and actress can demonstrate his relationship with the world. He has his rags, his broom, and he has dirt.

Dirt is important in Dickens’ presentation of Jo, because, just as elsewhere in the novel, as we have seen, it provides a link with work; it also marks him out as neglected. Because he is a child, this raises the additional question of who therefore is responsible for him, a question Dickens sustains as Jo is ‘moved on’ through the novel. Jo’s dirt bears no moral reflection on him, but on us. So he is literally *of* the street; he is covered in it. He walks ‘*over* the hard stones’ but ‘*through* the mud and the mire’ (*BH* p. 224). However *Bleak House* is also concerned with the transmission of dirt, its spreading; Dickens uses Jo to show there is no escape for anyone from the consequences of neglect and filth. Tom-all-Alone’s is inhabited by a crowd which ‘comes and goes fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than Lord Coodle...shall set

⁷ Fulkerson, Richard Paul, *The Dickens Novel on the Victorian Stage* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International 1982). The following account of the adaptations of *Bleak House*, and their reception, is indebted to pp. 268-75.

right in five hundred years...’ (*BH* p. 220). And Jo himself, although an ‘outlaw,’ is the agent who penetrates Esther’s circle, bringing disease and disfigurement.

It probably needs stressing that nowhere is Dickens remotely sentimental about Jo’s appearance. His death is a highly-wrought, even histrionic scene with ingredients which perhaps make it an over-rich dish for modern tastes, but there is none of the picturesque urchin about this child. Lady Dedlock finds him disgusting. Her exclamation ‘Don’t talk to me, and stand further from me!’ (*BH* pp. 223-4) could be prompted by fear of discovery, but it also has a strong flavour of revulsion. Even her payment for the service rendered taxes her sensibility: ‘She drops a piece of money in his hand, without touching it, and shuddering as their hands approach’ (*BH* p. 225). She calls him a ‘horrible creature.’ Which of course he is. It would in no way serve Dickens’ purpose to make Jo in any way palatable to his readers’ sensations, because he is aiming at their feelings. Dickens needs to convince us of his horribleness in order to raise him up as a symbol of a wider sickness. He compares him to an animal, ‘a thoroughly vagabond dog,’ and by referring to his ‘slouching figure’ as he comes to sweep the graveyard step, contrives to describe him as ‘it’ through the course of a couple of paragraphs – in order to emphasise the effect of breaking into the direct, familiar and literary ‘thou’ to finish the chapter: ‘...thou art not quite in darkness. There is something like a distant ray of light in thy muttered reason for this...’ (*BH* p. 152). Here we have a tight little miniature of Jo’s journey through the novel – the human beast raised up by his loyalty and his moral significance.

How do these concerns come across on the stage? It is a characteristic of both these Victorian adaptations and Dickens’ own readings that the social criticism or satire of the novels tends to disappear in performance. Jennie Lee’s Jo (praised by the *Athenaeum* for its ‘pathos’) started something of a craze in the 1870s; one of the imitations - by George Lander and first performed in 1876 – survives in print. *Bleak House or Poor Jo* seems to have a similar structure to its stage model, in that it moves Jo’s death back to make it a more feasible climax to the whole work, but, necessarily, the author’s voice is missing to underline the wider implications of Jo, his dirt, his faithfulness and his travels. This is partly addressed by giving Jo himself comments which make a point similar to Dickens’ own about Tom-all-Alone’s: ‘it’s why they moves me on... [saying] “You ain’t a goin’

to stop here and breed fevers...” Jo is also allowed an additional awareness during the inquest which manifests itself as a kind of bitter wit:

Coroner: Who were your father and mother?

Jo: Don't know. Parish is father, and a hard one too. Charity is mother, and a stingy old gal she is, I can tell you.

Perhaps there is also a suggestion here in this last exchange of an adaptor writing in a mode now recognisable as ‘Dickensian;’ *Oliver Twist* and its many associated productions had made this kind of thing identifiable Dickens territory and a fertile landscape in which to search for audience appeal.

Generally however, reviews of the various *Jo* productions referred to the strongly pathetic, but diffuse, nature of the spectacle. The *Examiner* said Jennie Lee's show was ‘excellent for its pathos’; the *Times* supposed that ‘There are many... who will be pleased to shed a tear without inquiring why or at what they weep’. And later in the same article, revealingly, the reviewer refers to the stage Jo as:

a dirty little boy in an artistic combination of rags and sores, being perpetually ‘moved on’ for no apparent reason... The little chords of pathos, which in the novel are touched comparatively but occasionally... are in the play struck again and again till we begin to grow somewhat weary of the strain.

This performed neglect brings us closer to modern Dickensian festivities. Why is Jo pathetic? Because he cannot look after himself and he has no-one to look after him. The dirt and his rags are an enactment of this idea. And why is his appearance ‘artistic?’ Because it is contrived. It is constructed with a view to a local effect rather than in the cause of the work. It pushes the Jo-figure towards type and in doing so insulates him from the context of the novel, where a background of disease, starvation and an (almost) all-pervading social cynicism lends him huge weight. The *Times* critic sees ‘no apparent reason’ for this boy to be pushed here and there precisely because Jennie Lee's Jo has been made to exist anywhere, in a vacuum; there is no apparent reason for him to be anything, he is of himself, performing himself, forever. This is what types are, this is why they are safe.

A Victorian audience would have been able to respond to the Jo type in this way. Perhaps they would have understood the hidden infantilism behind the smudge on the face of our festival character. Like the stage urchin's rags, it acts as a lure for our compassion; this person needs taking care of. But we are not a Victorian audience; we have had more than a century to become familiar with this type which appears to us to have sprung from Dickens' pages; and as it has tumbled through the decades it has picked up new associations and grown. These days, we can afford to be a little more playful in our interpretation of dirtiness. Now that it is extremely unusual in Britain – indeed an emergency – to be deprived of clean running water, cleanliness has lost some of its class edge; it is no longer the social clue it might have been in the nineteenth century. This means that, correspondingly, dirt has become more a matter of choice – or disobedience. This is transgressive dirt, the dirt of naughtiness and freedom. We are as familiar as Dickens with the ideal of the orderly home; in fact we can hardly escape it as each year introduces new ways of getting it ever cleaner. And it is especially the preserve of children and animals to disrupt this ideal and be forgiven. Here are the raggedy Bisto Kids, still a lingering vocal presence on the modern packet as their ghostly 'aaah!' anticipates a delicious Sunday dinner. Who are they but the descendants of Jo, brought into the home, messy, naughty, but tamed by the promise of food and domestic order? As we forgive them we forgive ourselves, for all the Jos who lie heavy on our sense of historical responsibility. So types draw the sting of art and conspire with our conscience to perform closed little dramas of moral comfort and resolution.

In the film of the musical *Oliver!* there is a further striking illustration of where this typing has led. The context, of course, helps. Surely for any student of *Oliver Twist* every viewing of this film must be accompanied by renewed astonishment at how *jolly* it is. Partly this is a result of careful changes to some of the principal characters: Nancy's intimacy with Oliver (and indeed with all the boys) is established from the beginning and Fagin does not incite Sikes to violence as he does in the book: but it can only happen because, as with the figure of the stage urchin, distance promotes the possibility of playfulness. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than during Oliver's first encounter with the streets of the capital, when we are distracted momentarily by the cries of child chimney-sweeps as they emerge up on the roof of a neighbouring house. They cry out because they have been set on fire – as we discover when they run out of the front door to cool themselves in a horse-trough across the street. Their dirty faces

smile with relief. Now a number of contexts may make this acceptable and therefore amusing rather than shocking. None of these are more important or persuasive than the fact that this incident occurs as part of an image of the Heritage past.

Dickens also finds some comedy in the subject of chimney-sweeping boys. It is of course of a very different nature, and black as soot. Children were still being compelled routinely to enter chimneys while Dickens was writing, as the practice was not outlawed until 1842, so that Mr Gamfield the sweep in *Oliver Twist* is lent a specific contemporary relevance which acts on us today rather differently. His reply to the board's anxieties about the trade of chimney sweeping, and about a boy's place in it, is a wonderful example of both the crazy zest in Dickens humour and its moral force (*OT* p. 16). The first important joke is that Gamfield himself is not making one. So that he does not as we might expect attempt to deny the board's veiled accusation ("Young boys have been smothered in chimneys before now") by refuting it outright or by disproving its cruelty; he acknowledges the practice and claims it only arises from an incorrect (i.e. less forceful) infliction of pain. His technical knowledge ("That's a cause they damped the straw afore they lit it in the chimbley to make 'em come down again"), his professional prejudice ("smoke ain't o' no use at all in making a boy come down, for it only sinds him to sleep, and that's wot he likes") and the vividness of his language ("there's nothink like a good hot blaze to make 'em come down vith a run") bring him entirely alive. His earnestness is both part of the joke and part of the satire. In case we miss the point, Dickens shows us the gentleman in the white waistcoat enjoying Gamfield's explanation too, and our shame at being identified with such a character ensures that we position ourselves in a place where we can identify the arrogant cynicism of this member of the board, and the emptiness of his laughter, while still remaining open to a fuller appreciation of the humour in the spectacle of the Gamfield character.

When *Oliver!* was filmed, the reality of boy chimney-sweeps was sunk back well over 100 years into the past. Certainly long enough to have become one of the icons of the Victorian period, a variety or sub-set of our urchin, part of the world of railway stations, domestic service and crinolines. In other words, these sweeps are no longer associated with individuals, but with an idea. In this scene they serve to telegraph to the audience

the register in which the film is operating: comic, broad, and broadly comic. Once again, we have *colour*.

Any quick glance at a Rochester festival programme will serve to show how diffuse (though strong) is our understanding of the existence of Dickens' universe in an actual, lived, past. The idea of period is very strong in recreations of his novels, or parts of novels, and because our label for the period is 'Victorian,' certain icons which seem appropriate to the label are necessarily associated with the author and his works. Indeed, in the most completely circular fashion, in many ways Dickens is thought of as definitively Victorian. This is why the Music Hall tends to feature so strongly in Rochester festivities. The motif of Dickensian celebrations has been translated to an arena where it seems more palatable, more comprehensible, to modern tastes. The music hall becomes the historical shorthand, the surrogate (one of many) for the birth of this particular Dickens situation. Dickens of course adored cheap theatre, even if he would not have understood in our terms what a music hall was, and the term transfers us into the appropriate milieu for the transmission of his ideas. It is like the menu for the tourists' 'Elizabethan' banquet, which presents a re-enactment of the days of Good Queen Bess over a five course Tudor meal, ending with coffee, which, so the menu tells us, 'quickens the blood and makes the heart lightsome.' The coffee is an impostor, but communicates a sense of period in a way more amenable to our modern minds than something more rigorously historical, like, for instance, dirty food or dying of the plague.

Thus the Dickensian wrestlers, the Dickens Barbecue, Mr Pickwick reading 'Dullborough Town' from *The Uncommercial Traveller*, and the puppet show with Little Nell playing Goldilocks, all become pieces of local nonsense in pursuit of a global coherence. On the cover of the second Dickens Christmas festival programme (1989), we are treated to the sight of Scrooge opening his front door to Oliver Twist. Or at least, we see a boy with no shoes, dressed in a check shirt, flat cap, torn trousers and stage dirt, holding up a bowl and wooden spoon to a man in a doorway wearing a stripey nightcap, a long nightshirt, socks and slippers, and carrying a plate with a raw chicken, onions, carrots and brussel sprouts crammed onto it. These two must surely be the two most recognisable characters in the history of English literature. Who could rival them? Peter Pan? Sherlock Holmes? The list is not a long one. And what makes them so

irresistible to publicists and performers of all kinds is that their enacting identity is so compact, their shorthand is so short, that they can be imported together or alone into all kinds of bizarre contexts or conjunctions and still do what they do.

So Oliver is hungry (the bowl). He is in need of care (the stage dirt). He is not our contemporary (bare feet and torn clothes do not fit our understanding of modern British poverty). He is asking for something (that's what he does). All these things are augmented because of the figure of Scrooge. In this particular incarnation, he seems to be living it up in order to spite the common run of humanity. This is not the man who enjoys darkness because it is 'cheap' or who takes gruel in front of a low fire. Unless of course this is Christmas morning, and he is treating Oliver to a slap-up feed. But the expression on his face makes this unlikely. He is wearing a nightshirt, which of course reminds us of the three spirits, but (as it is not night-time) it also gives us the idea of a man shut up in his bed, solitary, never coming out. And Oliver is on the street, in the Christmas weather, with no shoes. A new drama, a new meaning, is created out of an apparently impossible conjunction. This is what happens over the course of innumerable encounters during the Festivals.

Mr Pickwick, for instance, spends his entire festival *arriving*. He never leaves off appearing, turning up, greeting, opening jollifications, launching events. One of the big hits of the regular summer festival, from its inauguration in 1979, corresponding with the opening of the Charles Dickens Centre and (more-or-less) with the creation of the Rochester-upon-Medway local authority, was always the specially arranged train which travelled from Victoria to Rochester on the Saturday. This was free to anyone who was prepared to board the train in 'Dickensian' costume. The relevant Rochester enactors were specially taken up to London so they could return in this fashion. Mr Pickwick's Special Train (there can't have been many of *those* in 1827) was merely the tool to involve our participants in an enactment situation, like that we have seen imposed upon the characters of Scrooge and Oliver Twist. They were enrolled by the train into a community of arriving. Everyone was welcomed at Victoria by a band, which then joined them on the train, thus marking and celebrating the first arrival. Even the departure of the train from London was no leaving but an arrival extended and elaborated through the entire journey. Having been initiated into the community, the

whole moved together (no-one was left) and conspired to do one thing – arrive – as well as they could.

When the train pulled into Rochester station the major characters were originally met by a coach-and-four which then drew them up the narrow High Street through enormous crowds. This, one of the few genuinely *period* features of the festival (i.e. it was incredibly dangerous), was eventually abandoned for the less spectacular, but considerably safer, parade on foot. But a Dickens festival without some kind of parade would be no festival at all. And what is a parade but an extended arrival, a greeting prolonged and dispersed so that it is transformed from the individual encounter of a second to the drawn-out welcome of a community, fixed but ever-repeating? It is in this way that the miracle of *seeing* Pickwick, Fagin, Sikes and, indeed, Dickens himself, is performed; the magic of watching that which has been liberated from our imaginations – or from the grave – is captured in these enlarged moments of welcome.

‘But if they were social and happy outside the house, what was the warmth and cordiality of their reception when they reached the farm!’ (*PP* p. 381). John Bowen points out how the open world of *The Pickwick Papers* is one held together by friendships.⁸ It is also a work of art animated by a kind of freewheeling contingency, and one whose strong background of physical movement is punctuated by episodes of arrival. These encounters are the entry points to new arenas of action and are also long-anticipated re-connections with the familiar. In fact they are virtually all anticipation. Dickens’ joy in postponing the moment of arrival for the Christmas episode in *Pickwick Papers* almost leads to it being squeezed out of the novel altogether; Wardle is on top of them before the Pickwickians are even aware of his presence.

As they turned into a lane they had to cross, the sound of many voices burst upon their ears; and before they even had time to form a guess to whom they belonged, they walked into the very centre of the party who were expecting their arrival... (*PP* p. 380)

Even the ‘ceremony of introduction’ is ‘soon over, without any ceremony at all.’ For Dickens, this arrival is all in the not-arriving, the anticipation, postponement (Mr

⁸ Bowen, John, *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000) pp. 57-8.

Pickwick and his friends send Sam ahead with the luggage but walk themselves) and the contemplation of imminent pleasure. It is almost as if, because of this, a need is created and a space is generated where our re-imagining of the episode can get free from the printed text. This is the space the festival parade triumphantly fills.

In the same way, *Oliver Twist*'s first arrival in London is an episode which receives a great deal of attention in two of the most influential versions of the novel on screen, David Lean's 1948 film and the 1968 *Oliver!* musical. It is significant that both films move Oliver's first meeting with the Dodger from Barnet to the heart of the city, practically in the shadow of St Paul's. Dickens devotes three pages to the conversation between Oliver and the Dodger, and less than one to a compressed account of the pair sneaking in to London itself under cover of darkness. They find their way to Saffron Hill through a carefully delineated maze of streets, in contrast apparently to Oliver's original vision of London as a place of vast anonymity ('nobody – not even Mr Bumble – could ever find him there' (*OT* p. 50.)). Here instead is the just-round-the-corner vividness of a street map. Dickens wants to place the action of the novel in a city familiar to his readers in order to challenge them with the contemporary relevance of his narrative.

Lean however enlarges upon the physical sensations of arrival and also uses the familiarity of London – but in an entirely different way. London is characterised as both set in the distant perspectives of history and as part of the modern world. Oliver is jostled and harassed by the arms and legs of an anonymous crowd, but this crowd is not dressed for the 1940s, and it is driving sheep, selling chickens, and assaulted by the cacophony of a period street band. All this, however, with the backdrop of the dome of St Paul's, still defiantly standing after six years of war. So as Oliver climbs with the Dodger through what could be both derelict Victorian slum and Blitz bomb site, the film score builds to a climax with a view of that dome in which we see both Oliver's Victorian dreams and aspirations of salvation and the nation's 1948 thankfulness at the miracle of survival. In this way again room is found in the Dickens text: here for a celebration of a historically specific moment enacted in post-war Britain, and an expression of a more general trend to shape other Londons for arenas of artistic and historical expression.

This need to recreate the city is exploited to the full in *Oliver!* Here it is the Dodger who welcomes Oliver to London. And welcome him to *London* is exactly what he does, as the performance of the song 'Consider yourself...' makes clear. Oliver is initiated into a community as dozens of performers are paraded in front of him demonstrating their one marked place in the vast active world of the city. And of course it is also our welcome into a theatre of Heritage presence where difference is elaborated into a gallery of distinct types. The first merely 'idle' characters (they are leaning against a wall talking) do not appear until the change in tone that occurs at the end of the song when Dodger leads Oliver off the street to take him to Fagin. Before this moment, not only is everyone busy, but all appear to be working. As well as the chimney sweeps we have already noticed, there are policemen, builders, priests, and a band: people selling fruit, fish, meat, live fowl and newspapers: people mending the road, people washing clothes and bottles: a pavement artist and even a street circus. The presence of work serves to cement the idea of myriad roles, of a dense, layered community, as well as providing an opportunity for the display of those all-important props our imaginations thrive on. As the Dodger conducts his tour, he joins in short dances with the principal groups. So as well as showing Oliver/the audience London living, he enables us to penetrate its fabric and be included through him in all the variety of its existence.

For what is this process of adaptation, re-writing? Everyone who reads Dickens makes their own Pickwick, their own London, their own idea of Pip's memories. These are things made by our imaginations working on the printed text and are provisional and private. They cannot be entirely predetermined, least of all by the author, because of the unique ingredients each of us brings to the shared knowledge of the text. But performance is those ingredients erupting back into the arena of the world, a discovery of new things to share with our contemporaries which were beyond the powers of the author to shape for us. We have to make them ourselves.

Chapter 6: The Dickensian Dickens

1. Playing at Pickwick

It would be tempting to assume that there is something exclusively contemporary, exuberantly post-modern, in these Dickensian cut-and-paste conjunctions, making new meaning out of the fragments of an artistic vision; but it is Dickens himself who gives a clear lead. Despite his bitter skirmishes with adapters and pirate authors, particularly early on in his career, in some ways he was the least precious of authors. Perhaps his practice of publishing in parts encouraged him to regard his work as in some way provisional; certainly he proved an enthusiastic adapter of his own novels and stories in later life.

‘And this,’ said Mr Pickwick, stopping short, ‘is the clock! Dear me! And this really is the old clock!’ (*MHC* p. 55)

In *Master Humphrey’s Clock* we are treated to a scene straight out of the Dickens Festival when a resurgent Mr Pickwick applies to join the story-telling club. Here we have the disorientating spectacle of two characters, created by the same author to serve in entirely different fictional worlds, enacting a complete car-crash of colliding references and registers. Dickens knows exactly how odd this is; he exaggerates the weirdness by treating Mr Pickwick as a ‘real’ phenomenon as well as a character in a book. ‘You knew me directly!’ he says when he meets Master Humphrey: ‘what a pleasure it is to think you knew me directly!’ (*MHC* p. 53). This emphasis on appearance and the catalogue of critical visual motifs which Master Humphrey has delineated for us at Mr Pickwick’s approach (his hat, his bald head, his smiling face, his spectacles, his tights and gaiters) locate the meeting in a new fictional space which is something like invented reportage. These manifestations of Pickwickness are of course important in the novel, but they are also vital as disseminators of the Pickwick myth in ‘the real world’. Thus we feel Master Humphrey is part of *our* life; a life thick with images of the Pickwick idea. In this way Dickens strives to make us feel that we are watching one of his characters step out of the book world into our home, which for the purposes of this meeting, is also Master Humphrey’s home. Master Humphrey himself rather elegantly brings together real world and Pickwick-world in the same sentence by referring both to reading ‘his adventures’ and to ‘the published portraits,’ which suggest not the illustrations from the work itself but the subsequent spin-offs available in print-

shops throughout London. Mr Pickwick is thus invited to take possession of the world we live in, which he does, by reacting to what Master Humphrey calls the ‘various libels on his character which had appeared in print’ – presumably adverse critical notices. He accepts the invitation and looks ‘very indignant’, but rises above them (*MHC* p. 53). Mr Pickwick is thus not only the sum total of all his experiences in the novel; he also has memories of those things we encounter in the world.

Of course in fact Master Humphrey is a fictional host, an invented surrogate for the reception of the genre-hopping Pickwick. He is himself a character with a very specific imagined world, his ‘lonely, solitary life’ and his house with its ‘worm-eaten doors, and low ceilings crossed by clumsy beams; its walls of wainscot, dark stairs, and gaping closets; its small chambers, communicating with each other by winding passages or narrow steps; its many nooks, scarce larger than its corner cupboards; its very dust and dullness’ – and of course his clock – are all important elements in the atmosphere Dickens felt was appropriate for the revelation of narrative (*MHC* pp. 5-6). For Master Humphrey hosts a story-telling society, whose tales are stored in the bottom of the long-case clock which gave the weekly periodical its name. This society has apparently become famous – so well-known in fact that Mr Pickwick is something of a fan.

So we find that the new relationship described in this meeting at the old house is a complex and reciprocal one; not only does Dickens make Master Humphrey invite Mr Pickwick into his world, which serves as our world, but he also uses Mr Pickwick to validate the authority of the newer fictional character, to set a seal of approval upon his claim for mythical status. This is why Mr Pickwick goes into such raptures over the key elements of the Master Humphrey universe; Dickens leans on him to force the issue, as if he wants Master Humphrey to have the instant appeal of giants like Sikes or Squeers or Pickwick himself without going to the trouble of taking his readership through a full-length work. Master Humphrey is like one of these classic figures whom everyone has forgotten about so that he needs to explain to us who he is – he assures us, for instance, that the fame of the clock itself is ‘diffused so extensively throughout the neighbourhood’ that its timekeeping is more renowned than that of the sun (*MHC* p. 10). Mr Pickwick’s efforts are part of this. In fact he seems to find it difficult to leave, he is so fascinated by being in the presence of the world he has before now only been able to imagine – like the rest of us.

His admiration was not confined to the clock either, but extended itself to every article in the room; and really, when he had gone through them every one, and at last sat himself down in all the six chairs, one after another, to try how they felt, I never saw such a picture of good humour and happiness as he presented, from the top of his shining head down to the last button on his gaiters. (*MHC* p. 56)

Perhaps, therefore, this is a corresponding invitation from Mr Pickwick, extended to Master Humphrey, offering him a place in the Dickens text, the 'World' which we see enacted during the Rochester festival, offering him a place, in effect, in our hearts. Unfortunately most readers would agree that this is an invitation that Master Humphrey himself is not able to accept; we would not receive him; it is a journey, or a transfer, beyond his capabilities. This episode and its method of appropriation, as well as showing us the peculiar light shed upon disparate creations of the same mind, also shows us its limitations. Mr Pickwick here seems lifeless and perfunctory, himself like a pirated adaptation of the original, a blurred facsimile run off by another artist (which of course, in a way, he is); and Master Humphrey is a something rather thin worked up into a grand portrait. Maybe after all that has been written about the self-sufficiency of Dickens' characters, their identifiably whole natures, their almost incidental involvement in the specific plots of the novels in which they happen to have been imprisoned, nevertheless there is something that is lost when they are appropriated to appear elsewhere. Even Dickens has to convert his Pickwick into a coarser, more diffuse figure, a meta-Pickwick, and props him up with the ready-made context of 'real life' instead of embedding him in a finely wrought imagined background like that from which he sprang.

2. The Dickensian short-circuit

This history, having, to its own perfect satisfaction...proved the Chuzzlewits to have had an origin...may now proceed in earnest with its task. (*MC* p. 6)

When Scrooge confronts the hungry Oliver Twist on his doorstep, an image – a world – is created which belongs neither to Dickens' imagination nor to the actual past nor to the modern world. It has come from a convulsion of references and a collision of types. This generation of a scenario, a model, which is has no currency beyond its own presence, which refers to no reality, is what Jean Baudrillard has written about as a

hyperreal, 'a real without origin or reality.'¹ He works on this concept to define how, today, a period he describes as the 'era of simulation,' signs themselves have absorbed every notion of what is real and deter 'every real process via its operational double (p. 2).' Thus a soap opera appears to refer to what happens in real life, to relate itself to actual experience, but in fact, as we see by the reporting of its imagined events in newspapers and magazines, generates its own hollow presence, its own hyperreality, which short-circuits what is real. Baudrillard's work makes fruitful study for anyone interested in the way that our culture appropriates, enacts and remakes its own fictions. But does it offer us a way of talking about the Dickens we see in the lived-in world that takes account of its appeal and allows us to analyse its power?

This Dickens-in-the-world certainly seems to demonstrate the loosed quality, the freeness, that is necessary for the hyperreal to enable its deterring presence. Where on earth or out of it can we place the spectacle of Fagin demonstrating pickpocketing to Danish tourists? This would make no sense to Dickens; to us it is bizarre – this is part of its appeal. To what then does it *refer*? Not to any character in *Oliver Twist*, surely? It is tempting to describe this Fagin as an entity like the soap opera, with its own irreferent reality; to attempt to tie it definitively to any other context than itself (where in the novel does Fagin behave like this? What is he doing in the same space as people like me?) is to appreciate immediately its essential irrationality. In Baudrillard's words: 'It is no longer anything but operational (p. 2).' This English word 'operational' here gives the impression of something routine or circumscribed – when in fact the opposite is the case. The hyperreal is beyond all routines, because routines bind events into a real, into a context; what is operational is simply something which operates, of itself; this is why it can be reproduced – because it can be removed. The appeal of this as a model for understanding the Dickens Festival happenings rests largely upon this notion of the apparently arbitrary nature of a spectacle which is not arbitrary at all but rather the result of behaviours which make no sense beyond the distinct succeeding minutes of their eternally present existence. In other words there is no context that would have allowed us to predict the 'behaviour' of Scrooge and Oliver that has led them to appear together on a Rochester doorstep. According to Baudrillard, they can only do this because they are 'no imaginary envelops [them] anymore (p. 2).'

¹ Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, tr. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press 1994), p. 1.

We are back with context again. It is important to emphasise the muscular aspects of this 'imaginary.' Dickens' universe establishes its legitimacy not on the page, but in our minds: so that his characters draw their authority from a context which is a conspiracy between the printed word and our imagination. For Jacques Derrida, this is 'the power of mediation or synthesis between meaning and literality.' The text has no meaning of itself, but requires the art of imagining to exist. '...in question here is a departure from the world toward a place which is neither *non-place* nor an *other* world, neither a utopia nor an alibi...' ² So our imaginations are intent on engendering, on conceiving, a place, a region, a scene, out of the performed text of the Dickens Festival as much as the printed text of the novel.

But what will be born out of the violent conjunctions of the staged Dickensian happening? These are signs imported into a contextually indifferent universe. A thousand redundancies (of clothing, of speech, of technologies) are elaborated and enacted into a vacuum of modernity. Where does this leave the 'reader', who is striving quite literally to *make* sense out of this text? We hear of Mr Pickwick catching a train. How can we *imagine* him? We take a photo of Fagin dancing to a jazz band. How are we ever going to be able to *see* him? Or, to put it another way, how can this person we see *be* Fagin? Or, to put it another way still, how does this spectacle differ from one in which an unnamed man dances in the street? What description of Fagin could accommodate his festival behaviour without him becoming so diffuse that he was no longer Fagin? Any referents which might allow us to make sense of these figures, to include them in the energetic processes of our imaginations, seem to be always sliding towards absurdity. So they get away from us into the free air of hyperexistence where what they do is only what they do and nothing else.

The elements of the hyperreal are un-legitimised by their removal from their matrix; we can look but never see them. It is as if every page of *A Christmas Carol* was printed with just one word: *Scrooge*. So when Baudrillard develops this idea of the operational hyperreal, and calls it the product of 'a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere,' ³ we ask: could this be the Rochester Dickens Festival? *Synthesis* does not amount to *context*: it is a simulation of context in that it is

² Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference*, rev. edn., tr. Alan Bass (London: Routledge 2001), pp. 4-7.

³ *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 2.

an assemblage of signs which appear to interrelate but in fact exist in an arbitrary proximity. Thus we could call a glass case in a museum a flat synthesis of signs and not a round contextual truth.

This notion of arbitrary proximity might remind us of Frank Cottrell Boyce and his experience of *I-Spy* – books ‘alienating in form as well as content’. The selection of significant objects and their presentation within the consecutive pages of the booklet might indeed be a model for a manual of the hyperreal – the book itself the kind of uncontextual synthesis to which Baudrillard refers. The form of *I-Spy* acts as a deterrent because it seeks to lay claim to a world through the analogical authority of its coherence, asserted through nearness and difference. The deterrent effect is experienced by the young reader as a kind of nostalgia, itself a symptom of alienation – a sense of the unattainable worth of the proper England. Such is the power of the I-Spy vision, that the booklet becomes the evidence-text of a more real world – a hyperreal – which divides him from his sense of his own self.

This is the kind of deterrence to which Baudrillard refers; in longhand, we might say that the kind of coherence hijacked by I-Spy and the Heritage generally – one which utilises the immediate directness of affect and aims at the performed relevance of the self – is so persuasive that it supersedes the rational and defensible coherence that characterises history and the novel. But does this take us far enough? Or too far, oversimplifying processes of derivation and referral that are at once creative and provisional? Can the festival Fagin really be ‘without origin’?

Anxiety about origins and context, which Dickens satirises at (intentionally no doubt) tedious length at the beginning of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, is something which all adapters and enactors of Dickens’ work must confront. *Micawber* is a fascinating example.⁴ Now to dress as Mr Micawber and join a parade down Rochester High Street, is to appropriate his legitimacy. Thousands of people are involved in this mass theft every year. *Micawber* however was a project to steal what was necessary from *David Copperfield* and leave the rest, to pick and choose, to create a hyperreality whose operational qualities could be sufficiently extended to become a narrative. In case we

⁴ *Micawber*, dir. Adrian Shergold, Granada Television 2001.

miss the point, the video box tells us that Mr Micawber is ‘A character created by Charles Dickens:’ but any resemblance to the familiar Micawber ‘imaginary’ of the novel more-or-less ends there. Because this is an attempt to make *David Copperfield* more Dickensian: to put in those things that Dickens himself, because of the constraints of his period, of his medium, even (and critically) because of his aesthetic judgement, was forced to leave out.

On viewing *Micawber*, we discover the limitations of the hyperreal – or at least the difference between a parade and a drama. The writer, John Sullivan, seems to have decided that Mr Micawber cannot lay claim to any new imaginary without a past. This he has in *David Copperfield*, but one so clearly and economically designed with the wider context of the novel in mind, that it will not serve anywhere else. So in the novel we hear about Mrs Micawber’s family and their attitude to her husband because of the comic drive it gives to their relationship. These few hints are worked upon in the TV drama, again to serve a purpose. That purpose is to deal with and defeat the spectre of Mr Micawber’s irresponsibility: and to make him working class. Both of these update the loosed hyperreal and tie it down to a context to which a modern audience might be able to refer.

First of all, John Sullivan and David Jason make Mr Micawber less arbitrary. The histrionics have gone, the self-pity is toned down and the abrupt reversals of mood which so bewilder David in the book are nowhere to be seen. This kind of behaviour gives the character his edge in the novel but in the contemporary world leads us into a tabloid arena of feckless parents and scrounging. In fact, although we are allowed to think that Mr Micawber has indeed engineered his own downfall through the hardly convincing weakness of an irresistible attachment to alcohol, the truth (which is even more extraordinary) is soon revealed through a series of flashbacks. This is that Mrs Micawber’s father found him so repulsive a suitor for his daughter’s hand, that he allowed him to marry her, then drugged the new son-in-law’s wine while he was working on the family accounts – in order himself to falsely falsify them and blame the unconscious innocent. Mr Micawber goes to prison. And of course is unable to practice again, hence his desperate poverty.

One of the reasons for the family's antipathy is Mr Micawber's background, which is working class. There is some leaden-footed banter between the young brothers about the peripatetic nature of the Micawber family business (his father sold shellfish). This is interesting because the strong visual impact of the Micawber place in society definitely remains shabby-genteel. It is as though our visual understanding, informed as it is through so many historical dramas and reconstructions, is quite capable of appreciating this distinctively Dickensian milieu. But the hostility is explained to our conscious minds as the result of social climbing and class resentment. This *explaining* (Micawber's innocence regarding his family situation, his victimisation) takes up much of the action. The stealing from *David Copperfield* is fairly perfunctory. We have the 'something will turn up' line a few times: the twins put in an appearance: the Micawbers have lodgers. As with many similar 'historical' dramas, the sourcing is slack, the referents are obscure, but the execution is exquisite. The emotional force of *Micawber* is entirely radiated by the energy of its detail: the dirt on the face of the coalman: the dents in the side of Mr Micawber's beaver hat: the texture of the dung in the streets.

The devil is in the detail. In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard identifies a contemporary trend towards excess, towards proliferation and obscenity. He suggests that our cultural discourse is not dialectical but extreme. This would mean that, in the context of trying to imagine the past, (and Dickens, and Dickens in the past, as Sullivan and Jason do in *Micawber*) we are not interested in opposing falsehood with truth, we would rather elaborate the lies so that they augment and expand and obscure any notion of truth. This is what television does so powerfully. We may consider that the depiction of child chimney sweeps in *Oliver!* is a falsehood: that the sedan chair in *Micawber* is ridiculous: but these lies are so lovely and numerous and excessive that we find ourselves seduced. The model 'is truer than true (being the quintessence of the significant features of a situation) and thus procures a vertiginous sensation of truth.'⁵ Those icons of the nineteenth century which tumble in upon us during the first few minutes of *Micawber* – the workhouse, the pawnbroker's, the pail of slops emptied into the street, the hats – are more real than the past, and in fact do not even refer to the past,

⁵ Baudrillard, Jean, *Fatal Strategies* tr. Philip Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski (London: Pluto Press 1990), p. 8.

only to their own existence in our idea of pastness. This is what Baudrillard describes as ‘ecstasy.’

Fashion, in his example, is the ecstasy of beauty. In other words, it is beyond true aesthetics, it can be judged only on its own terms or codes; under the influence of its seduction we cannot relate it to the ‘truth’ of beauty. And by analogy, whether or not we are seduced by historical reconstructions in museums or on television, depends not on their relationship to some lost truth but on how they manage our notions of pastness. That we have these notions is clearly important: fashion is not accessible (is differently accessible – is no longer *fashion*) to those outside the culture in which it is born. This is why ecstasy is possible with Dickens as with no other novelist; because of his extraordinary currency, he is the only writer who is able to generate in us the ‘ascent to extremes’ necessary to take us out of the realm of aesthetic judgement and into ecstasy. In this sense there is no absurdity in the spectacle of a character from a book written in 1836 and set in 1827, catching a modern train pretending to be a period train from a period when it could never have existed. All that is possible in a state of Dickensian ecstasy is to locate it in the fantasia of community and joy and nostalgia which it creates itself of itself.

3. Re-connecting: myth

Such is the apparent openness of performance outside the printed text of the novel – wherein resides the only authoritative context which allows us to make sense of Dickens’ characters – so numerous are the various contingencies of adaptation, that we may feel it becomes impossible to say anything distinct about them at all. On the other hand, some coherence clearly exists somewhere, or the Charles Dickens Centre would have been empty, the festivals unattended. A process of recognition has not been entirely alienated. The crowds in Rochester High Street are not just watching an old man: not even an old man in ragged ‘Victorian’ clothes: they are watching Fagin. There is a strange link between the apparent emptiness of the parade, or the pickpocketing demonstrations (they make no sense, they are blank) and their message, received by thousands every year. In a way, their emptiness *is* their message; it is an invitation to the imagination – that ‘power of mediation or synthesis between meaning and literality’

which Derrida speaks about in *Writing and Difference*. This is the paradox; filling the space makes it empty.

This idea of an entity which is at once vacant and meaningful is a critical notion in Roland Barthes' analysis of modern mythologies. Mr Pickwick's emergence into Rochester High Street releases him into a world of possibilities which do not connect with his fictional presence. He becomes in that sense deprived of associations which link him to his environment; he becomes impossible, even invisible. But, of course, he remains Pickwick. He must remain Pickwick in order to allow our imaginations to be free; if he was not recognisable, we would be paralysed by the very openness of the spectacle, of what we were seeing. This seems analogous to the way Barthes describes the emptiness of myth drawing on the meaning of its constituent parts – the signs it appropriates – as if they were 'an instantaneous reserve of history.'⁶ Everything has the potential to be mythologised, because 'every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society (p. 109).' Surely this process of appropriation is what is happening as Dickens' characters get free of their context – where they are closed and silent because they are serving within the circumscribed boundaries of the author's created world – and start selling cigars and getting on the radio.

This appears to fit Dickens because fiction speaks reality as well as history. So can we make any useful distinction between the two? Both are precipitate activities which attempt to rescue reality from contingency by speaking it. 'Meaning,' according to Derrida, 'must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself:' indeed 'what has not yet been produced within literality has no other dwelling place.'⁷ So whether language is serving the purposes of what we call history or what we call fiction, it introduces us to, or confronts us with, a rent in the complete face of the world, a selection from the all-there-is. No wonder it is so easy to become accustomed to Dickens appearing on the same stage or scenario, as part of the same metaphor or register as his characters – in paintings, in documentaries, in parades, in museums: we understand their presence in the same way. Our Dickens is inaugurated through language, verbal and visual; it is impossible for him to exist anywhere else. His origins

⁶ *Mythologies*, p. 118.

⁷ *Writing and Difference*, p. 11.

lie in speech. And where have Sikes, Silas Wegg, and David Copperfield come from? In the way that Dickens has been shaped for us – is being shaped – out of the totality of history, they are born into language out of the unfathomable completeness of the writer's imagination.

4. Reconnecting: reading

By acknowledging Barthes we can to a certain extent put a name to the freed Dickensian character without either compromising its liberty or allowing it to become impossibly diffuse. We might also identify an invitation to revisit Baudrillard's question of deterrence and challenge the tension there implied. We might think again of the dirty face on our festival poster, that figure which appears itself to challenge or defy every coherent assertion it makes. This sweep/no-sweep, like the Fagin/no-Fagin, is so many things at once and none of them that it seems impossible to contextualise, to imagine, to see. And it is certainly true that the assertiveness and coherence of contemporary manifestations of Dickens-World appear to have obscured their 'historical' presence – i.e. that embedded in narrative, that figure we might come up with were we to describe the *Oliver Twist* Fagin, rather than the festival Fagin that has 'succeeded' him. Mrs Gamp, as we have seen, is for festival-goers not the Gamp of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Fagin is a mischievous clown; Miss Havisham parades up and down the High Street with just a walking stick to suggest that perhaps she is not accustomed to exercise.

When we are then forced to consider that in fact this annual event pulls in enormous numbers of people, and has done for more than 25 years, and that the promise of what it offers is somehow spread effectively by such apparently incoherent means, it seems complacent to ignore the process by which these images find their way to meaning. If they were genuinely 'operational' and did not refer to any origin or other presence, they would surely be illegible. They would be dark signs that absorbed all that light shed by the real – the original text – and so plunged our understanding into an essential night. In fact, we are left, paradoxically, with recognition and coherence (with, of all things, a *name* – the Dickens Festival) as the profound and provisional legacy of the hyperrealisation of Dickens' text.

These festival characters are clearly no longer surrounded by their native context – if indeed they can be said to have a nativity – in the Dickens novel. They are out of the book and in the street. Their context has become strenuous and fluid, and is supported by the kind of coherence that we have already examined. If they deter literality they do so only in the sense that imagination itself deters it, only in the way that reading replaces the book. What Barthes's 'oral state' implies, and what the inadequacies of the hyperreal demand, is an acknowledgement of the creative energy of the reader. To consider even the most radical assemblage of synthesised signs – that found in the I-Spy manual of the hyperreal – is inevitably to acknowledge the work done by the reader. Boyce's sense of alienation was a reading which drew both from his own need to belong to the super-real proper Britain and from his awareness of his own difference. In other words he contextualised I-Spy through what he brought to his reading. The analogical power of the true Britain demanded it. The irreferent nature of its assertions was merely an illusion.

Or rather, no illusion, but a reality held in abeyance, one never-to-be, only always about to exist. *Without reading*, if that were possible, we can make a blind guess at the form of the hyper-text, that refers to nothing, that turns upon itself, that poises on the brink of legibility. But reading inevitably *places* the hyperreal, as Boyce's example shows us. He constructs *his* I-Spy as a text that speaks of alienation and nostalgia. Thus Baudrillard's idea of 'synthesis' becomes the theoretical dark matter which allows the benign mass of intelligibility to balance across the fulcrum of the reader's perception. It is, however, *actually* impossible. It shows us that *reading* is the context of the Dickens festival; reading converts synthesis by not perceiving it, by the mere becoming initiated by its act. The incoherence of synthesis is something we understand must exist but can never feel, such is the strenuous activity of assimilation and generation that replaces it. We need only go to Dickens himself for a marvellous extended example of how this works. But since this takes us into a new part, we need a moment of review.

The Dickens brand detectable in the Heritage tourism of North Kent has its origin in a corporate understanding or idea of his work. This 'floating' Dickens, distinctive and recognisable, but not tied to the printed page, has a history that can be traced in public perceptions of his work. Whether we call it 'imaginary text' or just 'text' or, indeed, 'Dickens-World', its sustainable features – and its very existence – rest upon the seeds

sown in the peculiar structure of Dickens' fiction, most particularly on the way a reader is encouraged to assemble a coherent experience of the work. This experience, or reading, is one which owes its vitality to the emblematic and repeatable devices of type and motif, rather than the transforming line of narrative. By applying observations critics have made about visitor interaction with the Heritage, we can see how these energies, which operate through nearness, affection and analogy, rather than through argument and dialectic, enable Dickens matter to emerge into the world. The examples below, taking in both Dickens and Dickensians, are followed by a consideration of what makes this emergence pleasurable and necessary.

Part 3: Dickens memories

Chapter 7: Dickens' Dark Ride

It is a strenuous reading – contextualising, disseminating, transforming – that lies at the heart of Dickens-World. Dickens himself shows us this. In ‘Travelling Abroad,’ in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, he very clearly indulges his imagination in the Heritage idiom, by creating a space which can nourish his need for stasis, for safety and home-feeling. He calls this space ‘France’. In fact he uses his position as writer to construct his own Dark Ride.

Dark Rides were all the rage back in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Springing from an awareness of the growing economic potential of the Heritage marketplace, and benefiting from the consequent release of funds from various sources, private and public, they were (and still are) perhaps the ultimate expression of a perceived trend away from traditionally interpreted public historical material (cases of artefacts, long labels) towards a new ‘Heritage’ idiom (few, if any, original objects, ‘an emphasis on spectacle, rather than education’¹). The term Dark Ride was used in the trade very loosely to cover a number of different visitor attractions, epitomised by those found in York, at *Jorvik*, and in London, at the *Tower Hill Pageant*. The name stuck because it covers the two most important features of such an experience; the visitor is plunged into darkness, and thus immersed in a constructed environment, sealed from the light and the outside world: and he or she is also carried, usually in some kind of electric car. What is interesting about these elaborate visitor attractions is that, in taking a concept, or mode of perception, to an extreme, they enable us to identify the operation of the Heritage process more clearly, and to see the role of reading within it.

‘Since the beginnings of modernity the past has gradually been institutionalised through museum and Heritage representations, and promoted as that which modernization has overcome.’² In fact, as we have seen, this interpretation is rather too simplistic in two ways. It characterises the Heritage movement as an entirely ‘top down’ phenomenon, imposed by organisations with, presumably, overwhelming economic power, and it

¹ Walsh, Kevin, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-modern World* (London: Routledge 1992), p. 105.

² *The Representation of the Past*, p. 148.



ignores the way in which the sense of Heritage is in fact supra-historical, encompassing literature and geography outside the museum environment. Our analysis of Dickens-in-the-world shows us how Heritage can only exist in the located personal contact of the individual with the read entity, in the work that he or she does, and in the performance that results.

At *Jorvik*, generally acknowledged to be the queen of all UK Dark Rides, visitors are carried in a series of cars along a time tunnel, back through a thousand years of history indicated by appropriately costumed dummies, finally bursting into ninth century York. This ‘journey’ also later features the original archaeological excavation that led to the displays, itself frozen as though still underway. Dark ‘walks’ do exist; many large museums contain reconstructed environments (the Trench Experience at the Imperial War Museum, for example) – but rides allow the institution a greater degree of control and promote at least a physically passive visitor experience. At *Jorvik*, we are moved along at a pre-determined pace, and permitted to linger only where thousands of others have lingered before us. The scene passes in front of our eyes, changing, never-changing, as our home unit – family, couple, shared car – is moved through the environment.

‘Travelling Abroad’ is a fascinating essay, quietly compelling, approachably urbane and profoundly odd at the same time, like much of *The Uncommercial Traveller*. It shows Dickens on his own Dark Ride, sweeping aside historical time and engaging with the Heritage: doing in fact, precisely what thousands of others are to do with North Kent in the time to come as they search for the read coherence of the Dickens Country. The writer begins the essay by beginning a journey. But for someone so interested in the mechanisms and mechanics of travelling, Dickens treats the reader to a strangely sparse beginning. ‘I got into the travelling chariot, pulled up the steps after me, shut myself in with a sharp bang of the door, and gave the word, “Go on!”’ (*UT* p. 61).

Dickens dives into a box and emphasises a determined withdrawal from the world, even as he goes out into the world. The ‘sharp bang’ seems like a warning. The chariot is propelled by no apparent human or animal agency; London merely begins to ‘slide away’ in the most perfunctory fashion (‘river’, ‘Old Kent Road’, ‘Blackheath’), before Dickens gives us a few more details of the inner space which speeds him through this

scrolling landscape. He takes great satisfaction from the passive nature of this journey, being ‘amply provided in all respects’ by, again, some unseen agency: and in fact having no idea where he is going (*UT* p. 61). As we will see, this outer shell of unyielding unexpectedness conceals a soft body of determinate and identifiable matter which brings reassurance and confirmation. Dickens knows *exactly* where he is going; the entire journey becomes an odyssey of recognition. In the same way Heritage tourism promises distinctiveness and surprises, while relying on dramas of identification to engage the visitor and sustain a coherent narrative.

The chariot, with its luggage and light, is at once an identity and a refuge. Whatever the scene outside, the space within can be found, present, correct. Thus the Dark Ride cossets us with a passive experience which controls, but also provides. We submit because we know that in our car lies safety, both from the hazards of the world (we may step out onto a live wire, Dickens may be harassed by fellow travellers) and from the truth. If we remain in our car, we cannot take a peep at the workings. The workings of the world are certainly not apparent to Dickens in his chariot. His first view outside, as a ‘collected traveller’, is of the middle distance: ‘the widening river...bearing the ships, white-sailed or black-smoked, out to sea’ (*UT* p. 61).

Dickens’ chariot is magic too, like our Dark Ride. It goes back in time. The story of the ‘very queer small boy’, which contains material Dickens liked enough to repeat in a private context,³ is a kaleidoscope of temporal registers and time signatures which are in many ways a characteristic feature of the re-enacted Heritage experience. A young boy pops up out of nowhere (out of the ‘darkness’ surrounding the car) and Dickens gives him a lift. This boy tells Dickens about Gads Hill Place, which lies on the Gravesend to Rochester road. He claims his own father has held out this house as a potential reward for those who are ‘persevering’ and ‘work hard’. Dickens is ‘rather amazed’ by this boy’s story. He tells us why: ‘...that house happens to be my house, and I have reason to believe that what he said was true’ (*UT* p. 62).

Dickens owns the house. That seems to be clear enough. The boy’s story is ‘true’. Is this straightforward? Dickens presumably means more than that he subsequently met the

³ *Letters*, volume 8, pp. 265-6 (19 January 1857).

boy's father and was able to corroborate this account of present virtue and promised reward. Of course, we know from Dickens' letters that the story here happened to Dickens himself and involved his own father, but even taking the text at face value, we are able to appreciate (through Dickens' amazement) that the truth here is rather larger, that in fact the boy's story *comes* true. The point – the truth – of the story lies at once in the future (for the small boy) and in the known past (for Dickens). This is why he is 'rather amazed.' What we have here is a moment in the past (Dickens tells the story – something happened to him on a journey) framing a story in the past of that past (the boy Dickens talking about his Dad), while looking to the future of this past (the Dickens who has persevered, worked hard and bought the house), which the present past of the narrative knows is true. A moment passed (past) within the moment present-in-the-past.

It is Dickens' 'reason to believe' that gives him the authority to identify the truth and to forge a coherent personal narrative here. The very archness of this formulation is a thin transparent veil across the 'secret' at the heart of Dickens' engagement with this section of his *Dark Ride*. It is an evasion designed only to draw attention to that which it conceals. The reason-to-believe is not in the evidence offered to support the belief ('that house happens to be *my* house'), it is in the personal connection established between the writer who is 'reading' the boy's story - the story within his own story - and that story itself. The kind of coherence we find here is not that which requires a narrative that progresses in a historically linear way, but which becomes a template for reading the Heritage Dickens, which the writer himself presents to us as a reason to believe. This reason is the drama enacted by the projected self – the very queer small boy – and the lived-in world; this is read by the writer, who thus realises a Heritage. This is an exposition of Heritage reading. Any notion of historical time falls apart and is not able to accommodate this truth; everything is profoundly present in the classic *Dark Ride* manner.

The emblematic feel of this essay is increased, as Dickens moves into France, by his habit, especially obvious in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, of casting experience in the mould of the habitual. This is what Timothy Clark calls the 'urban everyday': 'That is, a place or person is often presented not precisely as appearing on a particular occasion but

in terms of qualities that reliably recur on all or lost occasions, habitually or recurrently.’⁴

Sometimes Dickens brings out this sense of the habitual very clearly; he foregrounds it and, in this case, makes it part of the experience of travelling.

Early in the morning I was on the deck of the steam-packet, and we were aiming at the bar in the usual intolerable manner, and the bar was aiming at us in the usual intolerable manner, and the bar got by far the best of it, and we got by far the worst – all in the usual intolerable manner. (*UT* p. 62)

Recognition becomes a part of the narrative of the journey, as Dickens finds pleasure in fitting this journey into the shape made by other, past journeys. Listing a series of details which have no detail but are instead a kind of a paradigm of France-by-road (bare trees, dusty soldiers, field labourers, broken stones) he feels at last that he has ‘arrived’. The traveller does not enter France when he enters France, but only during that first morning on the road, when certain signs are in place. Arriving is thus a strenuous process of construction. The signs help to build the ‘France’ with which Dickens is familiar, which he needs. What is interesting is how in making this one journey, he finds his France in recognising himself travelling. Once again, the truth of the view from the Dark Ride lies in the event of the dramatised self. The ‘well-remembered bottle of rough, ordinary wine’ is a prop which allows a staging of a show entitled *Lunch on the Road*, which Dickens enjoys, even as, or because, he observes himself enjoying lunch on the road. This communion affords the traveller ‘unspeakable satisfaction’ (*UT* p. 63). What is this satisfaction that cannot be spoken? We find that ‘France’ is not so much geographically situated as placed in a tight relationship with the traveller/reader who uses certain tools to realise its presence. This is the true France (because it can be performed rather than assumed), a Reader’s France, a ‘Heritage’ France, which is located in the Dark Ride alongside Gads Hill, there to be summoned by the appropriate Dickens selves of the small boy and the famous author having his *Lunch on the Road*.

⁴ Clark, Timothy, ‘Dickens through Blanchot: the nightmare fascination of a world without interiority’, in John Schad (ed.), *Dickens refigured: bodies, desires and other histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1996), p. 29.

In fact Dickens has already told us very clearly what kind of text this Dark Ride is and how we can expect to interpret it: in terms which prefigure exactly the way in which Heritage is discussed and condemned amongst many historians of the present day. 'I felt that now, indeed, I was in the dear old France of my affections' (*UT* p. 63). Heritage is thought of as a distinctively affective discourse. Valerie Krips, in discussing how Alice (of Alice in Wonderland) became a Heritage object worthy of inclusion in the 1951 Festival of Britain, notes the power of the kind of staging which allows new associations to accrue to remembered cultural entities. 'Living history', as perhaps the most explicit example of this kind of process, empowers the visitor because it shifts the burden of authenticity from curator (whose evidence includes records, artefacts and other primary sources) to visitor (whose evidence is how they feel).⁵ This is the empathy that makes Robert Hewison uncomfortable and which Kevin Walsh describes as 'dangerous' and 'anti-critical' because it denies the existence of history as process.⁶ We have seen, in fact, that all attempts to define 'the Heritage' will come to nothing if we do not pay attention to how its meaning is inaugurated from moment to moment by the work of the reader: that, indeed, it is a phenomenon that can only exist in personal engagements, and in the shape of those processes.

Dickens' affective France is as much a part of his Dark Ride as the Medway Towns landscape conjured by the small boy. It contains artefacts rich with arcane meaning that can only be liberated by the collision of Dickens' eye. Because this France can only exist in work. The work of looking, and reading. The stone breaker's 'hard, hot, shining hat, on which the sun played at a distance as on a burning-glass' is the personal key here (*UT* p. 63). Dickens does not even say that by encountering – reading – this clue he *recognises* his France: he just suddenly states that he is *in* France, the true France. Once again the self is projected into the drama which one is seeing.

This France is in many ways a curious place that at first appears to exist only to be travelled through. The momentary flying dust is the obscuring screen that reveals the truth, and once it settles there is nothing. The reality of Dickens' affective France lies in being passed. And past. How interesting that in reaching for a suitably intimate

⁵ Krips, Valerie, *The Presence of the Past: Memory, Heritage and Childhood in Postwar Britain* (New York: Garland 2000), p. 75.

⁶ *The Representation of the Past*, p. 104.

adjective, Dickens should choose 'old'. The colloquial double 'dear old' no doubt flowed easily from the pen. But he comes back to it a few lines later. 'Welcome the old French hill, with the old French lunatic...living in a thatched dog-kennel halfway up...' (UT p. 63). The lunatic may indeed require the descriptive adjective, but it seems hardly necessary to specify the age of a feature of the landscape. These things are old because they reside in Dickens' memory and because they confirm their unchanging status. Even the beggars seem summoned up by a 'resurrectionary process'. Not only are they of the past, but they have apparently been dead, out-of-the-world, until brought back to life for the purposes of Dickens' visit and his arrival in the true France. These beggars are not part of historical time; they can only exist in the ever-repeating present of the passing tourist. They have jumped from one interaction to another with no living and contingent existence in between. It is as hard to conceive of them doing anything else as it is to imagine the interactive manikins sneaking out of the museum for a night on the town. The old people *exhibit* the children and the children *exhibit* the old people. Dickens even pays a fee, 'scattering among them' some 'small coin' (UT p. 63).

Through this sameness, Dickens reaffirms his affective France and recognises himself. He enjoys 'every new assurance' that France still stands where he had left it. After a short stay in Paris, disturbed by a persistent vision of a body he has seen in the morgue, which appears to follow him everywhere, he once again, in setting out on the road to Switzerland, asserts how this France can only be found in its passing. If anything, he seems to approach even closer to an understanding of how the France-experience is operating. He is still attached to listing those features in which the secret clues of the true France reside: 'the queer country inns, full of vases and flowers and clocks...the dull little town...Monsieur the Curé...the highway dust...' But now he names this whole arrangement as 'the long, long spell of France', as if acknowledging its unreal, out-of-the-world magic. In looking out of the chariot window, Dickens finds himself 'in that delicious traveller's trance which knows no cares, no yesterdays, no tomorrows, nothing but the passing objects and the passing scents and sounds!' (UT p. 67).

This France is, in fact, Dickens' Dickens Country. Like the literary tourists who visit Medway to press up close against the fixed living presence of that world he placed behind it, or above it, or residing within those clues which only they can interpret, here, in moving through the French countryside, Dickens finds something immovable. A

determinate and unchanging Heritage France, not subject to the dialectics of history, which he can read and be part of and read himself-being-a-part-of. Indeed instead of going somewhere, on the road, between places, only about-to-arrive: suddenly Dickens is there, he is, he knows.

The chariot in which Dickens has accomplished this arrival, itself pulls up in Strasbourg. And this stop gets Dickens moving again, into the fleeting present of city life. The 'idle trifle of a vaudeville', the (further) story within the story that he describes as being 'played' for him in the house across the street from his hotel, serves to emphasise the linear and irretrievable *now* that assails Dickens as soon as he stops moving and engages with the world outside his chariot. In Strasbourg everything is specific. We have names, we have detail: Straudenheim ('a jeweller... a dealer in money... a diamond merchant, or what?') has large lips, a pear nose and a black skull cap; he is writing, putting his pen in his mouth and making peculiar movements with his right hand, 'like a man steadying piles of cash' (*UT* p. 68). When Straudenheim and an accomplice assault a soldier and knock off his hat, out fall 'two sugar-sticks and three or four large lumps of sugar' (*UT* p. 69). This eccentric and vivid narrative – eccentric with all the unaccountable force of the present – paradoxically speaks of a kind of engagement missing from Dickens-on-the-road. Even though the story is 'played' for him, every line demonstrates how the writer's eye is commanded by the scene in front of it, to an extent that the watcher is exposed, where the Dark Ride traveller is concealed. Indeed, so engaged – implicated – is the spectator/writer, that at one point, sounding a distinct note of alarm, he is convinced that he will be accosted by his players and dragged onto the stage: 'They were coming over to me (I thought) to demand satisfaction for my looking at the housekeeper...' (*UT* p. 69).

In Strasbourg, looking is active and involves a kind of guilt. The satisfaction that could not be spoken, an excess produced from the enclosed and repeated staging of the Lunch-on-the-road, has suddenly tuned into a debt. The observer instinctively relates this debt to 'looking'. The 'fee' of scattered coin which has sufficed in the Heritage France as payment for the 'exhibition' of the old people and children, has become something more obscure and forceful. Nothing other than *satisfaction* will do. On the Dark Ride, arrived at the perpetual non-arrival of passing through, the blameless regard of the traveller provokes no abrupt contentions.

When Dickens sets out once again, he returns to the habitual enacted real, 'like one in a sweet dream'. Again we have a list of generalised markers or signs of the progress of the journey, this time through Switzerland. This is a 'land of wooden houses, innocent cakes, thin butter soup, and spotless little inn bedrooms' where Swiss marksmen are 'for ever' target shooting (*UT* p. 70). Even when Dickens abandons his electric car/chariot for a mule, the writing stays firmly located in the 'peculiarly divided and yet suspended temporality of the habitual':⁷

Of a sudden... I would come down into picturesque little towns... and would stroll afoot into market-places in steep winding streets... About this time, I deserted my German chariot... and went up a thousand rugged ways, and looked down at a thousand woods of fir and pine... (*UT* pp. 70-1)

The 'suspended temporality' provides a kind of cover for the eye – and it indicates the blameless looking that is one of the seductive pleasures of the dichotomous realm. The withdrawn glance that characterises the Dark Ride – the view from the chariot – helps us to understand how the traveller/tourist (whether Dickens through France or Dickensian through Medway) engages with a self-contained, closed and determinate environment. The thrill of recognition, so clearly described by Dickens in 'Travelling Abroad', allows the viewer/reader the opportunity to establish an inclusive relationship with the environment like that promised by Heritage attractions. This is the feeling-a-part-of which is promoted so strongly by living history events. But this inclusiveness is at once limited and made safe by the peculiarities of the dichotomous realm which mean that time is circumscribed by memory. All that happens is all that happens. The open-ended present that unsettles Dickens in Paris and Strasbourg – the dynamic 'stops' on his trip – is what assails us in the ordinary business of living. This is not to say that it is impossible to visit a medieval castle, or travel through France, or even jump on a Dark Ride, and learn something: it is merely to emphasise how the possibilities of a determinate Heritage existence are situated in each moment, driven by desire and provoked by the memorial.

Given all this, it is interesting that Dickens can only end his essay with the further intrusion of the open present, revealing that in fact the entire experience has been a kind of reverie – a virtual Dark Ride, no less. Characteristically, he is unable to leave us quite

⁷ 'Dickens through Blanchot', p. 34.

so simply as all that, and cannot resist an impulsive gesture, almost a spasm, directed towards the very act of writing as it takes place, 'now'.

I came to the Lausanne shore of the Lake of Geneva, where I stood looking at the bright blue water, the flushed white mountains opposite, and the boats at my feet with their furled Mediterranean sails, showing like enormous magnifications of this goose-quill pen that is now in my hand. (*UT* p. 72)

'This' pen, 'now' in fact appears to be the literary jolt which provokes the greater intrusion of the narrative present (in the past of the writing hand) as Dickens emerges from his daydream in the 'Carriage Department of the London Pantechnicon'. For the reader, it is almost as if the *writing* author, as well as the *written* one, has himself been caught up in the delicious no-time of determinate Europe and, as a desperate measure, is forced to launch his quill into the text in order to rescue his selves from terminal nostalgia. Otherwise, who knows where it will end?

Readers of Dickens, faced with a similar dilemma of an unbearably attractive and persuasive written world, one which is attractive *because* it is so persuasive, having no inaugurating pen to project into the scene, are forced to live with their reading the best way they can. By sharing it.

Chapter 8: Dickens and Dickensians

1. Fellowship

For Dickensians, the language of devotion has always fallen easily to hand. It is often explicitly Christian, and no matter how self-conscious, or even tongue-in-cheek, the metaphors claim a legitimacy not just from the passion of the devotee but from the assumed worth of the object, Dickens himself. The very existence of *The Dickensian* is part of a corporate assertion of that worth. He is, of course, the ‘Immortal Boz:’ has a place of ‘nativity’ and Gad’s Hill Place is ‘the bourne to which all devout Dickens worshippers make a pilgrimage’.¹ Perhaps this is fairly throwaway: but sometimes within the pages of *The Dickensian* the tone seems to grow serious. At a charity dinner for children organised by the Portsmouth branch of the Dickens Fellowship, ‘Dickens the Writer was forgotten...and Dickens the Man, Dickens the Lover of Little Ones, was remembered.’ After the dinner, Lord Portsmouth makes a speech in which he claims to be a ‘disciple’ of Dickens.²

The very term ‘fellowship’ itself carries strong Christian associations. Its distinctiveness is recognised. ‘Why is it,’ says the Pall Mall Gazette leader of 8 February 1905, ‘that the art and the memory of Dickens bring men together in bonds of fellowship...? Why for instance is there not a Thackeray Fellowship?’³ Part of the sense of identity which brings Dickensians together into these ‘bonds’ is a matter of action rather than merely contemplation. The January 1911 issue gives the president the opportunity to prepare the membership for a year of preparation (1912 being the centenary of Dickens’ birth) by confirming this commitment to making an impact on the world: ‘we shall be in accord with Dickens’ teaching and Dickens’ principles...if we devote our thought and develop our energy to acts of mercy and charity.’ He confirms the inspiration to appropriate action to be found in the novels (‘the Tiny Tims need attention’) and could hardly use language of greater reverence when referring to the task in hand. ‘Every darkened home we brighten, every little sufferer we rescue, every despairing fellow-creature we raise up, and make hopeful, is a monument to Charles Dickens.’⁴ Here the strong echoes of both Luke XXII 19 (‘this do in remembrance of me’) and IX 48

¹ *The Dickens Country*, pp. 1 and 221.

² *The Dickensian*, 1 (1905), p. 74.

³ *The Dickensian*, 1 (1905), p. 66.

⁴ *The Dickensian*, 7 (1911), p. 5.

(‘Whosoever receiveth this child in my name receiveth me’) task the reading membership with the responsibility of moral action.

So what is the appropriate arena of this action? How is the Dickensian to recognise his or her own nature? There are many books devoted to just this subject, mapping out the territory – physical, emotional, artistic, spiritual – of the Dickens Country. But these are not simply guides to the novice or the unsure. There are too many, they are all too similar. There is an element of personal compulsion, of artistic drive in the journey of which books such as *Rambles in Dickens-land* or *The Dickens Country* are the result and record.

Detail is important. The energy with which leads are followed up yields the kind of insight in which the smallest item of information is the greatest triumph. William Hughes, for instance, talks to the cabinet maker and upholsterer who furnished part of Gad’s Hill Place. From him we learn that two bedrooms were separated from their dressing rooms initially with curtains made of chintz in an ‘Indian’ pattern. But were then changed to one of ‘crimson damask.’⁵ The same writer also fills two and a half pages with the adventures of a man whom he interviews on the sole basis of the fact that he looks a bit like Dickens (pp. 270-2).

This example makes a fine microcosm of Hughes’ method and the general procedure of many of these Dickensian writers. First of all there is the assertion of contiguity – i.e. where the Dickens life or art meets the everyday world – in this case the apparent fact of physical resemblance. There follows a gathering of supporting evidence by the writer/compiler: ‘Sir Arthur Otway told Mr Baird [the look-alike] that the Rev Mr Webster, the late vicar of Chatham, had always mistaken him for Charles Dickens...’ Finally – and crucially – there is the ‘new’ testimony of the present writer himself: ‘It struck us both forcibly that Mr Baird’s appearance at the time of our visit was very like the last American photograph of Dickens, taken by Gurney in 1867.’

This final personal confirmation is so important it sometimes has to be produced even when actual experience falls short of what the author requires of his written record.

⁵ Hughes, William, *A Week’s Tramp in Dickens-Land* (London: Chapman and Hall 1891), p. 85.

After an inconclusive trip to Aylesford where the physical details of the landscape refuse to conform to the fictional account preserved in *The Pickwick Papers*, Hughes and his friend Frederick Kitton ‘console’ themselves by reading the book and decide to ‘make believe’ that they have ‘actually seen’ Manor Farm, Dingley Dell (p. 299). This imagining of fact is very far removed from the processes of mere fiction. Our two gentlemen are not writing themselves a story which is to be enjoyed as an open expression of the imagination, whose veracity is irrelevant; they are masking a void (not finding the ‘real’ Dingley Dell) with a true lie, whose entire worth rests on the fact that they must believe it. In connection with the same excursion, Hughes characterises Dickens’ method by describing it as one in which the author ‘found it convenient often-times to take a nucleus of fact and surround it with a halo of fiction’ (p. 299). Here we can see Hughes and Kitton embarked upon the opposite process – by inventing the fact that they have seen the real Manor Farm, the original faithful heart of fiction is embraced by a shallow dream of the truth.

This genre or sub-genre of criticism (or travel writing? Or hagiography?) certainly amounts to more than mere guidance to fellow Dickensians. Hughes does, it is true, include a description of ‘a preliminary tramp in London’ in his book because he can appreciate how it may be useful to ‘foreign tramps in “Dickens-Land”’ (pp. ix-x). But essentially this is a ‘record of a pilgrimage’ and written for its own sake, because of some passion or ambition to understand experience. As he writes of Gad’s Hill Place:

the impression left on our minds is such as to induce us to feel that we understand and appreciate more of Dickens’ old home than any illustration or written description of it, however excellent, had hitherto adequately conveyed to us. We have seen it for ourselves. (p. 191)

As we know from our Heritage examples, the personal aspects of the journey are central; the whole book is a testimony to it. And nothing could be less passive. As its title implies, *A Week’s Tramp in Dickens-Land* is full of activity. In fact its very existence, and that of those many other similar testimonies, is proof that being a Dickensian is to be a lover of Dickens in the world, to respond to the impulse to get out, to share, to act - to perform. The secret Dickensian does not exist.

2. Performance

In June 1909 Norfolk is selected for the annual expedition of the Dickens Fellowship. The itinerary is obviously carefully planned to include the relevant destinations and landmarks – and activities. These activities are strongly imitative in nature: ‘The proposition is that Blundestone... should be the objective, and that the train should be taken to Lowestoft and the party driven to Blundestone, and thence along the route taken by Barkis into Yarmouth.’⁶ On the actual trip: ‘some light refreshments were taken, and, of course, it was thought the correct thing by some that those refreshments should be sherry and biscuits, in emulation of Mr Murdstone’s custom.’⁷

William Hughes is similarly aware of ‘following Mr Pickwick’s example... taking a turn before breakfast’ and finding himself upon Rochester Bridge.⁸ This is evidence of a kind of reading, in, and of, the world. Hughes, along with his fellow Dickensians in Norfolk, begins with a book, in his case one dating from 1836. Then he goes for a walk on a bridge in 1888. He does both, fully. He takes his idea of *Pickwick* into the traffic and walks the walk while admiring the pre-Victorian banks of the Medway through eyes which search for their existence beyond the railway line and somewhere under the chimneys of the cement factories. He writes the book as a record of – more properly *as a part of* – this performance.

Dickens himself had experienced this feeling of participation, in a live context. As he wrote to Forster: ‘The audiences do everything but embrace me, and take as much pains with the readings as I do.’⁹ These pains pay off most spectacularly in *A Week’s Tramp* in a wonderful moment which must rank as the exemplar of all Dickensian achievement. Hughes himself recognises it as a bit unusual, even if the anecdote is confined to a footnote: ‘Enthusiastic admirers of Dickens will doubtless envy me the possession of some remarkable memorials of the great writer.’¹⁰

These memorials include a hat which belonged to the author, some collars, and a bottle of ‘very rare old Madeira’ from Gad’s Hill. This of course immediately reminds Hughes

⁶ *The Dickensian*, 5 (1909), p. 143.

⁷ *The Dickensian*, 5 (1909), p. 221.

⁸ *A Week’s Tramp in Dickens-Land*, p. 67.

⁹ *The Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 800.

¹⁰ *A Week’s Tramp in Dickens-Land*, p. 227.

of that ‘last bottle of Madeira’ from *Dombey and Son* (*DS* p. 873), thus collapsing Dickens’ life and art into one glorious object. But the sweeter event, withheld at present but vividly anticipated – and what marks out Hughes as a true Dickensian – is the moment when the wine is opened and drunk. Here is life, art and performance. Hughes directs our gaze towards the future, and urges us to imagine a ‘very special and appropriate occasion.’ A projected range of readers may wait: the uninformed individual (to whom Dickens means nothing) sees a man drinking a bottle of wine; the historian sees a man drinking an important bottle of wine; the Dickensian, however, finds himself witness to an act of rare significance – Sol Gills, Captain Cuttle, Florence and the rest are suddenly with us, brought into a new world by the engendering power of Dickens’ life, his writing, and the active intervention of our contemporary. Hughes is not one to lie in bed thinking about Mr Pickwick’s adventures; he takes part in them. His knowledge of *Dombey and Son* will not permit him merely to preserve the bottle as a mere relic of the author’s life; he understands that it is rather a prop for the most wonderful performance. He knows, in fact, that the true intoxicating power of Dickens’ Madeira can only lie in drinking it. Which *reading* allows him, without the fact of consumption ever depriving him of the wine itself. This is the weird power of reading, as Hughes conjures magic from a text that he can ever go back to, and continually re-appropriates its inexhaustible resonance to create moments of penetrating impact. An ordinary bottle of wine is drunk, consumed, is transformed as part of the ordinary transactions of the world: here is the bottle as book, an unchanging text that is part of the always-to-be communion of the read.

Peter Ackroyd, in his biography, punctuates his conventionally chronological assemblage of Dickens’ life with made-up (not to say impossible) episodes starring a new Dickens – one of Ackroyd’s invention. These episodes are partly meditations upon the weighty responsibilities of the biographer and how we might go about ‘understanding’ the mind of such an artist. In Part IV (p. 614), he re-animates Dickens’ characters into a kind of fantasia (people have a go at this occasionally in *The Dickensian* too), set at Greenwich Fair: in III (p. 429) he records a ‘true conversation between imagined selves’ which sets Dickens against other Ackroyd subjects such as Chatterton and Oscar Wilde: in VI (p. 892) the biographer himself is interviewed: in VII (p. 1059) he describes a dream. Most interesting though is the direct fictionalising of the great writer’s own self - as a person you might meet in the street – which occurs in I (p.

100) and II (p. 306); the script for the imagined selves, in contrast, is set in a kind of shapeless limbo. It is as if, after the dispersed, oblique, wandering trail after meaning which fills the rest of the book, Ackroyd wants to see if the insights thus gained will actually fit into the physical frame of a human being – in other words he cannot resist trying out his Dickens to see if he works.

One curious feature of these efforts of understanding is the invariable mixing of life and art to the extent that Dickens and his characters seem to occupy the same universe. Hughes, Kitton, Allbut and the rest are pursuing equally evidence of Dickens' own path through the world, and the movements of people confined to the pages of fiction. It would scarcely seem an exaggeration to say that there is really no effective difference. Ackroyd again, has his Dickens meeting Little Dorrit and Maggie, and although he fills these pages (pp.100-05) with hints of stray characters from other novels and comments which emphasise the engendering, world-making imagination of the writer, as if this episode is actually taking place inside Dickens' head ('He did not look back at her, because he knew where she was going:' 'All will be revealed in good time' (pp. 100-01)), nevertheless he wants the reader to see author and authored on the same flat canvas, just like the famous Buss painting. And today of course we entirely expect to see the facsimile Dickens line up with versions of his own characters at the Rochester festivals.

Ackroyd's model Dickens makes for a few diverting chapters which vary the texture of the book pleasantly. What is most significant about them is not that Ackroyd should have made Dickens walk and talk his way into a few pages of new fiction, but that there what should he find but the biographer's own imagined self. Part II of this series of VII finds Dickens in the street under 'the rolling clouds of a London sky', accosted by an unknown voice which questions him closely: 'Do please stay and tell me where you are going' (p. 306). Ackroyd seems initially to go to some lengths to repress the identity of this voice, to restrain and control its presence inside the two-and-a-half pages of this little world. Thus the direct speech is unattributed, and twice the owner of the voice is referred to only as 'the questioner.' Then Dickens escapes. "'Good day to you,' he said abruptly, 'I must be on my way.'" This elusiveness forces the biographer's hand and he is compelled to reveal himself to the reader by using the first person: 'Eventually I was able to catch up with him...' (p. 307). He thus acknowledges that nothing less than a

fully committed presence – equivalent to that of the imagined Dickens – is going to win any meaning from these few words.

And here we are again with Hughes on Rochester Bridge, or contemplating his bottle of Madeira. All the machinery, all those props, are designed to get Dickens and the disciple into the same space; because that seems to be the only way of contending with the awesome legacies of his life and art. Only the tools are different. The pre-*Dickensian* Dickensians of the late nineteenth century were interested in the world, the physical mark of Dickens' life, his relics: Ackroyd is immersed in the psychology of the artist, the invisible marks of the mind on the work. All end up trying to accommodate the vast presence of the author by making a new world of performance where knowledge can be legitimised. Hughes need never actually drink the Madeira, such is the unique power of this object: but it is through the contemplation of this action that understanding can be achieved. Ackroyd devotes over a thousand pages to assembling the details of Dickens' life: but despite, or perhaps because of, this, cannot resist inventing himself into a place where his subject thinks and talks like him, where they can enact a meeting which the biographer can then record and contemplate. So, like William Hughes, and indeed like our tourist contending with the latest Heritage attraction, he can say that he has not just *seen*, himself, he has also seen himself.

3. Sincerity

These performances would prove the hollowest of achievements if they were built on ill-prepared foundations – if Hughes was in fact deceived about the Madeira, if Peter Ackroyd had not 'even made a point of reading all the books *about* Dickens and, in most cases, reading them all the way through' (p. 892). So how solid is the stage beneath these performing readers, and how are we, who read them in turn, persuaded that the performances are sound?

In the April 1907 issue of *The Dickensian* a contributor puts forward a case for his 'favourite work' by reviewing the re-publication of *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*. The writer acknowledges that Dickens' novels are 'never-failing sources of delight' but concludes that biography is the 'most fascinating form of literature.' He goes on: 'And however much a man's books may seem to reveal his heart, it is always good to turn to

the records of his life and doings, and learn that those books have *the added charm of sincerity.*'¹¹

This sincerity is the major assertion of the emerging Dickens industry. The rambles, walks and travels are the elaborated record of that 'turning to' the life, to the world from which the imagination sprang. Their discovery of the million ways in which the fiction is answerable to the identifiable fabric and texture of daily existence, and their passionate demonstration of that relationship is their chief delight. They represent a tramp into the doubtful heart of fiction to find it whole and truthful.

This central belief in Dickens' sincerity is twofold. It is first of all a justification of the devotion to the man which we have seen rehearsed in the pages of *The Dickensian*. It is in fact the source and inspiration of much Fellowship activity – the fundraising, the support of children's homes, and so on. Thus the speeches are assumed to be evidence – and according to this reviewer much the most reliable evidence – of the nature of the man. When we apply that evidence to the novels, and see the same values advocated and defended there, the work of art expands in significance, it acquires that 'added charm.' There is an article in the February edition of the 1909 *Dickensian* on Lessons Dickens Taught;¹² and the moral energy which is so much remarked on in the novels is very much identified with Dickens the man and his behaviour. According to a report of the AGM of the Rochester branch of the Fellowship, the members discuss presenting a cot to St Bartholomew's Hospital, 'to be named after Tiny Tim.' This idea receives support because it is 'entirely in accordance with the teaching of Dickens.'¹³

But this idea of sincerity has a dimension that is not purely moral: not about teaching, or preaching, or example; it is about origin. What does the treatment of the *Speeches* say about the writer's attitude to art? He does not believe it reveals the man. In fact he says the books are all very well, but what is really important is that Dickens meant what he said: that they are, in that sense, true. The fictions which disguise the face of the author cannot be trusted; if Dickens could invent a man, a woman, a town, with such

¹¹ *The Dickensian* 3 (1907), p. 102 (my emphasis).

¹² *The Dickensian* 5 (1909), pp. 38-41.

¹³ *The Dickensian* 9 (1913) p. 306.

persuasiveness, what else can he do? What can he not do? This kind of question sends us flying to the consoling embrace of the original.

This is why it is the impulse towards verification which dominates *The Dickensian* – because every newly attributed location, each type traced to its source, demonstrates the sincerity of the author as much as any moral lesson. And any piece of writing is fair game. Dickens happened to mention in a light-hearted letter to Forster from Broadstairs that he had seen a man praying in his house across the road: ‘I have discovered...that a cobbler who lives opposite to my bedroom window is a Roman Catholic, and gives an hour and a half to his devotions every morning behind his counter.’¹⁴ In *The Dickensian*, B. W. Matz quotes this letter in an article about Broadstairs’ associations with Dickens.¹⁵ Why? ‘Last year I came across an old inhabitant who remembered that cobbler and confirmed the incident of his devotions.’ Elsewhere, J. F. van Ripen dismisses the common idea of Dickens as a caricaturist – not by discussing literary technique but by asserting that his characters ‘can be duplicated in any corner of the globe if they are sought with open eyes.’¹⁶

This tendency, so firmly established so early in the evolutionary story of the Dickens idea, is part of the reason why it is so easy, as we have seen, to reach for the language of history when talking about the novels. Hughes and Kitton meet Dickens’ old nurse, Mary Weller, and of course it is no surprise that, confronted with a person bearing such a name, their thoughts turn to *The Pickwick Papers*. Except that they do not. What Hughes writes is this: ‘what a host of pleasant recollections does the married name of the ‘pretty housemaid’ bring up of the Pickwickian days.’¹⁷ The first thing which may strike a reader about this statement is that somehow action and behaviour which was introduced to the world within a work of art has split the covers of the novel wide open and spilled into the world. We all have *days*, they belong to everyone. A number of people may have spent those days reading about the adventures of a group of comic characters but that remains their own experience; the book is the key to the world. But here Hughes assumes no key; it is not necessary because all that is Pickwickian is as

¹⁴ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The Pilgrim Edition, volume 1, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon 1965), p. 103 (3 September 1837).

¹⁵ *The Dickensian*, 4 (1908), p. 148.

¹⁶ *The Dickensian*, 5 (1909), p. 125.

¹⁷ *A Week’s Tramp in Dickens-Land*, p. 265.

universal as the weather – we have moved from the specific to the general. The second point is that Hughes remembers these days. Now, technically, this is possible. If we locate the Pickwickian days in that period of history during which the action of the book is set – which seems reasonable – this means that Hughes is looking back to the late 1820s. He was tramping and recollecting in the late summer of 1888. Assuming an age of ten so that such memories may be recoverable, we are looking at an author of about 70 years old. Possible, but irrelevant. What we have here is a reader (Hughes) so affected by the presence of genius that the only metaphors he can use to describe its impact all elevate artistic experience to that status of the ‘real.’

This is why, although, on his week’s tramp, he is certainly aware of following in the footsteps of the historical Dickens – a man who really lived – Hughes continually acknowledges the verifying power of the *imagined* world: ‘...the fidelity of his descriptions, and the reality of the characters peopling [the place], certainly give *a historical value never before understood or appreciated*’ (p. 8 – my italics). This amazing statement is part of the same process. What is Hughes’ idea of ‘historical value?’ Dickens is dead; Dickens is famous; these things might be supposed to lend a certain air of importance to those places with which the writer is associated. He also tended to set his narratives a few years before the actual time of writing; we can see how, towards the end of a century of rapid social and technological change, this might make his novels seem authoritatively ‘old-fashioned.’ But Hughes makes none of these points. He does not refer to Dickens’ fame; the sense of value does not relate to the status of the artist, but the nature of his art. Hughes talks about *technique*. It is the ‘fidelity’ and ‘reality’ of the created world which lends value to history, and - since history without value is not history at all but simply the past – which actually brings it into existence. The place has no history until made real by fiction. We cannot believe what is true until it is made up. We cannot see what is really there until it is obscured by the imagination.

4. Dickens memories

In November 1910, *The Dickensian* reports on a visit to Brighton made by the Dickens Fellowship. The President, J. Cuming Walters, moved by the associations of the town,

gives a speech in which he sums up a series of artistic and moral legacies left to the world by the great author. He outlines the pertinence of the occasion:

We are standing on ground consecrated by Dickens memories.¹⁸

As always when reading about Dickens, we need to watch for the apostrophe – which is not here. The President is not saying (which he conceivably might have done) that Dickens, during his lifetime, remembered coming to Brighton, and that therefore the ground is holy. These are not Dickens' memories. So are they memories *of* Dickens? But it is certainly not the case that he is speaking to an audience who knew the man, to a man, even if there are a few who remember him. It is of course, even more unlikely that they remember him at Brighton, which is the point. These memories appear to have an independent existence. Can thoughts exist without a thinker? What happens to what is remembered when there is no-one to do the remembering?

In the way that J. Cuming Walters refers to 'the Dickens sentiment,' 'the Dickens gospel' and 'the Dickens standard' in the same speech, these are Dickens memories because he made them. They bear his mark, the stamp of his creativity. Once again, this is not a matter of the physical presence or absence of the man, it is a result of *craft*. These memories are like the calculated distress applied to apartment furniture in the French rustic style, like the stonewash fade on a pair of jeans, they are part of the shape of the artefact, not acquired through the haphazard action of time. In their struggle to register adequately the impact of such works as *The Pickwick Papers* and *Dombey and Son*, Hughes and Cuming Walters have stumbled blindly into the dark secret at the heart of fiction, which is, essentially, *that it is better than life*. Why else would two late Victorian gentlemen be busy indulging in 'make-believe' to bring the real world up to scratch, when they cannot find an adequate Dingley Dell in front of their eyes? Why otherwise would they, during their visit, refer to the verger of Rochester Cathedral as 'Mr Tope,' if the imagined world did not somehow take precedence over the everyday?

They are suffering, as we all do, from the double memory fiction imposes on us. In remembering what I have read, I sometimes (want to) forget that it I have read it. Dickens knew this of course – knew it as a man (a reader) as much as he did as a writer.

¹⁸ *The Dickensian*, 6 (1910), p. 228.

In a letter to George Eliot he claims that ‘Adam Bede has taken its place among *the actual experiences and endurances* of my life’ (my italics).¹⁹ How can we read without subjecting ourselves to experience: and how can we experience without indulging our memory? The participation writing demands from the imagination of the reader ensures that the reader is changed. Those changes can be as real as any prompted by the action of the world. We may all remember the Pickwickian days.

No wonder that so often, an enjoyment of Dickens seems to be linked with the idea of performance, whether through writing (tramps, rambles and the Dickens country), charity (the Dickens cot), collecting (the Dickens bottle) adaptation (amateur dramatics and readings), visiting (Rochester and tourism) or shopping. Performance is a response to the terrible power of fiction in showing us the brighter world and showing us its death. It becomes vital that we import it in some way into our lives so that it can be touched or smelt or seen with the eyes. What agony to open a book and be born into the world of Pickwick, the Dodger, Dick Swiveller and Mr Micawber: of London, a *real* London, not the disparate and, literally, unimaginable collection of half-felt experiences we have to put up with in our own lives: of laughter, and terror, seen and beaten; what agony – because for all the knowing bravado with which we try to believe it is a mere accident of history that we do not bump into Uncle Pumblechook in the streets of Rochester, we have to shut the book and leave: because Dickens made it up, memories and all. What is there left but to fight the emptiness with the weapon of the author’s sincerity – believing that even if he did tell lies, such was his fidelity to the world of things that somehow even those invented aspects hold a mirror to the truth – and to do everything possible to bring the imagined universe into the closest proximity with our own: if possible *into* our own, through performing it. So the originals are sought: amongst the relics, the people and the places in the contemporary world: amongst home, family and friends in the author’s life: and in the fears, memories and impulses inside his own head. If there is a path to a beginning, something of the anxiety of reading is soothed, and the cynicism of fiction is counter-balanced with a manufactured truth.

¹⁹ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, The Pilgrim Edition, volume 9, ed. Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon 1997) p. 93 (10 July 1859).

Chapter 9: Art and the memorial

1. The feeling of having known

In 1990 Jacques Derrida was asked to select, arrange and curate an exhibition at the Louvre, as part of a series of shows entitled 'Taking Sides'. He wrote a supplement to the display, a kind of accompaniment to the pictures, which he maintained was no journal but merely 'the chance or place for a thoughtful question: what would a journal of the blind be like?'¹ *Memoirs of the Blind* takes this question and uses it to explore the notion of blind looking, or the blindness of looking. This blindness can be explored most profitably in the kind of observation which the artist makes when drawing, when producing the seen object on the page. It is drawing for Derrida which provides a model for the kind of unseeing perception which betrays the influence of memory. As such his deliberations are particularly useful as we try to trace the operation and the subsequent influence of the Dickens-branded memory, *the feeling of having known*, the delicious sense of loss, which permeates the pages of *The Dickensian* and stimulates the activities of the Fellowship.

Derrida gives us himself as an example. 'I have always experienced drawing as an infirmity, even worse, as a culpable infirmity...to this day I still think that I will never know either how to draw or how to look at a drawing...it is as if, just as I was about to draw, I no longer saw the thing' (p. 36). Derrida outlines the impossibility of looking at both model and image at the same time – literally, in the same moment, in the present. How can this simultaneity fit into the same instant of perception? 'Doesn't one always have to be content with the memory of the other?' (pp. 36-7). In fact the 'draftsman' – the person making the drawing – is subject to a kind of (according to Derrida, several kinds of) powerlessness, a seeing blindness which allows drawing its transcendental qualities. Representational drawing does not reproduce the model but hides a *trait*, or trace, of the-feeling-of-seeing it, within the blind night which is set against the seeing day of the visible lines on the paper. The *trait* cannot be seen, in the same way that visibility itself cannot be visible. Derrida states clearly that an abyss yawns between the thing that is drawn and this invisible *trait* and relates it to the visible by identifying it as 'the eve or the memory of the day' – the day being that part of the experience of looking

¹ Derrida, Jacques, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993), p. 33.

at the drawing which we accomplish with our eyes. The *trait* lends the drawing a ‘reserve of visibility’ – an excess – which can be characterised by representing the drawing (an unseeing act itself) as a witness to the fact that the draftsman *has seen* before this moment (the memory of the seen day) and *will see* again (the eve of a seeing act to come) (p. 45).

Drawing thus becomes an act of anamnesis, a means of recalling something to the mind. And more than that: in a very Derridean process of doubling, it is an ‘*anamnesis of memory itself*.’ When we look at a drawing, we are not simply recalling the experience of looking, a sensation provoked by the aptness of the artist’s powers of observation: we are remembering remembering. Derrida explores this further by quoting Baudelaire on ‘Mnemonic Art’. The poet considers how ‘all good draftsmen draw from the image imprinted on their brains, and not from nature’ – even to the extent that ‘When a true artist has come to the point of the final execution of his work, the model would be more of an embarrassment than a help to him.’ Baudelaire considers the memory, and not perception, to be the tool of art and in fact describes them as perpetually in opposition, as engaged in a ‘duel’ (pp. 45-6). In this way he aligns himself with a tradition noted by Derrida, itself in debt to an exemplary narrative outlined by Pliny the Elder, usually taken to describe the origins of drawing and illustrated more than once by classicist painters. This is the myth of Butades and her lover.

Butades in fact has no name of her own and so is generally referred to by that of her father, a potter. Facing the prospect of a lengthy separation from her lover, this daughter Butades uses an oil lamp to throw his silhouette onto a wall of a room in her house. She then traces around it to ‘fix’ it in place. There are a number of things which have appealed to writers and artists in this narrative, not least to Derrida himself, whose interpretation is interesting and useful as we keep Dickens in mind. First, Butades, in drawing, faces the wall, away from her lover. She does not look at her model and in this way her making is a ‘blind’ act. As Derrida says: ‘it is as if seeing were forbidden in order to draw, as if one drew only on the condition of not seeing, as if the drawing were a declaration of love destined for or suited to the invisibility of the other – unless it were in fact born from seeing the other withdrawn from sight’ (p. 49).

The shadow, being a trace of the model, is an absence, that which sets apart, which defers, the thing from what it is. It is 'a simultaneous memory' (p. 51). In drawing, Butades thus perceives the lack of her lover and shapes an image containing not just the image of a remembered entity, but the memory of that memory. According to Derrida, she 'writes, and thus already loves in nostalgia' (p. 51). It is this notion of an art which preserves and practices the experience of loss – which in fact has its origin in loss – even as it purports to celebrate the imaged thing itself, which can help us describe more closely the Dickensian reading of the major motifs in Dickens.

2. Distance and deferral

'Railroads won't bring you to Dingley Dell – there's no station within a thousand miles of it.'² In writing of 'Dickens' Best Book', one Charles Townsend Copeland reaches for a geographical metaphor to describe how *The Pickwick Papers* is at once situated during an identifiable period and also cut loose into an ahistorical region of old ways. Of course there are no railways in the book – it is after all set in 1827 – but the writer here uses the present tense to underline the continuing inaccessibility of the Pickwickian theatre of occurrence. Or does he? Rather than implying that there is no point striving to locate the presence of Dingley Dell in the real world of 1912 (a place you could travel to like any other) – which would after all be a very unlikely assertion to find in *The Dickensian* at this date – this is an article about *approach*. There can only be one appropriate vehicle for the modern-day Pickwickian and it means shunning all things which reek of the modern. The escape velocity required for the ascent to Dingley Dell can only be achieved on the outside of the Muggleton coach. Part of the reason why this conviction is so strong among readers of Dickens – why the feeling of feeling his world is tied so closely to the things with which that world is constructed – is that his most celebrated passages are written with this Derridean night of remembering hidden as a *trait* inside them. We could almost say that the secret of Dickens World is that it *cannot* be with us: that in fact Dickens himself could only perceive it as lost: that when we read it we remember that remembering: that this accounts for its appeal and explains our Dickensian ache for rediscovery.

² *The Dickensian*, 8 (1912), p. 268.

In the ‘good-humoured Christmas Chapter’ (chapter 28) of *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens is at pains to set the whole delightful episode away from us as something which has passed. This is not simply a matter of presenting ancient customs and country genialities likely to appeal to Dickens’ urban audience. It is not even the ‘perpetual yesterday’ of Mr Pickwick and his friends. Christmas is framed as an act of living in memory – with all the implications of loss and divided experience which that carries with it. Dickens includes a considerable introduction – one long enough to require something of an apology for ‘keeping Mr Pickwick and his friends waiting’ – in which he positions or reaffirms himself as a narrator who traces the shadow of those lost Christmases and absent joys. The moment of the telling of the story, the present tense of the editor who collects and offers the Papers to the public, is categorically distanced from the action of the book in the heading to the chapter.

A good-humoured Christmas chapter, containing an account of a wedding, and some other Sports beside: which although in their way, even as good customs as marriage itself, are not quite so religiously kept up, in these degenerate times. (*PP* p. 374)

Of course, even more importantly, this heading claims the reader too, and pulls him or her to the side of the narrator/editor, in order to confirm the shared nature of the ‘times’. They are these times, here and now. The Christmas we are about to enjoy does not belong to them. So we approach the chapter with a sense of alienation; it will tempt us and beckon to us, but we cannot go.

It is striking how this episode, a favourite with Dickensians valuing the genial qualities of Dickens’ art, depends so much on the melancholy framing of loss and remembrance. And this is more than merely a device to make the joy stand prouder by way of relief – the fire in the hearth burning against the cold and waste outside. Our narrator seems at pains to make clear that the joy lies in sadness and absence. In fact this is no framing at all but an attempt to make explicit that blind *trait* which lies hidden in the exuberant recreation of happiness, as our narrator remembers remembering. ‘How many old recollections, and how many dormant sympathies, does Christmas time awaken!’ (*PP* p. 374).

Dickens draws attention to the act of making (tracing the shadow) even as he directs our gaze away from the page filling with writing. 'We write these words now, many miles distant from the spot at which, year after year, we met...' Is this another Dingley Dell, a counterpart, one also 'a thousand miles' away from any railway station? Even the reference to the repeated nature of festival, as if it were ongoing, serves to emphasise the inaccessible region from which the narrator has been withdrawn, as if joy may still be alive, merely lost. What is the major characteristic of this 'merry and joyous circle' that the narrator wishes to share with us? It is, largely, that many of its individuals are now dead. The value of Christmas is that it can make those who are gone 'crowd upon' the mind, and thus 'win us back to the *delusions* of our childish days' (*PP* p. 375: my italics). This recognition of the power of memory and fiction (and fictional memory) – as well as the inevitably accompanying traits of alienation and loss – is a moment of revelation for the young writer as he is about to launch into one of his most 'immortal' and defining pieces of writing.

By giving us that 'personal' introduction, our narrator seems to characterise the creating of the Pickwickian Christmas as an act of anamnesis, in the way that Derrida defines drawing as a process of recalling memory. 'Boz' outlines the shadow cast by the Dingley Dell festivities and in that very performance its absence is confirmed and celebrated. There is no Christmas but that of the past, those which are lost. The 'image' we are given to read contains the blind trace of remembering which divides the work from itself – as an outline does: invisible, only present because it traces the border between the inside and the outside of a figure. 'The *trait* joins and adjoins only in separating'.³ As readers we perceive and cannot avoid perceiving this division in a narrative reality which is present only in its absence, which can only be admitted into meaning as it is lost, whose solidity is derived from the hollow space where it has been and is no more.

3. Commemoration

Pierre Nora considers that we have entered 'the era of commemoration.'⁴ In *Realms of Memory* he attempts to show how a new response to the past can be described in terms

³ *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 54.

⁴ Nora, Pierre, *Realms of Memory* III tr. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press 1998), p. 610.

of the power of the memorial, that which is of the past, but in the present, assimilating contemporary meanings. Commemoration affects all societies which have traditionally revered the human act – which consider that what we do (and therefore what we have done) is enduringly significant. These are, pre-eminently, societies ‘that see themselves as historical, that is, as based on human freedom, rather than governed by divine will’(p. 610). The importance of history – the existence of history – lies in its assumption of choice; it is worldly and provisional. For Nora, history lends the past a character which is ‘peremptory and constraining’, which is above all ‘organic’ (p. 618). Thus we are directed again towards acknowledging the types of coherence that appear in our views of the world, constructed from our awareness of history, Heritage and fiction. Nora emphasises not just the linear aspect of history, but its muscular qualities – as an account which utilises the organising frameworks of cause and effect, event and character. It can be explained. It can be refuted. To exist, history has to justify itself; this is why it ‘constrains’ our idea of the past.

In the same way, when we are deep in the middle of *Oliver Twist*, it would be absurd to encounter the Dodger picking Mr Winkle’s pocket. As we have discussed, the means by which these figures conventionally claim their legitimacy, in a novel, is analogous to Nora’s idea of the historical model, one of meaning acting upon itself, of connectivity and justifiable coherence. When, however, we see pictures of Oliver begging a Christmas dinner on Scrooge’s doorstep, or see Fagin in a parade with Mr Pickwick and the rest, we find ourselves subject to different structures of sense and order. We cannot deny that something works here; but it is more challenging to identify the patterns of justification which admit the necessary coherence to the public spectacle. Here, Nora’s work on the memorial can refine our notions of how Dickens’ technique urges us to accept and adopt and, indeed, love his imagined memories.

We have seen how, in *Mythologies*, Barthes identifies a number of characteristics which help us to identify the mechanics of the Dickens-World. The most popular of Dickens’ characters have clearly passed into the oral state of myth, where they have a social usage which has grown from and out of their original context, from which they have been appropriated. These ‘mythical’ figures are made of material ‘which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication’: hence the critical use of the word ‘appropriation’ – this is a removal, a stealing, even if it is one which, at the

same time, leaves the stolen entity in its original location. However, there is a weakness in the analogy we need to explain the operation of the 'mythical' Dickens.

Barthes' myth is a 'second order semiological system'.⁵ Thus his example of the mythologized bunch of roses only works because our culture is familiar with the first order system which has already acted upon the unmythologized, naked roses. In this first system, roses signify Barthes' passion. The point is that roses have done the same thing for so many other people that they are open to appropriation into the second order system, which is myth. They enter an oral state; they are a kind of shorthand for passion. The important thing for our analysis of Dickens here is to recognise that, no matter how vestigial or hidden it may be, there is a narrative which propels the roses into being a sign. The mythologized object, roses-signifying-passion, must always refer to this complete act, even as it is incorporated into new myth. It is a point of departure looking back to the narrative which passionified the roses, and forward to their new social usage. This is what Barthes calls 'duplicité' (p. 124). Now it is not surprising that the key axis here of narrative (leading to the sign) and popularity (leading to the currency of the oral state) should tempt us to turn to Dickens.

There are two important difficulties in applying this analysis to the emergence of Dickens' characters into the Heritage market place. There is first of all the partial and capricious treatment of the narrative of signification – which emerges into 'myth' to interfere with our notion of *time*: and second, there is the organic nature of the systemic relationship across the axis of duplicité – which emerges to interfere with our notion of *character*.

To take the first point: we never see the characters of *Oliver Twist* as they appear at, or towards the end, of the novel. Fagin being led from the condemned cell: Nancy dead and Bill on the run: Oliver cosy and come home at last: the Dodger on his way to Australia. If we are to search for the narrative which has given birth to the mythological or proverbial Fagin, we have to do such violence to *Oliver Twist* that it brings into question whether the analogy of myth is suitable at all. A dead Fagin, even a condemned Fagin, seems to have no 'social usage'. Consider how *Oliver!* does its best

⁵ *Mythologies*, p. 114.

to rescue him and the Dodger and return them to a kind of prelapsarian state of innocent guilt before Oliver came along to complicate things. On the other hand, nobody, least of all Dickens, wants a Mr Pickwick lifted from the early chapters of the book. The beaming and benevolent figure who turns up in *Master Humphrey's Clock* is surely one who has endured the ordeal of the Fleet and come under the maturing influence of Sam Weller. Who has ever come across a converted Scrooge in the real world? To call someone proverbially Scrooge-like is clearly not to call to mind the re-born figure of the *Carol's* climax. These characters do not derive their significations simply from the narratives that gave birth to them. Their presence is partial, their formation incomplete; to look for a linear coherence according to Barthes' model is to do violence to both model and example.

The process of selection is complex. Does our idea of Sikes depend upon the fact that he murders Nancy? Does the Rochester spectacle - where we see the two together - interrupt something? Is it important that 'the boy who asked for more' gets more than he ever dreamed of in the end? These characters escape from the narrative time of their setting in the novel and seem to circle a permanently arrested motif of presence, while being once more included in the onward movement of time passing - but in a completely adjacent world of cars and tourists and advertising and ourselves. They inhabit the dichotomous realm of Heritage. Here they are not, in Pierre Nora's terms, 'historical'; they have no relationship with their origin which can be justified (or refuted) in terms of progressive, developmental reasoning. The sideways jump they make into the circular existence of time-with-no-time, marks them out as memorial entities, not historical ones. They are the sites of memory (the *lieux de memoire*) Nora identifies as characteristic of the era of commemoration.

Second: this disruption is even more apparent when we consider the organic nature of the 'mythical' Dickens. Barthes' roses, *passionified* on their emergence from the first order semiological system he describes, can be appropriated into many different kinds of new mythological narratives. But they remain roses-signifying-passion. What happens with Dickens is that the muscular nature of the 'second order' text begins to warp the whole system itself, and the components of that system, across the fulcrum of the sign-which-becomes-the-new-signifier, which, according to Barthes, is the duplicitous centre of the operation of the mythical. Who is Miss Havisham, in *Great*

Expectations? How do we recognise her? She is an old lady, confined to her house, which is itself frozen in a grim mockery of her wedding morning, when she was jilted many years ago. Thus embittered, she is determined to take revenge on the male sex, which leads to her interest in the beautiful young Estella. So who is this person in a wedding dress and pantomime white make-up, who joins in the parade with Magwitch? We have seen how Fagin has been transformed into the festival joker; Paul Davis has examined in great depth how we have always ended up with the Scrooge that we needed.⁶ This is the endless Dickens text, interfering with whatever was there in the first place, growing and renewing itself. To look for originals is fraught with difficulty and is to demonstrate the unsuitable nature of the mythological model for the analysis of these ahistorical phenomena. They do not claim a legitimacy on these terms at all.

For Nora, ‘the memorial model has triumphed over the historical model and ushered in a new, unpredictable and capricious use of the past...’⁷ The memorial is unpredictable not because it is necessarily unexpected; but because it literally has no narrative link to its context. Its coherence is of another order entirely; it relies on a process of aggrandisement, a circular thickening of association, of excess, in order to acquire contemporary meaning, divorced from, and even antagonistic to, that account of the past which brought it into the light. In this way memory, and that which memory calls to mind, generates a kind of discontinuity at odds with the philosophy of history. Nora explicitly notes the usurping nature of the memorial object, suggesting that we have seen ‘the substitution of the memorial for the mythical’ – again, emphasising the radical departure from traditional ways of understanding the past (p. 634). His historical example is the advent of ‘*La France Profonde*’ – the true France, or real France, which can never change because it has no causal link to any of the accepted agents of change known to history. It has shifted, ‘dropping out of the continuity of history in order to live in the discontinuity of memory’ (p. 622). This is Heritage. This is where we can find the naughty Fagin and the mobile Miss Havisham.

‘The organising coherence of history’ (p. 634) is abandoned in the realm of memory for something whose contemporary presence is a witness to an absence, and whose power is, at root, derived from the experience of loss. It grows and changes without reference

⁶ Davis, Paul, *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1990).

⁷ *Realms of Memory*, p. 618.

to the theoretical matrix of historical discourse, because it answers only the needs of what is current. Its coherence does not organise, it is acquisitive and didactic, allied only to excess. It is absurd to ask whether a history is ‘authentic’: for memory, this is the only thing that matters, whether it can be seen to be founded upon itself in a kind of rhapsody of associative meanings. Nora considers the mechanisms of memory to operate through a series of distinct ‘sites’, around which contemporary concerns assemble, to lend them their power and relevance. These sites are conceptual in nature; for *‘La France Profonde’* we might substitute ‘The English Village’ to see how the site of memory here is a theoretical construct with an opportunity for a practical geographic expression, as real places are tweaked and managed into an expression of an idea – which may be more or less ‘authentic’ according to the assumptions we bring to it.

Nora’s analysis supports and partially explains the appeal of the Heritage Dickens. It illuminates a number of things about the experience of reading him, and about his popular presence. It allows us to identify the radical coherence adopted by figures - and motifs – taken from the novels, taking into account both the way they achieve a new freedom and the way they retain their power. By emphasising the ‘discontinuity’ of the realm of memory, we can see how elements of Dickens’ work become removed from the ‘organising coherence’ of their inaugurating narrative structure, and thus cease to be subject to its restrictions. They are then free to gather additional associations – often of *pastness*, that ‘historical feeling’ which speaks so strongly of our loss. This is to make explicit that *trait* which the artist sees and cannot see in writing (the memory of) what he has thought or observed. In fact it is to fetishize it, to take a part of the experience of reading and isolate it as the only accessible source of pleasure: ‘...the boundary between the memorial and the historical...is defined...from one’s sense of having lost a part of oneself and of that loss’s having become an indispensable part of one’s self-awareness’ (p. 628).

The impulse of all those Dickensian readings was very strongly to memorialise Dickens as a consolation for the grievous joy of discovery. Hughes, Kitton and the rest were the published examples of an imaginative journey of redemption which sought to locate and celebrate the sites of memory where they marked the present absence of a fictional world. To read the plaque on the side of the Royal Victoria and Bull Hotel in Rochester is to stand on the edge of a void of longing; it is to look across to a parallel lost world

which is always with us, always gone. Now when we think about Hughes' prized bottle, owned by Dickens and replete with associations of the last of the old Madeira, Captain Cuttle and the universe of *Dombey and Son*, we can see how he has got his hands on a memorial - so much a part of the present that he can even contemplate drinking it, but so far absent that its value - its existence - relies on its presence elsewhere: in the very hands of Solomon Gills.

Valerie Krips has applied Nora's investigation of the memorial and the historical to Lewis Carroll's Alice. Here the associations are complicated by the fact that the Alice books are read by children and therefore generate memories of reading which have a particular, and particularly precious, character. If the books themselves do represent a vision of a lived-in lost world, in the way that *The Pickwick Papers* might, it can only be because they evoke so thoroughly the experience of being a child, of having a child's imagination, rather than of having actually fallen down a rabbit hole when we were six. But then, who ever lived as the Pickwickians do? Krips thus needs to be on the alert for different kinds of nostalgia – remembering reading, remembering living. As she says: 'Alice is a memory as well as a contemporary presence'.⁸ Although Dickens has ever been read and enjoyed by children, this reading activity located in the nostalgia of one's own life is less important for Dickensians, who are rather more concerned with the lost fictional worlds they memorialise.

Krips' reading of Nora is, however, persuasive. She emphasises the dynamic qualities of Nora's memorials, which are able to grow by a process of association. The "Lieux de memoire" are objects removed from history and returned to what remains of memory... Their removal from history ensures that meaning can accrue to them freely; the strictures of specific historic context and of traditional meaning are loosened' (p. 17).

Her analysis is complicated because she attempts to keep distinct at least three kinds of memory, all of which she appears to term 'memory'. They are: that which is perpetuated through social interaction and generational contact: that which begins with the child's experience of art: and a third, which remains somewhat shadowy, but which seems to be

⁸ *The Presence of the Past*, p. 8.

the non-historical nostalgia we find, for example, in the reading of *Pickwick*. Nora certainly contends that his 'lieux' are growing in importance with the changes running through Western societies – they reflect and depend upon 'the abandonment of the traditional channels and modes of transmission of the past'.⁹ So when Krips claims that 'lieux de memoire are both the sign of memory's persistence and memory's failure' she is really talking about two different things – the first being contemporary memory, a memorial to the feeling of being in the past: and the second social memory, tied to and growing out of the past along a chain of human experience.¹⁰ She seems to claim that the Alice books are no longer passed down as part of a genuine, living experience of childhood (this is 'memory's failure'), but instead stand for the idea of being a child – perhaps more exactly, of what it feels like to be a child. Of the Alice figure herself, she says that 'The memory she constellates is the memory of Heritage, a memory constructed at the site of memory's failure. But it is from this failure that the new memory springs, one based not upon the experience of life itself so much as from life's representation' (p. 26).

The failed memory is based on life – which must be the shared experience of childhood reading. The new memory is grown from representation. Is this the action – the life – of the books? Again, it is difficult to see how the world of the Alice books is itself the stuff of which memories are made. Surely here is proof of the relevance of Nora's writing to Dickens World. Alice's importance – as memory – is not dependent upon the causal coherence of her life in fiction, and in that sense does not operate 'historically', as a historical entity. Alice is a site, a *lieu*, around which apparently disparate associations congregate – which may include the idea of the Child's Life, but which are not derived from the historical experience of children. So when Krips refers to 'life's representation', she is not talking about life as it is lived in Wonderland but using the term generically, to include representation belonging to life, which is Art, which is, in this case, Alice.

Krips is intrigued by Alice's starring role in the Festival of Britain in 1951, and thinks that this can only be explained in terms of Nora's new memory. Alice is there identified – recognised – not in her historical form as a character attached to a story in a real book,

⁹ *Realms of Memory*, p. 636.

¹⁰ *The Presence of the Past*, p. 31.

but in the same category as other symbolic figures ‘whose meaning must be gleaned from their mobilization, through their staging as “Heritage” objects’ (p. 66). She hints here at a theory of the mechanics of the memorial, a transferral of the burden of significance. It is this kind of staging that we have seen in the activity of Dickensians, the re-animation of art in the life of the reader, a performed reading that projects the self into the text that is read.

This is how Dickens’ readers have traditionally attempted to live with the impossible nearness, the inaccessible presence, of his novels. The *trait* of remembering, embedded in the work, along with the enhanced portability of elements of the fiction, has led Dickensians to identify and celebrate a range of Dickens memorials – physical, behavioural and spiritual – that *are* accessible to the reader. Nora’s consideration of the commemorative treatment of the past is crucial here, since it shows us how memorials have no narrative link with their context: they instead grow in the present by a process of aggrandisement and association. Thus the animated monuments of the Dickens-World leave their inaugurating work behind.

Part 4: Reading Dickens

Chapter 10: Making sense

1. The problem of reading

Time and again we come back to readers and reading. The problem of reading – the problem of *describing* reading – is a central issue when we consider Dickens' work. How do we know what is going on? And how do we talk about it when we do? Faced as we are, in Dickens-World, with a phenomenon which, in its sheer size and complexity, its international dimensions and its startlingly specific regional focus, its instantly recognisable but ever-developing forms of expression, seems to be unique in the history of writing, we may inevitably conclude that something was different - and characteristically, identifiably different - at the very beginning or source of this phenomenon. What? Do we read Dickens in the same way that we read any other novelist?

It would be difficult to maintain that Dickens-World was not in some way free of Dickens' words. What we can do but return to those words and look for clues to where this freedom came from and how it became so thoroughly practised? In accounting, for instance, for the presence of the Fagin who seems to have a life outside *Oliver Twist*, who can be identified and *known* within another context which offers his persona no support at all (taking phone calls on the radio, dancing Dixie), we will always find ourselves struggling with the very concept of textuality, of where what we might call the 'notion' of *Oliver Twist* might reside – where indeed, the work exists. Fagin on the train could not be Fagin if we scanned novels into our brain as if they were data being saved on a computer. He would not make sense. Clearly, in doing the work we need to do as readers to establish the presence of *Oliver Twist* in our mind, we do some violence to the text we read. This violence is the detail of that activity of transfer that we have already identified is the key operation of reading behaviour. It is a complicated business that Dickens' career dives into at its very beginning.

The Pickwick Papers, that is, Dickens' novel, not the Papers themselves – of which we are allowed only the briefest glimpse and whose presence lingers heavily but near-silently during the life of the narrative – challenges the reader, especially in its opening

numbers, with an absolute cascade of tones and registers, of texts and ways of reading. It is not an exaggeration to say in fact that reading, and writing, *for* reading and *after* reading, is one of Dickens' major preoccupations in this work.

Our experience of the novel (A) begins with us reading an account (B) of someone else (C) reading an account of someone (D) reading. Or, to put names to faces, I open a text (A) written by an author, whom we shall call Charles Dickens, which depicts an editor (he writes B), whom we shall call Boz, who in turn relates his experience of reading entries in the transactions of a body of men called the Pickwick Club. The entry with which Boz begins is itself an account written by the secretary (C) of the club describing someone else, Samuel Pickwick (D), reading a paper about Tittlebats. The fact that the first words of the novel encourage the reader to see this thickly layered mediation of experience as a 'ray of light' is only the first of many vigorous and complex ironies which weave their way through the book.

Perhaps the best way to begin is at the bottom layer of this stack of experiences – with the ostensible action of the novel, at least the early parts of it. After all, we are told what we can expect and possibly what the coming book will be about. Mr Pickwick will be 'extending his travels' and 'enlarging his sphere of observation.' He and his companions are encouraged to forward 'authenticated accounts of their journeys and investigations, [and] of their observations of character and manners' (*PP* pp. 1-2). Their mission – and the narrative which we will be encouraged to enjoy – will be one of looking, analysing and reporting. Before we think about the place of Boz or Dickens here, we first need to see how these characters manage this, the ostensible subject of the book in which they appear – what kind of interpreting, or reading, they practice.

Of course part of the joke is that they find the whole thing incredibly difficult. Mr Pickwick is set up to take a fall. We see him on the morning of the first day's journey complacently observing the view from his window. He draws a trite moral from the prospect. "Such...are the narrow views of those philosophers who, content with examining the things that lie before them, look not to the truths that are hidden beyond" (*PP* p. 6). Although Mr Pickwick rejects these 'narrow views,' his method here is clearly the kind of tidy process which he hopes will suffice for his travels. It establishes an outside and an inside: a domain of experience and a place of reflection.

Down there is the ‘world;’ up here is Mr Pickwick. But after this it is all downhill. And the trouble he gets into is doubled. It is a matter of personal confusion, but also threatens the whole idea and existence of the ‘Corresponding Society.’ What happens is that Mr Pickwick gets a cab. Full of zeal, he interrogates the cabman and receives a series of deadpan absurdities by way of response. He is struck by these replies, ‘laying his hand upon his notebook’ in a reflex of astonishment (*PP* p. 7). And the facetious nonsense is duly recorded, and already the Corresponding Society is up the spout, and Mr Pickwick is exposed for the innocent he is. However all this is harmless compared to the row which occurs when the cab reaches the Golden Cross. The cabman receives his fare only to throw it on the ground and assault Mr Pickwick and his three companions. It is the notebook itself that is the cause of all this bother, since Mr Pickwick has been taken as an informer. This is the kind of knockabout stuff we find in the *Sketches by Boz* and in Dickens’ contemporaries, but there is something of an edge to it as a faceless hostility springs up from nowhere. “‘Informers!’” shouted the crowd’ (*PP* p. 8). The Pickwickians are saved only by Jingle, the full ignominy of which is understood only in retrospect.

This ‘reading’ project of the Pickwick Club, ostensibly the subject of the narrative, is thus doubly exposed by the action of that narrative in its very first encounter with the ‘wider field’ the secretary mentions in his minutes. Not only are the notes from which the ‘authenticated accounts’ are to be shaped, likely to be inaccurate and nonsensical, but the very act of recording them is shown to be (extremely) perilous. Here is a world that *will not be taken account of*.

Our Pickwickians are in fact highly inept at interpreting, or reading, these wider fields of their adventures. Although it would be difficult to maintain that Dickens’ project in this book does not alter as it is produced, and that he did not feel compelled quietly to forget the various devices of notebooks and editors and societies (most explicitly, perhaps, in re-casting himself/Boz as ‘Mr Pickwick’s Stage-Manager’ in an announcement at the conclusion of the tenth number¹), nevertheless he continues to play with the idea of reading and recording – and its dangers – for some considerable time. He cannot quite let it go.

¹ Dickens, Charles, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, ed. Robert L. Patten (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics 1986) p. 902.

Certainly references to note-gathering are most frequent in the earliest chapters of the novel, although we later turn to Mr Snodgrass (*PP* p. 95). We are back with Mr Pickwick's notebook in the fourth number (*PP* p. 131). There is a description of Mr Pickwick writing in his 'journal' in Bath (*PP* p. 506). But this textual recording is only one external aspect of the process of interpretation to which Dickens directs our attention as the Pickwickians proceed with their acknowledged task. The stock types (sportsman, lover, poet) and rudimentary set pieces (the duel is lifted from Smollett) are used to animate a slightly anxious comedy of misunderstanding. Winkle, as the butt of the duel joke, is not so much a victim of mistaken identity (that is, a misfortune imposed upon him by someone else's confusion) but of faulty reading, most particularly his own. The evidence is in front of him in the shape of his coat, clearly well-used and demonstrating signs of the evening it has spent on Jingle's back; but he is unable to arrive at an understanding which can get him out of trouble. In fact he demonstrates that reading is *more persuasive even than memory*; he is stupefied by the 'tokens' of wear he sees and cries "It must be so" (*PP* p. 24). Winkle then gets himself utterly lost with his projections of various outcomes which may promise his survival unscathed, from the pistols not being loaded with ball, to the alarm of Mr Snodgrass and the solicitude of Mr Pickwick. Unfortunately for Winkle, his misreading of Snodgrass's character, who takes every exhortation to secrecy at face value, means that we head unstoppably to the farcical denouement.

The troubles that the Pickwickians have in reading the world are emphasised by the ease and apparent accuracy with which Jingle negotiates every new situation. Certainly he reads *them* like book. He identifies the types they represent: "Fine girl, sir" (to Mr Tracy Tupman, who had been bestowing anti-Pickwickian glances on a young lady by the roadside)' (*PP* p. 12). But he also sees the corporate naivety this masks, or which is part of this mask. His absurd stories (the epic war poem, the Sagacious Dog, Donna Christina and the stomach pump) demonstrate this comprehensively in the way they are adapted to each gentleman's taste. Before we know it, Jingle has insinuated himself into something like an intermediary between the reader and Boz's text, inserting his abbreviated commentaries – his readings – at appropriate moments to contextualise the action.

No clearer illustration of the way Dickens is playing with, or trying out, or playing with and trying out, different types of reading in *Pickwick*, could be provided than the three little vignettes of the Medway towns which are delivered to us during the brief stay the book makes in the region. In clearly-defined passages, we are treated to the observations of Jingle from the roof of the coach: the thoughts of Mr Pickwick direct from his notebook: and the author's description of Mr Pickwick on Rochester Bridge on the morning of his departure for Manor Farm. All these excerpts rely on the use of quotation – on our understanding of previously conceived and received material – to encourage the reader to adopt a range of attitudes.

The coach carrying the Pickwickians and their new companion, Alfred Jingle, is greeted by the striking sight of Rochester Castle as they cross the bridge into the city. The reader's encounter with this new stage for the action of the novel is prefaced by the reactions of Snodgrass and Pickwick, who act up to their types with convenient economy. Then we plunge into Jingle's staccato assessment of castle and cathedral (*PP* p. 13). This veers from the most pervasive and diffuse impressions (““earthy smell””, ““frowning walls””) to the most distinctive characterisations (““confessionals like money-takers' boxes at theatres””). We also get a kind of paradigm of popular historical-legendary background to the life which might have animated such a scene in the ‘olden days.’

Dickens' affection for the more extravagant forms of popular representation is well-documented in his writing, where the fun which is taken in mockery by no means obscures the delight in the thing itself. Thus in ‘Dullborough Town’, from *The Uncommercial Traveller*, we learn of a Richard III, ‘in a very uncomfortable cloak,’ who terrifies the young Dickens ‘by backing up against the stage-box in which [he] was posted, while struggling for life against the virtuous Richmond.’ This is the same king who ‘slept in war-time on a sofa much too short for him’ (*UT* p. 120). In the same way, Dickens cannot leave Martin Chuzzlewit with his breakfast in an ale-house without noting the ‘highly-coloured scripture pieces on the walls’ and pointing out how ‘the Wise Men... worshipped in a pink manger; and how the Prodigal Son came home in red rags to a purple father, and already feasted in his imagination on a sea-green calf’ (*MC* p. 214).

When Jingle speaks of “Popes, and Lord Treasurers, and all sorts of old fellows, with great red faces, and broken noses” (*PP* p. 13) we are meant to respond with recognition. These are the stock images of shared (taught?) history and belong in the vague but navigable hinterland between Friar Tuck and Good Queen Bess. In fact here Jingle glimpses Heritage Rochester. It is as if we have stepped into our electric pew for a trip through *The Rochester Cathedral Story*. Or at least a reading of it appropriate to 1836. The fat monks, absurd officials and other ‘queer customers’ inhabit the same place as the Wise Men and their pink manger – they are all part of the received metaphors through which contemporary nineteenth-century culture understands the invisible assumptions on which it is based. Jingle merely confirms his persuasive and opportunistic nature by manipulating them for the Pickwickians’ edification and our amusement. This makes it entirely suitable that it is Jingle himself who is quoted on the outside of the Royal Victoria and Bull Hotel today.

We are also allowed a view of the Medway Towns through the glass of Mr Pickwick’s notebook (*PP* pp. 14-15). This our editor (Boz) quotes directly, with the comment only that there is little remarkable in it to distinguish the account from many others. This has two effects; it implies Boz concurs with Mr Pickwick’s assessment of the towns and thus includes him in Dickens’ satire aimed at the conduct of soldiers and the public’s partial treatment of the military: and it adds force to that satire by suggesting its general application.

The streets present a lively and animated appearance, occasioned chiefly by the conviviality of the military. It is truly delightful to a philanthropic mind, to see these gallant men staggering along under the influence of an overflow, both of animal and ardent spirits...(*PP* p. 14).

Here we are permitted to see the events clearly, but are given room to depart from Mr Pickwick’s assessment of them. Our reading is another kind of recognition. The use of a direct quotation from the notebook makes us look up and see the figure of the author beckoning beyond his characters of the *action* (the Pickwickians et al), but also beyond his character of the *narrative* (the editor). This gesture of complicity, of invited nearness, is hardly one that we can fail to acknowledge, if we are to continue with the book.

Finally we do not leave Rochester without an opportunity to stand with Mr Pickwick, leaning over the balustrades of Rochester Bridge, ‘contemplating nature, and waiting for breakfast’ (*PP* p. 57). The tone of the description following is important. There is a kind of reckoning here which re-balances the narrative and rescues it from both the precipitate assertions/assertiveness of Jingle and the daft slapstick of the episode on the Lines. The conventionalities allow the reader to draw breath. The ivy clings ‘mournfully’, the ruins stand ‘proudly’, and the vanished past is described in the most general of terms as a place where one might hear the ‘clash of arms’ and ‘revelry’. No ‘broken noses’ here. This is the blandest watercolour sketch; Jingle’s version of history, on the other hand, makes us feel we have bumped up against a waxwork in the dark. We are subject to a gentle aligning of points of view: character, editor, author and reader. The unexpected ‘us’ (to whom the ruined castle speaks) softly persuades the reader to fall-in behind Mr Pickwick just for the sake of getting hold of something – shallow though it may be. This passage represents a temporary re-ordering of our scrambled perception through the tool of the picturesque – itself an assemblage of quotations. Here is ‘the spectator’ in the foreground: the eye then moves away step-by-step and encompasses the landscape with conventional phrasing, noting the ‘ruined wall’ nearby, moving past ‘corn fields and pastures’ out to a ‘distant church’ in the far prospect.

No author perhaps is more liable to vary the tone of his prose without warning. In these excerpts about the Medway Towns we can see the demands this makes on the reader and how it encourages the reader’s resourcefulness (or resource-fullness) in drawing on a shared understanding, before making the interpretative judgement. It is more difficult to resist *Jingle’s* readings because at this stage Dickens uses his interpretation of successive episodes to slide information towards the reader without which our understanding would be diminished. We know about ‘Dockyard people,’ including the Commissioner and the head of the garrison, and we know how to make an impression in a public assembly by withholding our name at the door. Or perhaps he is after all spinning us a line in the same way that has enabled him to manipulate the Pickwickians? Like everyone else who encounters Jingle, we have to rely upon our judgement; and at this stage we judge Jingle’s reading the most coherent and persuasive available to us, including the editor’s, who refers to Mr Pickwick’s ‘great mind’ and ‘noble breast.’ At this early stage of the novel we certainly lack the evidence to be able to agree with Boz.

2. Reading Boz

So we can see that one of Dickens' major concerns at the beginning of *The Pickwick Papers* is the comedy and tension that derives from the challenges of observing, interpreting and recording. These activities are part of the action. They are also part of the experience of getting this action written. Our editor, Boz, is engaged in a 'careful perusal' of a series of manuscripts – the 'Transactions of the Pickwick Club,' 'authenticated accounts' and 'notebooks' – collectively known as the Pickwick Papers. *The Pickwick Papers* is not of course the Pickwick Papers but a record of the activity of their editor. Therefore one important question the novel asks us is not (just) what attitude we should take to its characters but how we should regard the work itself – how we should read it in fact.

In the early numbers, the editor is generally careful to keep his sources visible, but obscure. He begins with a direct quotation which amounts to a dated record of the resolutions agreed to. These include the details of the formulation of the Corresponding Society of the Pickwick Club, with which the novel is concerned. Boz then moves into an account of his own for the first presentation of Pickwick, which is 'indebted' to notes made by the secretary. Then we are back with what appears to be ('says the Secretary') a direct quotation (from the notes) of reported speech (Mr Pickwick's), interspersed with quotations of direct speech from the floor: 'A cry of "It is," and great cheering' (*PP* p. 4).

Even as we move from this first chapter, Boz is careful to keep his sources in view. We are told we are reading an abridgement of Mr Pickwick's notes in chapter 2.

Conversely, when we are deprived of Mr Pickwick's opinion on a matter such as the Stroller's Tale, we are made aware it is because of the absence of a source with which the editor would be able to construct an account: 'It would afford us the highest gratification to be enabled to record Mr Pickwick's opinion of the foregoing anecdote' (*PP* p. 40). This is important because Dickens has begun this work by choosing a persona who does not have access to his characters' mind. In fact, in a manner that firmly allies him with the more conventional characters in the novel, all Boz has to go on are external events and actions, rather than internal insights. He theoretically has no access to the thoughts and intentions of individuals in the narrative, which remain the

business of 'Charles Dickens.' All this is important when we come to consider what effect this framing has on the tone of the novel.

Part of the joke of course is that Boz is surely a non-ironic editor. He colludes with the spirit of seriousness that is part of the original impulse of the Pickwick idea. He is a component of the device which encourages us to laugh at these cockney sportsmen/scientists/travellers. The words he applies to Mr Pickwick – 'immortal', 'illustrious' etc – and his presentation of the Papers as a concept and a practical 'reservoir' of text, are all straight, undeflected into spaces where there is room for a reader to adopt an ironic eye. But when we consider, for example, the first two paragraphs of the fourth chapter, in which the editor adopts his 'upright manner' and describes a world 'thirsting for Pickwickian knowledge,' and find we must admit these words in the serious tone in which Boz intends them and yet find them not serious, as everybody does, where can we place our deflected understanding, where does it properly belong? No-one could propose that the Pickwickians are not objects of satire in the early numbers – but which is the satirical language? In other words, where is the ironic text of *The Pickwick Papers*? It is the story of the reader's reading; the work he or she has to do to admit the *Papers*, rather than the Papers, into the arena of meaning.

In a book such as this, which has so much to say about reading and writing, we find ourselves confronted with a whole series of models, and indeed a central example, of how to behave when confronted with texts. In fact the book is itself, wholly, the story of a reading, a process by which an absent text is encouraged into meaning through the mediation of a reader, whom we read. The small library of invisible texts which lies behind *The Pickwick Papers*, and which are the Pickwick Papers, are thus both realised and hidden by the narrated act of reading which forms the text of the novel. And in the same way, our new ironic reading of that text is the 'work' which, existing in the space between the realm of the text and the domain of the reader, at once urges that text into meaning and at the same time obscures it. So reading, as for Blanchot, 'simply "makes" the book become – be – a work beyond the person who wrote it, the experience that gave rise to it and even all the artistic resources tradition has made available.'² This idea is extremely significant when we consider that we are trying to find some way of

² 'Reading', p. 251.

describing, and accounting for, the apparently 'out-of-the-book' vitality of Dickens-World.

The Pickwick Papers is a key example of this because the device of the editor makes clear how in doing that work, the making to which Blanchot refers, our attention glances off the text into a new realm of understanding which the text cannot accommodate. We have already seen how there is no room in the novel's avowed structure for irony; the editor's own reading fills the page. Instead we look away; we go somewhere else. This looking away, which at times is urged upon the reader with all the promptness and frequency of a reflex, is an enduring feature of the interaction between Dickens and his readers, and the examples in *The Pickwick Papers*, occurring so early in his career and with such persuasive force, are extremely influential in shaping the figure of the Dickensian and his or her activities.

We might possibly guess that a character whose name appears in the title of a novel might be of some significance to the action of that novel. And yet Dickens, through Boz, seems remarkably coy about letting us get a straight look at Mr Pickwick. The resolutions with which the book opens (read by the secretary), set the scene (and in fact describe the plot) and allow us an oblique appreciation of Mr Pickwick's achievements, the Club's attitude to him, the editor's position and perhaps Dickens' too. But as the text approaches the subject and major concern of these retrospective notes, as it slips into the ongoing past tense of its sphere of action, into a framework of continuous time, suddenly our attention is deflected towards a 'casual observer' – who seems to be merely a device to prevent us looking directly at the sun. 'A casual observer, adds the secretary, to whose notes we are indebted for the following account – a casual observer might possibly have remarked nothing extraordinary...' (*PP* p. 2).

This 'observer' is part of a joke about the secretary, and through him about the Club, and through that (presumably) about Boz the editor, which deflates the achievements just described by implying that to the uninitiated (anyone not humbled by the presence of Pickwick) they might seem petty and ridiculous. And that therefore the 'bald head, and circular spectacles' we are looking at (or trying to look at) are indeed extremely ordinary. So at this important moment, rather than being allowed to judge the size or

worth of Mr Pickwick (and perhaps to get the joke), we find ourselves looking away at our own proxy (the 'observer') where he has been pitched casually into the text.

We are then told that the 'spectacle' becomes much more interesting when the founder climbs onto his chair to address his Club. And again there follows the gesture to deflect our gaze, to point out to us some alternative view, some other text. 'What a study for an artist did that exciting scene represent!' (*PP* p. 3). We are not being asked to see Boz's Pickwick, at all. We look elsewhere, we are shown a displaced figure who is the subject of an imaginary artist; *here* is his primary presence, *here* we will know him, not in the words of the page in front of us. What is interesting of course is that in this case the artist's study is entirely present, as Robert Seymour's own text comes to sit amongst all the others in this first number.

Chapter 11: Real and reality

1. Seymour and the *Pickwick* preface

Dickens himself, when writing the preface to the Cheap Edition of *Pickwick Papers*, which was published in 1847, acknowledged the significance and power of Robert Seymour's pictorial embodiment of the glance away from the novel's written text.

*I thought of Mr Pickwick and wrote the first number; from the proof sheets of which, MR SEYMOUR made his drawing of the Club, and that happy portrait of its founder, by which he is always recognised, and which may be said to have made him a reality.*¹

Even allowing for Dickens' lingering feelings of generosity towards Seymour, because of his associations with the origins of Dickens' first great triumph and the artist's suicide soon after, this is an amazing thing for any author, let alone one like Dickens, usually so protective of his achievements, to concede. The story of the preface and this critical passage is complex because Dickens made alterations for the publication of the Charles Dickens Edition in 1867.

I thought of Mr Pickwick and wrote the first number; from the proof sheets of which, MR SEYMOUR made his drawing of the Club, and his happy portrait of its founder: - the latter on MR EDWARD CHAPMAN'S description of the dress and bearing of a real personage whom he had often seen.²

A number of things have happened here. Unquestionably Dickens has felt the need to downgrade the importance of Seymour's work. This is why he now writes of 'his happy portrait' rather than 'that happy portrait'. We are now encouraged to see the illustration as one version of many – a good one perhaps, but not of such over-riding significance as to eclipse all other renderings and make them derivative. Dickens even suggests, helpfully, the existence of a model additional to that provided by the author in the first number. This keeps Seymour even further away from the originary nuggets of Pickwickness from which the character is made. And of course Dickens removes completely the references to recognition and reality. We no longer have the author's sanction to credit Seymour with bringing Pickwick into the world of our everyday

¹ Dickens, Charles, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, ed. Robert L. Patten (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics 1986), p. 44.

² *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (Penguin Classics), pp. 50-1

experience. In fact, by emphasising that Seymour's *Pickwick* is some kind of reflection of someone 'real' (and not a unique entity of itself), the illustrator (or rather, his work) is again distanced from us. This distinction between real person and real 'character' is not one that Dickens even needs to acknowledge in the first version.

However, Dickens' actions in meddling with his own preface do not suggest a fundamental rethinking of the artistic issues concerned with the creation of *Pickwick* and his popular reception. There is a very large dose of pragmatic self-interest involved here. Between the two editions Dickens had become reluctantly drawn in to a dispute with Seymour's widow and family over the initial design and inspiration of *The Pickwick Papers*, and therefore (perhaps), its success. It had all begun because Dickens had, for one reason or another, declined to contribute to a benefit volume to be sold for Mrs Seymour's support (he was in fact involved at the time in a similar venture for the widow of his first publisher, John Macrone). In 1849, by which time Mrs Seymour was claiming that her husband had been responsible for *Pickwick's* triumph, a clearly frustrated Dickens broke off all correspondence with her. Eventually there was an anti-Dickens pamphlet, and, in March 1866, a letter from her son was published in the *Athenaeum*.³

Dickens responded in the following issue, but also surely in his preface to the Charles Dickens Edition. He was clearly nervous that his original tribute to Seymour could be wilfully misunderstood by those who wished to credit the artist with more than Dickens thought that he deserved. This is why his new account seems to edge Seymour away from the coal-face of the initiating act. And, in case anyone misses the point, he, 'with great unwillingness', alludes to the controversy and tackles the subject head-on. 'MR SEYMOUR never originated or suggested an incident, a phrase, or a word, to be found in this book'.⁴

It is extremely important, however, to keep in mind that Dickens need not necessarily have seen any contradiction between this statement and his tribute to Seymour in 1847. He must have become aware of the possibility of misinterpretation and decided to play safe. His sensitivity certainly shows us that the first assertion was no throwaway phrase

³ *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (Penguin Classics), a summary of pp. 919-22.

⁴ *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, (Penguin Classics), p. 51.

– he knew the importance of what he was conceding, and perhaps what others were likely to make of it. But the impulse to censor was surely practical and politic rather than a matter of artistic feeling. By offering Seymour the credit of making Mr Pickwick a ‘reality’, Dickens by no means, at any stage, meant to denigrate his own achievement of origination. This is significant because it gives us a clue to what Dickens claims for himself – what he thinks he is doing and what he thinks is happening to his readers when they read him.

So we can return to the 1847 preface as one unsullied by the practical considerations of a bitter and possibly litigious world, to return to ‘that happy portrait’ which makes Mr Pickwick a reality. What could Dickens have meant? Why would he so blithely have handed over the credit for this primal act of ‘making real’ when it concerned perhaps his most famous and enduring creation (in 1847, anyway). Because he did not see ‘making real’ as the primal act. What the subsequent controversy shows us is that Dickens certainly was not conceding *invention* to Seymour, or indeed to anyone else. Could we not conclude from this that Dickens did not see ‘reality’ as his business at all: making things *real* would be something that happened elsewhere, an activity imposed upon the primary text, a job belonging to those who *read*?

Even in the original 1837 preface to the publication of the collected numbers, Dickens finds himself musing on the subject of the real. He attempts to forestall (or more probably is reacting to) criticism which might be tempted to compare experience of the book with experience of reality. He pictures this postulated equivalence as an *objection*.

And if it be objected to the Pickwick Papers, that they are a mere series of adventures, in which the scenes are ever-changing, and the characters come and go like the men and women we encounter in the real world, he [the author] can only content himself with the reflection, that they claim to be nothing else, and that the same objection has been made to the works of some of the greatest novelists in the English language.⁵

Dickens is here stealing an argument in order to recast it as something else, and so answer it. In other words, he takes the widely held claim that there is not much sense of an overall artistic shape in the book, in terms of plot and narrative coherence, and

⁵ *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (Penguin Classics), p. 41.

characterises it as the criticism that therefore what we end up with is a ‘mere series of adventures’. This allows him to say that, since *life* is a mere series of adventures, this criticism is in fact its own refutation and the author’s defence. So *being like the real world* is, for this book at least, an artistic achievement and end in itself.

Thus, in 1837, Dickens clearly shows that, first of all, he is proud of a technique which mimics the *action* of the real, its mechanisms, its comings and goings. He permits himself to align his work with those written by some of the greatest English novelists. In 1847, he is happy to admit that the figure of his imagination, Mr Pickwick, who comes and goes like a real person, is made a reality by his illustrator. Not *a part of* reality, not even specifically *our* reality, but *a* reality, himself. Who is this real Pickwick? And how does Seymour’s Pickwick help us? Is he a bald man? A fat man? A man standing on a chair? All three? Does he have to be all three?

The two *Pickwick* prefaces help us to see in what ways *being like the real world* is not the same as *becoming a reality*. The former is a matter of sound technique; we could almost say the latter is out of an artist’s control. Dickens is similarly musing on the subject of realities when he writes the preface to the 1858 Library Edition of *Oliver Twist*.⁶ Responding to criticism that the novel depicts immoral themes and that its concern with characters who are ‘the most criminal and degraded in London’s population’ is a ‘coarse and shocking circumstance’, he argues for the moral basis of the practice of showing things ‘as they really are’.

I had read of thieves by the scores; seductive fellows (amiable for the most part), faultless in dress, plump in pocket, choice in horse-flesh, bold in bearing, fortunate in gallantry, great at a song, a bottle, pack of cards or dice-box, and fit companions for the bravest. But I had never met, (except in HOGARTH) with the miserable reality. It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really did exist... would be to attempt something which was needed, and which would be a service to society.

What is interesting is that here Dickens brings together a defence of his technique (the ability to depict things as they really are) and his own creative prowess as a reader (of Hogarth) to identify – in fact to make – a reality. It is because Dickens recognises the moral vision that animates Hogarth’s work, that he acknowledges its power and calls it

⁶ Dickens, Charles, *Oliver Twist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin English Library 1966) pp. 33-7.

true. The thieves of whom he has otherwise read seem unreal because they have no place in Dickens' idea of the world - where vice leads only and inevitably to wretchedness and punishment. He underlines for us in this very preface how real thieves really are; they are 'for ever skulking uneasily thorough the dirtiest paths of life, with the great black ghastly gallows closing up their prospect'. If you do not fit this description, you cannot be a real thief. In the same way, 'It is useless to discuss whether the conduct or character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. IT IS TRUE'. Here Dickens reads his own work, and, not surprisingly, finds it fits his idea of the world, one where God leaves hope 'yet lingering' in the heart of women who support and defend the men who abuse them.

In Dickens' terms then, to return to his claims for Seymour's Pickwick, his illustrator enabled a process of recognition which embraced an original and made it somehow identifiable, pre-conceived, of-the-things-which-have-been: present, but of the past. It is an acknowledgment entirely in keeping with the strange obliqueness of the early chapters of *The Pickwick Papers* and the presentation of its narrative; we can only recognise that which is original by looking away and reading a reading of it. In this oblique reading we perceive Seymour's idea of Pickwick, but also recognise our past selves encountering the original (in the printed text), and read the job of our reading that has already taken place.

2. Looking away from the text

We can open out this tight and complex process with the help of Yves Bonnefoy, a poet and critic who has written about the necessary obliqueness of recognition, about 'the problem of how to read a work'.⁷ This essay begins with an acknowledgement of how reading 'has become a responsibility, a contribution, equal in its way to writing' (p. 795). Bonnefoy becomes troubled by this responsibility because it raises the question of what reading we should be contributing – can we come up to the expectations of the author of the text? He considers the phantom 'complete reading' that lies behind this feeling of duty not only impossible but undesirable. We use a certain language to denigrate readings and demote their status to mere 'usages' or 'pillagings' of the text for partial ends, when in fact this partiality is something to wonder at and celebrate.

⁷ Bonnefoy, Yves, 'Lifting Our Eyes from the Page', tr. John Naughton, *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990), p. 794.

When we read a poet as though absent-mindedly, because we are turned by his very words toward something that escapes them, when this intuition of an all-necessary beyond and this impression of something urgent come along...to suspend in us the act of reading, this does not mean poetry has been slighted. (p. 798)

One of the most distinctive features of the story of Dickens-reading and Dickens-readers is the large amount of activity which seems to concern itself with what appears to be out-of-the-book. This includes performance, travel, criticism and simply reading which has gone beyond the analogies of adaptation and seems to concern itself with the freer, pervasive Dickens-World with which we are familiar. All this surely has its origin in the impulse away from the printed text, the kind of absent-mindedness Bonnefoy is describing. *The Pickwick Papers* sets an example for the Dickensian reading of Dickens which is to become so persuasive a response to his work. It constantly makes us feel we are getting just a glimpse of the total work, a *presentation* whose pauses allow us to escape into wondering about life 'off-stage' where the characters go about their business undetected and where, in fact, in *Pickwick*, the work has its genesis (the place where the Papers are). 'Dickens instinctively felt all his figures to be immortal souls who existed whether he wrote of them or not, and whether the reader read of them or not...Not only did they exist before we heard of them, they existed also before Dickens heard of them.'⁸

When Wardle and Mr Pickwick eventually catch up with Jingle, and, with the help of the solicitor Perker, pay him off in order to encourage Rachel to return home, there is a distinct interruption in what we might call the *narrative of reading* created by the reader. The ongoing past tense into which we have settled, and which makes a linear shape of the action in our reading minds ('He panted for breath, and looked benignly round upon his friends') is suddenly disrupted by the editor appearing in the present (our present, as we make our reading of the work) and speaking in the future tense about Mr Pickwick's completed action in a kind of hidden past, a past which is at once present, in the shape of the notebook, and doubly past, in the sense that it is not recovered by the linear action of the book. 'Shall we tell the lamentations that ensued, when Miss Wardle found herself deserted by the faithless Jingle? Shall we extract Mr

⁸ *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, p. 3.

Pickwick's masterly description of that heart-rending scene?' (*PP* p. 131). Of course there is the joke about the editor, whose overwrought manner is both an object of satire in itself and also a tool with which to belittle Rachel Wardle's predicament. Her 'lamentations' and 'suffering' are the result of the kind of foolishness with which *The Pickwick Papers* has little sympathy. The implication is that 'the public bosom' is certainly not interested. We get a good look at our editor's source though. '[Mr Pickwick's] note-book, blotted with the tears of sympathising humanity, lies open before us; one word, and it is in the printer's hands. But, no! we will be resolute! We will not wring the public bosom, with the delineation of such suffering!' (*PP* p. 131).

What a strange feeling it is. As Boz vacillates, Dickens takes a little shot at cheap and sensationalist writing, but also teases us with a conceit which makes a component of his fictional world tumble out onto the desk in front of us. At the sight of the notebook, Mr Pickwick vaults into the world of the narrator – when we were getting used to him being merely part of the world of the narrated. Looking away from the *Papers* towards this relic, we see another Pickwick, one who has been busily shaping the Pickwick we thought we knew. Is this the real Pickwick – the unwritten Pickwick – who can in fact sit alongside the editor, call in and pick up his notebook, who cried those tears which fell outside the action of the novel but somehow inside the total work? We look away and are treated to a vivid glimpse from an entire world in a space where we were hardly aware there was even a space.

'In the heart of interruption, communication'.⁹ This feeling of interruption, or perhaps of diversion, is characteristic of Dickens' relationship with his reader. Susan Horton, in *The Reader in the Dickens World*, while noting that 'the energy of the novels is... partly that of the reader', maintains that the demands of interpretation this makes are considerable.¹⁰ Dickens-World is full of interventions and reported presences which tease the reader away from that job of making sense – or rather make that making sense vastly more complicated, as we have seen in *Pickwick*. And although here we might expect the device of an editor to add, itself, that extra layer of reported perceptions which the reader needs to decode, in fact Horton shows that in other novels Dickens is

⁹ 'Lifting Our Eyes from the Page', p. 801.

¹⁰ Horton, Susan R., *The Reader in the Dickens World: Style and Response* (London: Macmillan 1981), p. 54.

quite happy to take on that role himself in his persona as author. His novels, she writes, 'are full of "stasis" statements that contradict his "process" statements'. In other words his interventions in the narrative are designed not to give the reader an extra push in the direction he or she is already travelling, but to suggest turning off somewhere else. His rhetoric (stasis) does not directly interpret the action of the novel, but 'increases the work of interpretation the reader must do' to make sense of the narrative (process) (p. 35).

Dickens can also produce this kind of intervention from within the plane of the narrative itself, without resorting to editorial/authorial comment. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Jonas, having murdered Montague, remains untroubled by remorse. Dickens dwells on the physical presence of the body in the wood so that it is firmly and uncomfortably fixed in the reader's mind: but Jonas seems not to reflect on what he has left behind him – or at least only to wonder when it will be discovered. He is pursued by no visions of blood or staring eyes, like Bill Sikes. What terrifies Jonas is the ghost of a lost narrative, his absence from the room at home, where, as far as anyone else knows, he spent the night. This 'interruption' in Jonas' own story of his plot to murder his blackmailing partner diverts his consciousness away from the present to a kind of provisional past where the murder has, and has not, occurred. He is 'believed' to be shut in the room at home and until he is discovered not to be there, nothing – or everything – is possible. The inviolate room holds the alternative futures equally valid. This is why 'His hideous secret was shut up in the room, and all its terrors were there; to his thinking it was not in the wood at all' (*MC* p. 725). The strain of supporting these two distinct, complimentary, exclusive worlds produces in Jonas's mind two Jonases who cannot merge together into one entity. 'He became in a manner his own ghost and phantom, and was at once the haunting spirit and the haunted man' (*MC* p. 727).

In the same way *The Pickwick Papers* is haunted by the other Pickwicks who try to lead us away from the narrative into another book entirely, one unwritten, free and appealing. It becomes hardly surprising that Pickwick turns up later in Dickens' writing, with Master Humphrey, as we have already got used to the Pickwick who is not covered by *The Pickwick Papers*. It begins to seem almost natural that we should meet him in Rochester with Fagin and the rest.

So Dickens' interrupted narratives may make us pause to affirm our reading, or deny it, or modify it, or all three. When Dickens claims that Seymour made Pickwick a reality, he is paying tribute to the power of illustration to do all of this, and one reason why he was so sympathetic to the presence of graphic work in his novels, is that he saw in his own work the cycles of recognition and diversion which gave shape and depth to the reading experience. Although there have been studies of the place of illustration in Dickens' work and in other nineteenth-century novels, which have examined both the cumulative effect of images (especially those bound together in the original monthly parts) and the composition of important individual plates, we need to begin by considering their impact on the narrative of the work that the reader makes in encountering it. In other words, bearing in mind what we have considered in relation to the role of recognition and the unwritten text, how does the reader take account of them in forming an idea of the novel?

The illustrations interrupt our experience of Dickens' prose. This is not a matter of sequencing. It would be difficult not to grant the printed word a kind of primary authority over the pictures, so that even if a reader was to study the plates in advance, or in a random order, individually or together, they would still be seen as some kind of commentary on the written text. They are intermittent, the words are extensive. In fact, publishing convention does not regard them as an integral part of the work at all; readers are all the time buying unillustrated copies of Dickens' work without feeling the loss. However, no matter how one approaches a book that *is* illustrated, the pictures will get in the way. This interruption is not temporal but conceptual.

We left Seymour's Mr Pickwick wondering in what way he could be real, and how other Pickwicks might relate to him. Dickens of course gives us the essential clue to his reality by acknowledging that it is Seymour's portrait 'by which he is always recognised.' We identify something in this Pickwick in the same way that Dickens himself identifies something in Hogarth's thieves. That something must be our perceiving selves. Imagine looking at the same image with absolutely no knowledge of Pickwick or Dickens. To look at it as we do today, reading, or having read, the book, is to look back at ourselves reading and assess the picture according to the awareness we have constructed from our experience of Dickens. It is to know ourselves in a past we did not know was there. This interruption has the curious effect of embracing us so that

we see ourselves included in the narrative of our own understanding of the work. When we look at Seymour's picture while reading, or having read, *The Pickwick Papers*, the work we are doing to make an understanding of the book in our heads changes character. We no longer accumulate; we are invited to review. The way we approach the figure standing on the chair is to draw on our experience of the prose; so that we assess Seymour's Pickwick by drawing on our own reading of 'those tights and gaiters', the bald head and the circular spectacles. If we recognise this figure, he becomes 'a reality' because we have already met him. We discover he is already part of our experience of the world.

Perhaps this is what Dickens is talking about when he refers to realities. Dickens' reality is equivalent to Barthes' 'oral state' – attained by (and a necessary requirement of) the elements of myth. Pickwick, with the help of Seymour, is passing into a new realm of existence where his identity can be manipulated – handled – independently of the written text where Dickens has completed his work of origination. The Pickwick we have known in *The Pickwick Papers* lived a life circumscribed by his author; this is when we knew him. And yet he occurs in the world of the present day – the same (recognisable) but transformed. Pickwick, and knowledge of Pickwick, is developing free of his original context – not an imported relic, a souvenir, but a genuinely current entity. He has been and is.

Chapter 12: Reading the unwritten

1. Other narratives

We must acknowledge that it is not possible for any illustrator simply to hold up a mirror to our own understanding of the work. A further consequence of the interrupted reading represented by images is to open up exactly the kind of hidden narratives we have seen represented by Pickwick's notebook and Jonas's fixation with his absent presence in the locked room. This is hardly surprising, considering the freedom Dickens allowed his illustrators, especially when under the pressure of deadlines. He certainly knew when he disliked a certain offering, but, as Michael Steig has shown, often expected images to be produced from the sketchiest of authorial input. For instance, in *Dombey and Son*, 'Browne was given no text to work from (by his own account, Dickens had not yet written the text).'¹ Steig describes Hablot Browne's development of a distinctively allusive and punning style to complement and comment on Dickens' prose, characteristically including details either not in the text at all, or drawn from an understanding of the wider drift of the whole work, rather than simply the specific incident he was depicting. This offers the reader glimpses of freedom in the lives of the figures he or she recognises from the prose, so that while the review (which we do in looking) of the reading already done, produces, on the one hand, a kind of acknowledged history of (our own) understanding, it also raises questions of unfamiliarity and exposes unreachable areas of the unwritten life of the novel.

Steig quotes examples of Dickens' instructions to Browne, especially for *Martin Chuzzlewit*, where full instructions for five of the plates survive (p. 63). These are fascinating not least for the insight they give into the *Martin Chuzzlewit* that never made it into print. We need to remember that Browne, although sometimes given a new excerpt of the book to read, was often working from instructions which preceded the creation of the prose which was eventually to appear as the latest monthly part – simply because the drawings needed to be started before Dickens had actually written the stuff. At the end of this particular novel, Browne is asked by Dickens to create an illustration for Charity Pecksniff's wedding-that-is-no-wedding, when she is jilted by Augustus Moddle. Steig quotes extensively from Dickens' instructions, which spill from his pen as though he has momentarily slipped into the world of the novel and his role as

¹ Steig, Michael, *Dickens and Phiz*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1978), p. 93.

narrator. As Steig points out (p. 78), what is interesting is that these instructions contain information which cannot be of any use to Browne ('The bride wears a bonnet with an orange flower') and describe elements of the scene which do not make it into the final printed version ('The strong-minded woman has [frequently] expressed a hope that nothing has happened to him'). In the version printed, the closest we get to this last observation is the 'sketchy nephew' hinting that 'he might have fallen off a bridge' (*MC* p. 835). Suddenly, when writing these instructions, Dickens appears to realise what he is getting into and breaks off abruptly:

The strong-minded woman and her daughters are

Lettering. The Nuptials of Miss Pecksniff receive a temporary check.

Steig shows us that Browne is not really illustrating *Martin Chuzzlewit* at all, but 'Martin Chuzzlewit', an unresolved and irresolvable life and world of which *Martin Chuzzlewit* is merely a selection. Steig highlights this later in *Dickens and Phiz*, when writing about *Dombey and Son*, specifically the plate in which Major Bagstock is depicted introducing Mr Dombey to Edith and Mrs Skewton. For this Browne had no text from the monthly part in composition, but merely an outline of Dickens' intentions and his idea of his characters' personalities. 'In outlining the subject, Dickens says nothing about arrangement of figures, and even gives Browne the choice of portraying them in "the street or in a green lane...if you like it better"' (p. 93).

Because 'by his own account, Dickens had not yet written the text', Steig observes that this makes the assemblage of instructions 'a kind of ur-text' (p.93) – from which *Dombey and Son* is eventually written. And which remains a strong presence in the finished work through the illustrations that are its visual representation and commentary. It is curious then that these images are often seen as fixed, static snapshots of an unravelling, ongoing text, that, in the words of J. Hillis Miller, 'The power of a picture is to detach a moment from its temporal sequence and make it hang there in a perpetual non-present representational present, without past or future.'²

² Hillis Miller, J., *Illustration* (London: Reaktion 1992), p. 66.

In fact, although, as we have seen, the illustrations in Dickens' novels do have a function which enables us to pause and review the text in order to see ourselves experiencing it, to see ourselves as part of Dickens-World, their interruption of that text also has a kind of dynamic which attempts to launch us centrifugally out from what we have understood so far, into other narratives not covered by what we know. And in those magnificently interrupted instructions to Hablot Browne, we have an emblem of the other worlds tantalisingly acknowledged, never explored, always present in the subsequent illustrations, analogous to the hidden lives glimpsed in Dickens' work. The strong-minded woman and her daughters! Here they *are*: on the brink of a thousand possible journeys, an infinite number of lives to be lived: whose outcomes escape us, whose stories over-stretch our perception of the central narrative, whose consequences dissolve and fade into the white blank of the page.

This effect is particularly marked in illustrations which do not present any identifiable scene from the novel in which they are included. The image of 'The Dombey Family', for instance, is designed as an emblematic summary of the relationship between four individuals who are of paramount importance to the development of the first quarter of the book. Its appearance is a genuine collaboration between author and illustrator (Mr Dombey's sitting posture was Browne's suggested alteration after he had drawn Dickens a version with him standing)³ and seems to be compiled from a number of details which are scattered through this monthly part. There is the evidence of Mr Dombey's behaviour after the funeral of his wife, when he covers up the furniture, leaving every chandelier 'muffled in holland, [looking] like a monstrous tear depending from the ceiling's eye' (*DS* p. 22). Polly is present, as though she is carrying out that part of her duties which involves walking up and down with Paul while Dombey has his breakfast or waits for his dinner. And Florence seems to have been caught during the episode when Polly attempts to engineer some appearance of affection between father and daughter. But in the written account of this, Dombey is 'pacing up and down' (*DS* p. 29) before he stops to look at her, and in the picture, thanks to Browne's revision, he sits facing us as though having his portrait taken. The lettering ('The Dombey Family') must indicate an awareness, and a reinforcing, of this effect. We are left with an impression not of a paused moment in the action of the novel, with which we are

³ *Dickens and Phiz*, p. 88.

familiar, but a new event staged by characters who have somehow slipped the control of our narrator. J. R. Harvey identifies it as a kind of epitome, and relates it to the extended use of tableaux in Browne's illustrations for *David Copperfield*.⁴ It means that we recognise the individual elements of the image, but can only make sense of the whole if we admit to a world where *Dombey* is, but *Dombey and Son* is not.

This feeling is strengthened by the frontispieces which were printed along with a title page to accompany the last number. As Michael Steig notes, because of the distinction between their date of issue (at the end of the work) and their position in a bound volume (at the beginning), these plates serve in both an anticipatory and a reviewing role.⁵ Because of this, they tend towards general depictions of central characters in appropriate poses, with invented – and often satirical – smaller scenes worked into the overall scheme. Thus, on beginning *Dombey and Son*, we see Paul and Florence on the beach sheltered by angels and surrounded by images which include Dr Blimber's academy, but also Mrs Skewton menaced by the figures of Death and Time and Sol Gills borne aloft by mermaids.

The *Pickwick* frontispiece is particularly interesting. It seems to encourage the reader in forming an impression of, and a curiosity about, the Pickwick who is not accounted for by the novel and who is only hinted at by the presence of the notebook that lies open upon our editor's table. Sam and Mr Pickwick are sitting in a room which looks like a small library or study. The atmosphere is one of withdrawn repose and genial retirement. We must surely be looking at a the 'little retreat' at Dulwich to which Mr Pickwick retires at the end of the book, planning to employ 'his leisure hours in arranging the memoranda which he afterwards presented to the secretary of the once famous club' (*PP* p. 801) Or perhaps he is 'hearing Sam Weller read aloud'. Sam is certainly doing something with a pile of books in the illustration – maybe these are the *Pickwick Papers*, or even *The Pickwick Papers*. Certainly the scene is constructed as a privileged glimpsed of a private world, an unedited peek at the raw material of the book we have just read/are about to read. It is framed by a niche or window opening of flamboyant comedy-Gothic. What we see through the window is revealed only by a set of enormously theatrical imps and jesters who pull apart two sweeping curtains, which

⁴ Harvey, J. R., *Victorian Novelists and their Illustrators* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson 1970) p. 142.

⁵ *Dickens and Phiz*, p. 38.

remain encroaching on the upper part of the image, as if they are about to fall back across it and obscure our view forever. It is a vivid evocation of the merest hint in the written text, which allows Mr Pickwick and Sam to escape the close of the book and aids their release into the free air of immortality.

In Dickens we have a writer whose imagination was peculiarly seized by the nonsensical, nonsense-making, overwhelming detail of people's lives and who could not avoid gesturing towards the infinite, impossible vistas of daily life, while yet remaining faithful, just about, to his craft as a comprehensible novelist. He also happened to publish in a format which allowed other artists not only to comment on this richness and hint at its unaccountable complexity, but even to give his readers a glimpse of the unsorted, unpublished Dickens-World before it hit the page. While we can certainly concur with Michael Steig's assessment of the quality of Browne's illustrations – he calls them 'essential' – nevertheless we must feel that far from rendering Dickens' text 'complete' (p. 316), their true significance lies in the work they do to incomplete his achievement and set it free.

2. The unbordered text

Any reader of Dickens soon discovers that words are only the beginning. Even a reader of the novels alone – even a contemporary reader of the novels – will be unavoidably contending with both apparently random hints (in the prose) and structured meditations (in the illustrations) upon the non-verbal, hidden Dickens. It is those hints to which friends, colleagues, Dickensians and the entire reading (in the widest sense) public have been responding enthusiastically for over 150 years. This does however present a challenge to those who may wish to describe and analyse such a pervasive phenomenon. It is just this problem that Derrida highlights.

If we are to approach a text, it must have an edge.⁶

If there is no border to an artwork, no beginning, no end, no line beyond which we can say that it is no longer pertinent or operative, then how can we tell if we are getting any

⁶ Derrida, Jacques, 'Living On: Border Lines' in Bloom, de Man et al, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1979), p. 83.

closer as we try to study its detail? It will always remain equally distant, forever at our elbow, untouchable. In fact, Derrida claims that this is precisely the case.

What has happened... is a sort of overrun that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a 'text'... that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces (pp. 83-4).

It is not difficult to see Dickens as a supreme example of this process. Derrida identifies two tendencies of this unbordered text, both of which are extremely useful in attempting to analyse the particular qualities of Dickens' art and its presence in the world. Derrida warns us first of all that we cannot regard the work as a 'finished corpus of writing'; he also restrains, or modifies, his metaphor of the text subject to 'overrun', by characterising the result, not as a featureless flood, but as a 'differential network'. It is this idea of the differential which we will first examine in Dickens' work.

The genesis of 'Living On: Border Lines' was an agreement between Derrida and a number of colleagues to take one text as an example with which to demonstrate their own particular method or project. The example chosen was Shelley's unfinished poem, *The Triumph of Life*. Derrida is particularly interested in the 'double narrative' represented by this work, in which the poet describes himself having a vision, and then describes that vision within the work. With this observation in mind, Derrida examines a piece of writing by Maurice Blanchot, *La folie du jour*, which depicts a man interrogated by barely identifiable authority-figures. But at the start of this work, its first words, we are not aware of the presence of others, only the narrator. 'I am neither learned nor ignorant. I have known joys. That is saying too little: I am alive and this life gives me the greatest pleasure.' It is only later, as Derrida says, that 'we learn that this opening paragraph... corresponds in its content and form, if not in its occurrence, to the beginning of the account that the narrator tries to take up in response to the demands of his interrogators' (pp. 95-6).

Because of the sudden change in tense during Blanchot's work, we find that we are forced to take account of an event which takes place outside what we thought was the edge of the text, its beginning. 'I had been asked, "Tell us exactly what happened." A

story? I began: I am neither learned nor ignorant. I have known joys. That is saying too little. I told them the whole story...' Derrida comments:

This creates an exceedingly strange space: what appeared to be the beginning and the upper edge of a discourse will have been merely part of a narrative that forms a part of the discourse in that it recounts how an attempt was made - in vain! - to force a narrative out of the narrator. (p. 96)

We can see that the border of the total work cannot be identified, and the quotation of the narrative fragment here will itself, as the history progresses, end up 'quoting its quotation'. In the same way, as *Oliver Twist* moves towards its conclusion, when Monks moves 'restlessly in his chair' and observes to Mr Brownlow that 'Your tale is of the longest', we are forced to agree: longer than long – unending. Mr Brownlow's narrative reaches back beyond the 'upper edge' of the text we thought we were reading and, in its steady progress, re-presents to us the story with which we have become familiar: "When [Oliver] was rescued by me, then, and lay recovering from sickness in my house, his strong resemblance to the picture I have spoken of, struck me with astonishment" (*OT* p. 377). This is a re-telling. Mr Brownlow emphasises the literally up-to-the-hour freshness of the story within the story ("until two hours ago, all my efforts were fruitless") and all but elbows his narrative into the current linear past tense of the action, which would lead to the absurdity of him forced to begin his story again, quoting his own quoted history of himself, as if he were to say to Monks 'so I brought you here, and told you this story, which goes...'

Derrida rescues us from these kinds of difficulties by assuring us that it was:

never our wish to extend the reassuring notion of the text to a whole extra-textual realm and to transform the world into a library by doing away with all boundaries, all framework, all sharp edges...but that we sought rather to work out the theoretical and practical system of these margins, these borders, once more, from the ground up. (p. 84)

We are urged to think not in terms of *edges* but *folds*, which shape the reading experience, the story of the narrative, what Derrida calls the 'event of the narrative' or the 'text as narrative'. Thus: 'The edge of the set is a fold in the set...' (p. 96). If we were to lay our hands on a long piece of material resting on a polished table, and were to slide them towards each other, a fold would rise and fall to one side, concealing,

lying on top of, material that had previously been visible. This illustrates Derrida's 'invaginated' structure, in which a fold confronts the text with its outer edge (although perhaps the English word 'surface' does just as well in this precise context) – for instance, a beginning – formed into a pocket. What we thought, as readers, was the exterior surface of the narrative, thus becomes the inner surface of a pocket enfolded by another outer. Here is the story within a story. Here also is a way of talking about Dickens' collaboration with Browne and the interruptions the subsequent illustrations make in the prose.

Yves Bonnefoy would have it that the interrupted readings he describes are the way the poet brings the reader closer to the essential fact of poetry, by freeing him or her from the very language which is the vehicle for the experience. The importance of interruption is precisely that it halts *all* reading, since '*poetry* is what aims at an object...in its absolute, or at being itself, at the presence of the world, in its unity – even when, in point of fact, no *text* can tell of them. Poetry is what attaches itself...to what cannot be designated by a word of language...' ⁷

But if we return to that narrative that our reading makes as we tackle Dickens – in *Dombey and Son*, for instance – we are likely to find that 'invagination' rather than 'interruption' will serve our purpose better in trying to describe the shape of Dickens-World. When we look at 'The Dombey Family' with a knowledge of the novel's printed text – whether during our reading or after is not important, as this 'fold' is not a matter of sequences but of concepts – the details take us back over our understanding of the world we know through Dickens. We recognise Dombey, Polly, Florence, Paul and so on, and in doing so we are (unavoidably, since we are drawing on our past) travelling back into the story of our reading, along an inner surface that initially appeared to be an outer border – the picture. We are inside a pocket. The point that needs a little labouring is that this pocket is not in Dickens' narrative – not even in the narrative of the 'total work' as it was envisaged in monthly parts with plates included – but in our developing understanding of the work, the 'Dombey and Son' which is our own.

⁷ 'Lifting Our Eyes from the Page', p. 798.

What is so fascinating is that if we push our analogy further, Derrida's formula becomes ever more apt. We have, in describing the process of looking at Browne's illustrations, already been troubled by the additional worlds they bring to the published text, since they represent not merely a review of what has been read, but also indicate the unwritten material we can never read. Therefore, while moving along the folded surface of our reading of *Dombey and Son*, into the pocket represented by 'The Dombey Family', discovering it as the reviewing inner edge of an understanding already partly established, we come across Mr Dombey sitting for his picture. Here, as Yves Bonnefoy might say, is an interruption in our experience of interruption. At what point in our reading of the novel did Mr Dombey sit for his picture? We search our memory in vain. So when did he decide to have it done? An image of father and son must have appealed to him. How much did he pay? Did he want Florence in it? Who is the artist? Are we the artist? How did Mr Dombey find us? Where is the picture which resulted from this sitting? Is this it? Or is this a picture of Mr Dombey sitting for his picture?

What we find is that the 'text' of the illustration is *itself folded*. This is a pocket within a pocket. As we read the image, reviewing the printed narrative, we suddenly discover we have to review the image itself as it becomes a new outer surface-folded-in-to-be-an-inner-surface. In making a narrative of our reading of Mr Dombey's hidden life, as told by the picture, we treat what was a folded commentary on the written text (*Dombey and Son*) - looking back at our reading and incorporating new feelings of recognition - as the 'written text' over which the new fold passes (concerning Mr Dombey's hidden life) and demands a commentary - looking back at our reading and incorporating new feelings of recognition. Surely this is an example of what Derrida describes as the 'endless process of invagination' in which the 'demand for truth is itself recounted and swept along'.⁸ Although his own example, Blanchot's *La folie du jour*, is purely verbal, and uses the device of an audience within the text, to whom the narrator is talking (and to whom he (re-)tells his story), in order to produce the reflexive movements necessary to reveal the fold, the same model works if we consider the conversation between image and prose in Dickens' novels.

⁸ 'Living On: Border Lines', p. 98.

If we follow Derrida, we discover that there is a way to sustain the concept of the unbordered text – potentially so useful when trying to understand the Dickens-World – while yet being able to describe and differentiate between the various textures and movements of the one enormous activity of writing. Is this the writing that cannot ever be completed, that is ‘no longer a finished corpus’, whose cover we can never close? Derrida highlights the fact that we cannot approach this kind of text; he might also have said we cannot get away from it either. There is evidence all around us that this is exactly the kind of work we are dealing with when we consider Charles Dickens.

If it were somehow possible to read *Oliver Twist* in a complete cultural vacuum – and it would need to be one that began almost at birth – before visiting one of the Rochester festivals, it would soon become clear that we had missed out on an awful lot of reading somewhere or other. We would find ourselves drastically out of step with the recognised, *acknowledged entity* of the book. The idea of the work – *the work*, in fact, at least the only manifestation of it at all amenable to discussion – has been through a great deal of development, of writing or re-writing, since 1838. We find a hugely beaming Fagin on the cover of the festival programme. This is a man who, according to *Oliver Twist*, is glad when his accomplices hang, because ““dead men never bring awkward stories to light”” (*OT* p. 59): who threatens directly to betray the thieves who bring him stolen goods: who carefully incites Bill Sikes to murder Nancy (““Be crafty, Bill, and not too bold”” (*OT* p. 360)), having previously assured her of his help should she ever want to free herself – with poison – of the housebreaker (““You have a friend in me Nance; a staunch friend”” (*OT* p. 341)). He is also a character whom Dickens sends to the gallows in a manner which seems to attempt to extinguish not just his life but his psychic hold over the novel, portraying him as fearful, demented, torn from Oliver’s side and abandoned to ‘the black stage, the cross-beam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death’ (*OT* p. 411).

The subsequent history of Fagin ‘in the world’ (and it is a narrative we can talk about in terms of history) rescues his character from this kind of fate – a *literal*, as well as an imagined, death – simply by existing, by continuing his story. ‘*Oliver Twist*’ (the perceived entity inspired by *Oliver Twist*) is not a linear, page-turning work of art with a beginning and an end, but rather fold upon fold of developed and undeveloped areas of growth. This is why, when we encounter the Rochester Fagin, we are unconsciously

admitting ourselves to be readers of the unending 'Oliver Twist' from which he has sprung. We recognise this 'lovable rogue', reviewing our understanding of him as a fold confronting us with our own past reading, but also allow ourselves to be led into new folds, as Fagin larks about with Scrooge and Magwitch and seems to create some kind of new narrative, which leads us to review this lovable Fagin as the accepted 'Dickens' text (ie as a new outer surface or edge). Pocket (Fagin-Scrooge-Magwitch narrative) within a pocket (Fagin-naughty-but-lovable narrative) within a pocket (Fagin-*Oliver Twist* narrative).

3. Forever Fagin

Readers of Dickens have got used to Fagin popping up in all kinds of places; he has a 'proverbial' or legendary quality that allows him, or elements of his character, this enhanced portability. It is only when we return to the novel that we notice how Fagin's position in the work is central not just to its sense of place and time, not just to its moral structure, but perhaps most importantly to its psychology, the deep shape of its energy. But this is because the plot turns on a kind of revision of Dickens' view of his character. Or again, because the plot actually *exists* as a revision of his character. Indeed there could be no more appropriate measure of the distinctive structures of meaning in Dickens-World than the fact that Dickens himself freely admitted to having no planned ending a year into the writing of the novel. 'I am quite satisfied that nobody can have heard what I mean to do with the different characters in the end, inasmuch as at present I don't quite know, myself.'⁹

Burton M. Wheeler details further clues that point to the belated process by which the novel is steered to its conclusion, demonstrating how Dickens' method led to a number of artistic inconsistencies.¹⁰ As a result much of Fagin's life after *Oliver Twist* has sprung from the sense of rupture preserved at the heart of the novel. There has been a renegotiation of these arenas of action in order to provide us with a crucially different Fagin who is both literally and metaphorically free.

⁹ *Letters*, volume 1, p. 388 (March 1838).

¹⁰ Wheeler, Burton M., 'The Text and Plan of *Oliver Twist*', *Dickens Studies Annual* 12 (1983), pp. 41-61.

As the novel progresses, Dickens begins to work hard to convince us that Fagin's menace is multi-dimensional. In documenting something of Fagin's after-life (later life), it becomes clearer how Dickens structures his dynamic otherness, and puts him beyond the sympathies of his readers. In reading the book we are alive to a sense of wrong which may be legal or moral or both. In fact it is Fagin's forgivability which is above all else an outstanding feature of his development since 1837, as if we needed to rescue something from the psychic destruction Dickens practises upon him in the novel. The final frames of the musical *Oliver!*, for instance, see him slipping off into the sunset, unrepented and unrepentant, as the work loses itself into comedy from the oppressive narrative of the destruction of Sikes and Nancy. How did we get here?

In the novel we are witness to Fagin's criminal activity. He is a fence, a receiver of stolen goods. Dickens is sufficiently interested in the processes of this activity to provide us with a few details, as part of Oliver's 'education'. Fagin is also accustomed to pay Sikes for the fruits of his work; and he plans the Chertsey job himself, although he angers Sikes by referring to it only by allusion: "don't sit there winking and blinking, and talking to me in hints, as if you warn't the very first that thought about the robbery" (*OT* p. 137).

He is furthermore, perhaps, in legal terms, rather less conclusively, accessory before the fact of Nancy's murder. Kags informs us that, on Bolter's evidence, 'he'll swing in six days from this' (*OT* p. 383). This is poetic rather than strictly legal justice, since Bolter/Claypole has been either asleep or absent during the key parts of Fagin's conversation with Sikes, in which the former makes sure of the robber's intentions before revealing the evidence of Nancy's meeting with Rose and Mr Brownlow. The reader is judge and jury here.

Fagin's crimes place him very clearly into a community of lawbreakers who rely upon and work with each other in opposition to established society. However, because it is a community, Dickens sets up a local moral code which governs their behaviour and which affects the reader's assessment of their activities. So it is important that throughout the book there are strong indications which place Fagin outside this code and which show him to be living off the thieves in the same way they live off regular society – by breaking rules. He promotes a sense of honour among the gang in order to

profit from the solidarity it encourages. Oliver's 'half-closed eyes' (*OT* p. 58) allow us to get an early peep at Fagin with his guard down, when we see him taking stock of profits and rejoicing in the death of his associates: "Ah, it's a fine thing for the trade! Five of 'em strung up in a row, and none left to play booty, or turn white-livered!" (*OT* p. 59).

This means that even as we are drawn into this world lived beyond the law, we remain aware of Fagin's presence partly outside it, as a malevolent and, to some extent, controlling influence. The multiple codes thus set at nought by his behaviour add to Fagin's debt of wrongdoing – and the challenge of freeing him in any comic adaptation. He is a legal and supra-legal transgressor.

Strangely, although we are present at the full and final consummation of Bill Sikes' criminal career, it is rather the extended torture of Fagin's life on which Dickens focuses at the end of the novel. His crimes are balanced legally and, perhaps, artistically, by his death sentence, and metaphorically by his betrayal at the hands of his own instrument, Bolter/Claypole. But these events are kept at a distance. We only have Kags' prediction of Claypole's King's Evidence; it is foreseen and we experience the consequences, like Fagin. We see the bare mechanisms of execution and we understand that the event is imminent, but we leave with the impression of Fagin immured in the condemned cell, alive-dead and unreleased into the free oblivion of the knot and the drop. Dickens homes in on the cell, and ropes in Oliver as a witness, because he needs it to balance a further transgression which lies at the heart of this parish boy's progress – and that is Fagin's project to morally extinguish and socially degrade Oliver himself.

For Dickens, this is such an enormously reprehensible intention, that only Life-in-Death seems an appropriate punishment; and this is the fate the novel deals out to Fagin. He is not merely a legal and moral villain, but a nightmare demon of extinction in which Oliver, the victim, is left in perpetual consciousness of his own oblivion, lost in a crowd of thieves, implicated in their activities and stained by their presence. Here is the ultimate menace behind such crucial passages as chapter 18, a veritable Temptation in the Wilderness of Fagin's new den, when a recaptured Oliver is assailed by Dodger, Charley and Fagin and urged to become a thief. Oliver is in a situation of greatest potential weakness here; he knows already the impression that will have been created at

Mr Brownlow's house by his disappearance along with the books and money ("He'll think I stole them" (*OT* p. 113)) and is left to wander alone through the forsaken old house. Dickens works hard to convey Oliver's vulnerability and hence the seriousness of the threat to his own idea of who he is. Despite the comedy of topsy-turviness here that asserts that thieving is the only moral action, the Dodger's arguments have an air of reason and coherence. Not to join the gang means a dependent (parasitical) existence: riches (in small change, anyway) await: joining is unavoidable in the end, because Fagin is determined: and, finally, somebody has to steal so why not do it properly? This persistence and Oliver's loneliness have their effect - 'In short, the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils' - even though Dickens makes sure we keep sight of his essential goodness: "I don't like it...I - I - would rather go" (*OT* p. 131).

Of course there is a motive for this behaviour, this highly personal vendetta: and it brings perhaps the most deeply felt theme of the book into contact with its weakest device. Monks - Edward Leeford, Oliver's half-brother - has conspired with Fagin to corrupt Oliver and keep him from his inheritance. This plot is given a nominal artistic legitimacy because of a ludicrous clause in the will of Oliver's father, who has never known him, but places such faith in his lover, Oliver's mother, that he will leave the son his inheritance "only on the stipulation that in his minority he should never have stained his name with any public act of dishonour, meanness, cowardice or wrong" (*OT* p. 396). Oliver's 'gentle heart, and noble nature' are thus the key to his future prosperity.

In Dickens' hands this device - both the mechanism which powers Oliver story and its ultimate end - becomes the true making of the unforgivable Fagin who pays in living torment in the condemned cell. It is not hard to see why this happens when we read Forster's *Life* and consider the fragment of autobiographical writing he quotes there. The young Dickens, in his own words, is 'cast away' by his family to work in Warren's blacking warehouse when his father is taken into the Marshalsea. His degradation is most keenly felt in terms of the company he is forced to keep.

No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these everyday associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast. The deep remembrance of the

sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position...cannot be written.¹¹

And like Oliver, Dickens' 'nature' shows itself in the midst of lower class company. 'Though perfectly familiar with [the other boys], my conduct and manner were different enough from theirs to place a space between us.' He is referred to as the 'young gentleman' and although feeling completely abandoned, never once allows himself to adjust or be 'reconciled' to his situation (p. 29). Dickens wrote his young life as one of huge self-conscious social integrity – and it is this integrity which is assailed in *Oliver Twist* as Fagin tries to defile a 'noble nature'. This accounts for the pride which animates Oliver's 'I don't like it' and the anxiety that surrounds his complicit laughter. Oliver and Dickens share the fate of conscious oblivion, a nature coming to know itself, under attack – a living death paralleled by Fagin's in the condemned cell.

In this context, the work of Lionel Bart in *Oliver!* seems all the more remarkable. He gives us a new Fagin. One who gets let off. At the end of the musical, represented so memorably by the enormously popular 1968 film, he is reunited with the Dodger and the pair head off into the sunset chuckling over their latest acquisition, a wallet lifted even as the body of Bill Sikes swung above the avenging crowd. It seems entirely satisfactory that Sikes should bear the burden of guilt distributed by the work, that Nancy's sacrifice should be accepted by the viewer as the price paid for a comic ending. *Oliver!* is most definitely the springboard that launches Fagin himself into the free world of festival happenings. In the Medway papers he is a lovable rogue who 'would love to pick a pocket or two'.¹² He is seen during the parade (largely sustained with comic dignity by the Pickwickians) wandering up and down, a kind of subversive jester or Lord of Misrule. No bestial skulking in alleys. He is at once permanently on the run (this is his naughtiness), while being permitted a kind of licensed status as a clown.

Oliver! makes important changes which address the nature of Fagin's transgressions, legal and moral, making some more excusable and omitting others altogether. He is, in the first place, protected from any close association with Nancy's death. In the novel, we have seen how he masterminds the entire event by inciting Sikes to murder. In

¹¹ *The Life of Charles Dickens*, p. 26.

¹² *KM Extra* (Medway) 14 December 2001, p. 12.

Oliver! Sikes himself tails Nancy and discovers her attempt to return Oliver to Mr Brownlow. The subsequent crime thus seems to spring from his own psychosis and is not bound up with the way Fagin's gang live their lives (a tight system of mutual trust tempered by the threat of betrayal).

Fagin in *Oliver!* is moreover no career stooge or informer, as he is hinted to be in the novel. His only transgressions against the thieves' code are made to seem petty, even pathetic, with his hidden treasure and protests as Nancy screws more money out of him than he claims he can afford. Even his resolutions to decamp with the money and go straight (as in the song 'I'm reviewing the situation') come to nothing as he concludes he is better off where he is. The only suggestion of betrayal preserved in the film is used directly to compel Sikes to help in the search for Oliver, as though in self-defence at the threat of abandonment (Sikes wants nothing to do with it).

It is in fact Sikes who effectively positions himself outside the gang's world, who puts himself beyond the pale. He has no song, and everyone is afraid of him ('When that man's back is up Dodger, no-one is safe' says Fagin). And the presence of Sikes as an outsider seems to bring Fagin's family of thieves closer together. Nancy and Bet are included (the song 'I'd do anything' playfully enacts relationships of love and loyalty between the boys and the grown-up women). Nancy's murder is thus an outrage for which this Fagin cannot be responsible. Nancy herself sows the seeds of doubt in Sikes' mind by her partiality for Oliver. And the act itself is rehearsed in Fagin's den as if to make clear to us what the reaction of the gang will be when the deed is eventually done. Sikes first threatens Nancy and then knocks her down in front of the boys. Their appalled faces (Fagin has already stepped in once to prevent violence) are arranged as a parallel audience sharing our sense of shock and alienation. In this community they become our moral representatives. So we end up feeling that the Dodger's shrug of unconcern underneath Sikes's swinging corpse is some kind of triumph: that the pickpocketed wallet is a trophy celebrating the victory of a resurgent, manageable transgression.

Lionel Bart completely ignores the Leeford plot. He does not even bother with Rose Maylie. Oliver is the son of Mr Brownlow's long-lost niece, 'who ran away'. His progress thus remains one of class identity and self-discovery – of the survival of that

'noble nature'. In fact the film in no sense demotes this dimension of Oliver's story and plays with the contrasts most effectively. Oliver more than ever is an individual in search of a community. The song with which the Dodger welcomes Oliver to London ('Consider yourself...one of us') sets the agenda. Who are 'us'? Dodger does not sing this in the den or as part of a gang – we have not even met Fagin at this stage. It is rather a huge choral number in which this small child in the ludicrous clothes seems to be backed by the whole of London in all its fabulous variety. As we have noted, the routine which accompanies the song seems to implicate every possible London type, from chimney sweep to road mender, as if to urge Oliver into an arena of self-determination where the central drama of his life will take place. Institutionalised from birth, labelled by the parish authorities ('Oliver! Oliver!' sings Mr Bumble) – here is the opportunity for the boy to re-identify himself, to find his life amongst the vast range on offer. 'Us' is everyone who is free. It is a kind of awakening, a celebration of a liberated moment poised upon the brink of irreversible moral choice. The rest of the film homes in on this choice, assembling two communities which vie for Oliver's identity. Both take as their theme the economic relations which sustain societies, and both attempt to dramatise, or demonstrate, Oliver's position within them. He has a chance to rehearse, to try out these new roles, before deciding which fits him best.

Fagin and the gang tell Oliver: 'You got to pick a pocket or two'. The argument is perfectly clear; it is a manifesto.

In this life, one thing counts:
In the bank, large amounts.
I'm afraid these
Don't grow on trees
You got to pick a pocket or two.

Later, while surveying the London populace from his vantage point at Mr Brownlow's window, Oliver wonders how to keep what he has just won from the jaws of destruction and ruin: 'What am I to do, to keep the sky so blue?' Like a good, law-abiding capitalist, he concludes that in fact 'there must be someone who will buy.' This song – 'Who will buy?' – shows Oliver how buying and selling (bakers delivering bread, window cleaners, men off to the City) lies at the heart of a harmonious community, which law breaking and pocket-picking can only destroy. He tries out his place, joining

in at a safe distance, and finds he feels at home. He characterises the morning itself and his feeling as a gift and the way he takes up and develops the theme reveals his nature expressing itself in an understanding of ownership and security.

Who will tie it up with a ribbon
And put it in a box for me?

This is not a boy who could join in with asserting that you've got to pick a pocket: and indeed he does not. Even his practice pocket picking turns out to be a kind of comedy conjuring trick on Fagin's part.

So *Oliver!* preserves the impact of Oliver's developing self-discovery, and if anything appears to emphasise the determining class aspects of this search. But the loss of the Leeford story lets Fagin off the hook here, and his personal threat of social oblivion in *Oliver!*, such as it is, springs first from self-defence (he wants Oliver back in case he betrays everyone to the authorities) and second in possibly having a more attractive lifestyle than Mr Brownlow, that might seduce the boy into crime. He is certainly not the demon attempting directly to thwart the rightful course of Oliver's noble nature.

In all these ways the Fagin of *Oliver Twist* is adjusted to be more forgivable. His crimes remain petty; his link to violence is removed; and he is no longer implicated in a plot to obscure - to murder - Oliver's identity. And we are the more prepared to accept the new Fagin because of a hugely influential model in the canon of English Literature, in the gallery of its most popular and well-known characters, acting as a type with which we are already familiar and comfortable. This is the chief of all lovable rogues:

Shakespeare's Falstaff, known in the 1988 Clarendon *Complete* text, followed here, as Sir John Oldcastle. The parallels are extensive and striking. Both 1 Henry IV and *Oliver!* present the audience with two distinct, discrete communities with strong internal identities but little in common. A central character moves between them and has to decide with which he really belongs. One community represents the establishment, one those outside it. The 'leader' of this last is literally a lawbreaker and a thief. Both works are so haunted by the shadow of the father figure calling to account that they have to burlesque him in the presence of the son, who subsequently returns to him. Both are additionally and consequently fascinated with the nature of play, and so inevitably with

truth and disguise. In both works the leader of the 'outsiders' is seized with feelings of conscience (or feelings disguised as conscience) that lead him to consider changing his behaviour. Instead he suffers a symbolic death and rises again to be free to pursue his old ways. Finally the nature of the central protagonist is seen to win through to its rightful place alongside the father.

Let us look at this more closely. The tavern in Eastcheap is as cosy a hideaway as Fagin's den. Oldcastle and his entourage are strongly identified with it; it is their spiritual home. Familiarity abounds. 'I know you, Sir John,' says Mistress Quickly, 'You owe me money, Sir John' (III. 3. 64).¹³ Oldcastle even contrives to fall asleep behind the arras; it seems absurd to consider him 'at home' anywhere else. Prince Harry, on the other hand, lets us know at once, in his first scene, of the temporary nature of his presence in this world, with these associates. The famous speech in which he warns the audience of his intention to break through the 'base contagious clouds' that 'smother up his beauty from the world' (I. 2. 195-6), draws a distinction between nature and behaviour. The latter is to be 'thrown off' as it has been adopted. We also see Oliver putting on behaviours, trying out to see where his nature will fit; he joins in, but remains apart.

That the two communities are incompatible is strongly emphasised. The King uses the contrast in an attempt to shame the Prince into abandoning his companions.

Could such inordinate and low desires,
Such poor, such bare, such lewd, such mean attempts,
Such barren pleasures, rude society,
As thou art matched withal and grafted to,
Accompany the greatness of thy blood,
And hold their level with thy princely heart? (III. 2. 12)

Nancy of course is murdered for attempting to bridge the gap between the two worlds of *Oliver!*: and the gulf in the middle is eloquently demonstrated by the final shot in the 'Who will buy?' sequence, which reveals Sikes and the Dodger, silent and ominously still in the centre of the square.

¹³ The text is that of *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon 1988).

Oldcastle's tavern society is not merely offensive; it in fact rejoices in putting itself beyond the law. Sir John has barely opened his mouth in Act I Scene 2 before he is characterising his gang as 'we that take purses.' It is a theme which is developed throughout the play as Oldcastle reflects on his own nature and behaviour, largely in order to find excuses for it. There are maudlin feelings of regret ('Monsieur Remorse' is what Pains call him in I. 2. 112): 'I must give over this life, and I will give it over' (I. 2. 95). There is the need for cash: 'Why Hal, 'tis my vocation, Hal. 'Tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation' (I. 2. 104). And, perhaps conclusively, there is nature: 'Thou knowest in the state of innocency Adam fell, and what should poor Jack Oldcastle do in the days of villainy?' (III. 3. 165).

In *Oliver!* Fagin himself experiences these comic uncertainties in the shape of the song 'I'm reviewing the situation'. Here he begins each verse with the intention to go straight, but, in imagining the ghastly rectitude of civilized life, talks himself back into a criminal career. He enacts this dilemma by rushing out of, and back into, the den, the home of crime. In the end, he settles for nature – and conclusive law breaking: 'I'm a bad'un and a bad'un I shall stay'.

Oldcastle is even traced by the sheriff to the tavern, his secure hideout. But these officers are not the true frowning face of morality, just as the ridiculous tipsy Justice Fang is not the chief arbiter of Oliver's universe. The King is to call Prince Harry to account: and it is Mr Brownlow whom Oliver is so scared of offending when forcibly taken back to Fagin with the books and money. Both heroes are involved in attempts to challenge the authority of the father by playing at how he can be duped and outwitted.

'Do thou stand for my father, and examine me upon the particulars of my life' (II. 5. 379). First Oldcastle and then Hal himself impersonate the King. Although encumbered with a leaden dagger for a sceptre and a bald head instead of a 'precious rich crown', Oldcastle gets pretty much straight to the point: 'Shall the son of England prove a thief, and take purses?' (II. 5. 413). It is Fagin who plays the King/father (Mr Brownlow) in *Oliver!* He loads himself up with a watch, snuff box, handkerchiefs and purses and promenades around his den while the boys pick his pockets, making the robbery a kind of justice practised upon a fool. Oliver laughs. This is the image which surely springs to

mind (perhaps Oliver's as well as ours) when faced with the real Brownlow and his sudden appreciation of his own complicity.

Both works, in tracing the way that nature will out, and in returning the central character to his rightful place, face the problem of what to do with those who are left out in the cold. The establishment community closes behind Oliver/Hal and he is promised wealth, security and love. What of those old law breaking companions? If the work values most those rewards which are saved for the hero, which would seem logical, how are we either to forgive the transgressors, if unpunished, or be consoled if they suffer under exile from the heart of all good things? Shakespeare is surely the great model that *Oliver!* follows here. Oldcastle is lugged off into battle and does his best to avoid both hard work and physical danger. When eventually caught by Douglas, he falls down and pretends to be dead. Fagin's world is thrown into great crisis by the pursuit of Sikes. Such is the danger that the thieves abandon their home. Fagin takes his treasure, but as he leaves, falls, and has to watch as his spilt jewels, and with them his future security, sink into the mud.

These reversals - play-deaths – which throw our clown/criminal to the ground and bring him shame, are also the chance we seize upon to forgive him. The degradation of losing allows us to release the transgressor. We are happy that the hero is rewarded; but we are happy also that the very failure of the most disruptive, as it curbs their power, so hands them back their life. Oldcastle's carcass stretched on the ground, Fagin's fingers in the mud, are the price paid for resurrection. And we can afford to be generous. In having nothing they emerge into new freedoms.

These freedoms, possessed and enjoyed by the Fagin grown from *Oliver Twist*, stem from the disrupted experience of reading Dickens' novels. Dickens was happy to acknowledge the work done by readers in realising his work; indeed, in an incautious moment, he stepped back from claiming himself to make it *real* in any sense at all. The original reference, in the 1847 preface, to Seymour's strenuous and creative reading of Mr Pickwick, is the clue which has revealed to us quite how complex the work of reading Dickens is, involving countless actions of review and recognition (of the reading self as well as the read work). By using Derrida's concept of a differential network, we have seen how the 'reading narrative', the story of the reader's reading, can

be described to show, not merely how it looks back at itself, but also how it is projected out into a region not controlled by the authority of the work. Here again is that path to association and growth that we have already seen in the Dickens memorial, as the work is invited to expand to fulfil the roles and usages demanded by society.

Part 5: Writing Dickens

Chapter 13: The name of the author

1. The author outside

We have seen how the figure of the Dickensian reader is illuminated by the glaring gas lamp of Heritage – an energetic and creative labourer who shapes the work even as it is perceived (who shapes the work in perceiving it), who emerges as the irrepressible motor of change and renewal in the Dickens story. We now need to draw things to a close by examining more closely that process by which the Dickens-World gets itself ‘written’, and what are the kinds of relationships that bind reader, writer and text together.

M. M. Bakhtin builds his theory of aesthetics on the fundamental and situated separateness of artist and his or her created world. In his formulation: ‘there can be no question of any properly theoretical correspondence or agreement between an author and a hero.’ He places them on ‘different planes’ of existence.¹ It is this relationship that defines what Bakhtin refers to as author-hero activity – which defines in fact their existence. It is realised in the one moment of the work, is actualised in the completed artefact, and is acknowledged by the reader in his or her encounter with it. Bakhtin emphasises this located and momentary perception because he recognises that the mere processes of human cultural engagement ensure that characters cannot be confined to the pages of the work of their origination. Neither can the author. ‘It is not just the heroes created who break away from the process that created them and begin to lead a life of their own in the world, but the same is equally true for their actual author-creator’ (p. 8).

We find this in Dickens’ work when he tries to re-engage with Mr Pickwick by introducing him into *Master Humphrey’s Clock*. The narrator here ‘sees’ not the Pickwick of the *Papers* but a Pickwick-in-the-world who registers (if only to ignore) the ‘various libels’ relating to the work which has sprung from his ‘notes’ – the work which of course gave him being. This new self-conscious Pickwick has a ‘life of his own’

¹ Bakhtin, M. M., ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’ in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, tr. Vadim Liapunov, ed. by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press 1990), pp. 9-10.

which the new Dickens-author must take account of. It is complicated because of course Dickens is making a new narrative with old material – an impossible task if we are to acknowledge Bakhtin's insistence on the momentary and situated nature of the author's relationship to the hero. And surely any reader of *Master Humphrey's Clock* is forced to notice the strain. The new Dickens cannot recreate the moment of *The Pickwick Papers* but instead conjures up an imitated Pickwick, a Pickwick who knows the right moves, a *read* Pickwick, as if he has created a Pickwick impressionist (a Dickensian Pickwick?) who reads reviews and lives in the world. Perhaps we can even see in Master Humphrey, with his tales and his burnt out air, a performed self, something of a memorial to the young Dickens pitched into the text, as if to prompt a revival of the old magic. But the Pickwick mimic and the ghost of Boz only serve to prove Bakhtin's point.

Since 'author' and 'hero' are defined by their relationship, we do not need to be too prescriptive in our expectations of the shape each may adopt. An author can be a reader, or an 'active contemplator', as Bakhtin puts it later: 'imagined life becomes an imaged life only in the active and creative contemplation of a spectator' (p. 75). A hero can be almost any component of a work of art, or any aspect of our lives which is susceptible to aesthetic appreciation. The relationship is the key: the relationship has a located presence: and it must place the author outside the hero. This becomes increasingly important as we use Bakhtin's formulation to examine the nature of pleasure in Dickens' world – what makes it enjoyable and satisfying.

This 'outsidedness' is vital to Bakhtin's understanding of the aesthetic, and it is a radical or comprehensive outside: 'What makes a reaction specifically aesthetic is precisely the fact that it is a reaction to the whole of the hero as a human being' (p. 5). The 'whole' includes not merely the front, back, sides and insides but the outer situatedness of the hero which he or she cannot possibly see. There is no escape from one's own being; one cannot appreciate oneself as a whole from outside – aesthetically. This perspective is only given to authors. Authors assemble valuations and understanding from within and without, and are thus able to, in Bakhtin's words, 'consummate' the hero – another person – in the unitary and unique whole of art. An aesthetic event 'presupposes two non-coinciding consciousnesses' (p. 22). Because of this the author can provide the hero with moments which he is not able to access

himself, and so complete the work. The hero may, caught up in the events of his own lived life in that work, justify himself and his actions with reference to what is outside him, but this is on a 'different plane' from the justification given to him by the author in shaping the whole of the work. The hero behaves *ethically*: ethical reasoning is at the heart of his behaviour (whether we agree with it or not). The author's vision, and therefore the justification of his character/hero, is however *aesthetic*. For example, Mr Pickwick justifies his own behaviour in entering the Fleet prison in terms of what he believes is right according to the terms of his lived life: this includes denying Dodson and Fogg their damages and costs, continuing his life in the interim as if nothing had happened, and, when the moment comes, forbidding Sam to interfere. This is his 'principle'. Dickens, on the other hand, justifies the whole melancholy episode aesthetically, as Mr Pickwick emerges from the Fleet chastened but not crushed, and shapes it as the central event of the journey his hero makes from the closed and naïve 'naturalist' of the opening pages to the open and benevolent figure who retires to Dulwich.

As readers of the read Dickens, we seem to be placed outside as authors, identifying the components (character, location, motif) of the fictions we recognise from the novels, but at the same time registering and enjoying their situated presence in the lived-in world. Does this give us access to a genuinely aesthetic vision? We are certainly not entirely absorbed in the ethically-driven antics of festival characters. Fagin, for instance, steals (or receives what is stolen) because he has made a choice taking into consideration the profitability and the danger of such an activity. We do not understand his actions in the same way, otherwise we would find ourselves making ethical decisions about whether to intervene, ignore him, call the police and so on. We see too much.

Whereas an 'element or an isolated natural configuration' has no author, the mere presence of a contemplator de-isolates the object and wins it the possibility of an aesthetic existence. The person who sees is able to construct an artistic event or moment around the object (as Bakhtin says, 'even if only in imagination'), because this seeing is extra to the object's experience of itself (p. 66). Thus, Bakhtin writes of the distinction between an 'actual cliff' and an 'imaged cliff', where the latter has had 'aesthetic grace' bestowed upon it by a contemplator (p. 67).

This kind of authoring-on-the-run - of cliff, of Fagin - is acknowledged only in passing in *Author and Hero* and it is not entirely clear what is the relationship between artist and contemplator, writer and reader. Bakhtin certainly admits the advent of the complete aesthetic event into the ongoing and incomplete lived life ('even if only in imagination') and does not attempt to confine this process to entities we would consider finished works. He appears occasionally to give artist and observer almost equal status: 'The aesthetic whole is... something actively produced, both by the author and the contemplator (in this sense, by stretching the point, one could speak about the beholder's experiencing the creative activity of the author)' (p. 67).

This parenthesis seems to reveal two things. First: a need to reserve a certain function for the author over and above anything a mere observer may achieve. Here the spectator and reader can only be productive by proxy, by a kind of sidestep where he puts on the mask of author and runs through what has already been made. Second: Bakhtin is uncomfortable here – he has an apparent dissatisfaction with this vagueness (he *stretches the point*). This however is never resolved in *Author and Hero*, and Bakhtin resorts merely to occasional expressions of equivalence such as 'author/contemplator' (p. 71). In our search for coherence in Dickens-World, we need to press hard for this equivalence, even if it leads us towards paradox. As we have already seen, it is not our ethical mind that is engaged in assessing the festival Fagin's behaviour, or in searching out the 'original' location of the Old Curiosity Shop, or in interpreting 'a London street' in a museum. Ethical assessments of these phenomena would lead to extraordinary and alarming behaviour. We must be judging Dickens-World aesthetically, and so by definition from outside, making each event some kind of whole – which it would not be without our looking.

Let us sum up what we have made so far of Bakhtin's position in *Author and Hero*.

The organising power in all aesthetic forms is the axiological category of the other, the relationship to the other, enriched by an axiological 'excess' of seeing for the purpose of achieving a transgredient consummation. (p. 189)

In this summary Bakhtin emphasises the valuational ('axiological') aspects of his formulations. The author is not merely an observable other, but one who is essentially

and necessarily not correspondent with the entity of the hero (be he major character, minor character, cliff or sea). This otherness permits an excess of seeing (an excess which incorporates a qualitative – axiological – ‘extra’) that creates the aesthetic whole. This consummation is *transgredient* because it cannot bring itself about, it cannot exist without that which is not itself. The author cannot consummate himself any more than can the hero; each needs the other – that which is transgredient and not in them by definition – in order for the aesthetic vision to be realised. The task now is to identify more nearly how this aesthetic vision is to be expressed – is expressed in the aesthetic activity of the thousands of author/contemplators who encounter Dickens in the world.

2. The author in the world

The problem here is that, according to Bakhtin, actions in the world, ‘which... involve myself and the other within the unitary and unique event of being, and which are directed toward the actual modification of the event and of the other as a moment in that event; such actions are purely ethical actions or deeds’ (p. 24). So, if Dickens is happening in the world, the various elements of his vision are clearly enmeshed and engaged with an arena of ethical behaviours. And yet, as we have seen, the actions characteristic of that arena make no ethical sense (why are hundreds of people complacently permitting wanton thievery and intimidation and bad dancing?). Bakhtin’s concern in *Author and Hero* is with what he calls ‘actions of contemplation’ (p. 24), and here he leads us into a paradox which he barely acknowledges but which is the fulcrum on which tilts the crazy sense of Dickens in the world. To begin with, Bakhtin specifies contemplation as active, because he wishes to emphasise its productive capacity. This is a kind of watching which makes things.

The first step of active contemplation is to appreciate the life of the looked-at subject from within. ‘I must empathise or project myself into this other human being, see his world axiologically from within him as he sees this world, I must put myself in his place’ (p. 25). What hero and contemplator see, together, is a horizon: distant, perceptible, unachieved. So we crouch by the street-door of Fagin’s hideout with Oliver, to be near the ‘living people’ outside, feeling our life in danger, feeling already buried alive, feeling lost to the world. But because we retain our outsidedness as active contemplators, even while empathising with the hero’s own life-experience, an excess

of seeing is produced which 'fills in' a located space around him *and* around his horizon. This is *environment*. It is not perceived by the hero, but is made by active contemplation. And, if we bear in mind Bakhtin's formulation, is made and re-made by and with every new reader, in their position as situated author. 'I must enframe him, create a consummating environment for him out of this excess of my own seeing, knowing, desiring and feeling' (p. 25).

The paradox for all active contemplators is not just this inside/outside awareness, but more importantly that they must somehow assemble this aesthetic artefact (even if only in imagination) without joining in the event itself. And yet we have already seen how the event cannot exist without the excess created by the participation of an observer. Bakhtin has to insist on this irreconcilable formula because when an author/contemplator is fully drawn into a moment of lived-life, he adopts the horizon of the hero and loses his ability to shape an environment which will bring about aesthetic consummation. In fact, he plays.

To play is to forego the privileges and responsibilities of excess and join in. Play does not assume the presence of any spectator or auditor. It makes nothing, it just happens. Or, as Bakhtin says, 'play images nothing, it merely imagines... Thus, there is no aesthetic constituent that is immanent to play in itself; such a constituent may be introduced into playing by an actively contemplating spectator' (p. 75).

We can see how nice are the distinctions between various kinds of active involvement. A spectator is able to set the players and their play in an environment, and so creates an aesthetically valid whole. As soon as he abandons his position 'outside' the event and joins in, he adopts the horizon appropriate to his role in the played scenario and loses his perception of the whole (or rather his perception of the whole is ethically shaped, in terms of his life-lived-in-the-event). He will be in some sense blind to his outside, since we cannot see all round ourselves, and therefore unable to consummate the total happening. For Bakhtin, the contemplator's role and engagement is so important that the aesthetic event cannot exist without it: and yet certain kinds of activity available to the spectator 'abolish the event as an artistic event' (p. 75).

Armed with this awareness, we can begin to see how the presence of the read Dickens balances across this gap between joining in and observing, between participating and making. Certainly it enables us to see how an awareness of the lived-in world in the background contributes to the excess of seeing that leads to aesthetic understanding. Fagin on the radio: visiting 'Pip's graves': motoring down to Dingley Dell: these things are not absurd ethical events which struggle and fail to retain their coherence under pressure from the monstrous and apparent modern. Nor are they anachronisms which mean one thing (or work in one way) for ignorant tourists and another entirely for the avowed Dickensian, enthusiast, or academic. They are rather whole happenings whose sense lies within the inclusive gaze of the spectator. The aesthetic eye - that of an active contemplator - embraces the incongruities of literary tourism. The appreciation of difference is part of the environment which shapes the constructed understanding of those who participate by watching. When we walk around Dickens' house in Doughty Street, the sound of the traffic outside, the souvenir shop, the till that issues our ticket, our own incontrovertible contemporary outsideness, shape our visit into an aesthetic event even as we may empathise with the ethically determined actions of the imagined young Dickens as he sets up home, writes, grieves.

But even this example, where we can consider a stable environment which presents a passive face to one active contemplator in isolation, raises the issue of participation and how this participation changes the event. How much more critical is this when we look at the active happenings of the Dickens Festivals, with their combination of scripted, improvised and utterly spontaneous occurrences? These manifestations are the same process exploded into new urgency, with every awkwardness and contradiction forced into the open. As tourists mingle with costumed characters, it is not difficult to see how an aesthetic excess remains in the view of a theoretical contemplator artificially removed to a separate vantage point. But what of those tourists themselves - are they playing, watching, or doing both?

We have already discussed how, through a number of revisions over the years, the Rochester Dickens festivals are still built around a parade. The stage coach has gone - the characters have even been delivered by paddle steamer in recent years - but the staged promenade remains our best opportunity of meeting Mr Pickwick and his Dickensian colleagues. Here is the construction of an aesthetic frame of reference. The

recognisable characters (that's Mrs Gamp, she has a teapot) are seen moving along the historic High Street. We are absorbed in their presence (we empathise), helped by the old buildings, the traffic ban, the anachronistic clothing, but we retain our outsidedness along with our digital camera, and the awareness of 'Dickens' that we bring to the event. And then Fagin looks at us, and waves. Here is a direct acknowledgement of our presence. Dickens-World is suddenly lit from within. We have been included in the activity of being: we are unavoidably, pleasurably claimed by this happening. We are seen.

Parades are not merely two dimensional. They do not have the passive texture of film. We attend them not simply to welcome but to acquire a feeling of belonging, of participation. They are saying hello in company. Those passing by in the road accept our welcome and in turn include us in the event of their arrival. Is active contemplation compatible with our role in the Dickens parade? Does not the pleasure of being included abolish the aesthetic event? Is this play?

Our enjoyment – our very acknowledgement – of the read Dickens takes Bakhtin into uncomfortable territory. We lend meaning to literary tourism not just by the aesthetic excess we bring from outside, but by our situated presence within the lived life of the subject. Here is pleasure. The frisson of excitement comes from the fact that we find ourselves on the same 'plane of existence' as Fagin, as 'Dickens', as Cloisterham. But this moment itself destroys the aesthetic enjoyment we have already established through our excessive witness of the event as a whole. Aesthetic authoring relies on our outsidedness, our remaining on that separate plane. And so the experience appears to dance backwards and forwards between two impossibly adjacent modes of understanding. It is a dynamic: neither one thing nor the other, but both, a movement between and back. This is the major characteristic of literary tourism and the *form* through which we understand and enjoy the read Dickens.

3. Form

When Bakhtin writes about form, he is careful to relate its function to the central tenets of aesthetic understanding that he has already established: notably, the essential (axiological) separateness of author and hero, the encapsulating and situated whole of

the work, and the transforming power that the author brings to it. Form is the shape of the work where it meets the world (even if only in imagination). It is the imaged idea; perhaps in the author's head for the benefit of an internal critical judgement, more commonly in a space where it encounters an audience. Its essential raw ingredient is the excess which allows an author to see all round the hero – person, place or thing – and consummate him, her or it in a work of art. However, form is not merely the author's expression of his understanding of the hero, a way of picturing that life in isolation. It is also the image of their relationship realised in the one event of the work. This is why Bakhtin writes that form is not 'pure expression', 'but an expression which, in giving expression to the hero, also expresses the author's relationship to the hero' (p. 89).

We have seen how the situatedness of this relationship is tackled in *Master Humphrey's Clock*. The curiously watery Pickwick here is an acknowledgement of the lost moment of the *Papers*. In the same way, as author/contemplators in the lived-in world, we find ourselves beyond the inaugurating moment that gave the Dickens-World its sense and shape. When we turn our attention to the Dickens festivals, and consider publicity shots of Scrooge and Oliver, or see Fagin and Magwitch arm-in-arm in the parade, or go ourselves on a walking tour of Dickensian Rochester, we are no longer readers who are able to experience the author-hero relationship imaged in the original novels. We have to work instead to establish a new form which will lend coherence to these recognisable but apparently unauthored entities and at the same time express our relationship with them. This is problematic, for a number of reasons. In the first place, how can we get outside? Our own experience of the Dickensian occurrence is our central reference point for what is happening. In fact we could almost say that the Dickensian is by definition that artistic matter which intrudes upon the lived life. Depending on one's taste, it thus either debases the art, or raises the reader, to place the two on the same plane of existence. If our own selves are not actively included there is no comprehensible event. There is no Dickensian World without our presence. But if we are *in*, how can we *see*?

Second: we are living life-in-the-world: we all have *horizons*, we are all heading towards that which has not yet happened. 'My relationship to each object within my horizon is never a consummated relationship; rather, it is a relationship which is imposed on me as a task-to-be-accomplished, for the event of being, taken as a whole, is an open event' (p. 98). Magwitch's life, for instance, is not quite like this. We know the

story behind those chains. Part of the impact of meeting him consists not merely in knowing his history but also his future - where he will end up. We cannot avoid seeing his *environment*. This is because his life, despite his presence in Rochester High Street, is part of a work of art. Its events are determined.

What is unique about the form of Dickensian activity, and what contributes to its enduring popularity, is the way it promises two otherwise impossible opportunities: the chance of experiencing one's own experiencing (to be in *and* to see), and the glimpse of our own life aesthetic.

4. Experiencing experiencing

Let us return to the parade for a moment. We are active contemplators, who are suddenly claimed by the event we are watching from outside. Is this play? But we do not abandon our authorial privileges; we never stop making sense of the parade in terms of the filled-in background. We become students of the dynamic. Part of the festival fiction is that the background is not accessible to the characters themselves: Fagin does not know he is supposed to be within the covers of *Oliver Twist* – he only knows he is looking for an opportunity to pinch someone's handkerchief. We accept his wave – it's Fagin! – and become part of something which only holds together if we can see ourselves in it. Our presence lends coherence to what is happening – the only coherence possible. The wave demands a reception and we ourselves see ourselves acknowledged. This gesture names us. We know ourselves as readers. For a moment, we become part of what *is*.

What, exactly, *is*? In emphasising the essential separation of author and hero, Bakhtin recognises the impossibility or absurdity of disagreeing or 'disputing' with a character in a created fiction, 'as if it were really possible to quarrel or to agree with *what exists*' (p. 10). We could put this to the test during a Dickens festival by remonstrating with Fagin or Sikes about their law-breaking and cruelty. Two things would happen. First, we would find that we did not make much progress. Fagin and Sikes 'exist' because their lives are written. The trick which allows them to appear in front of us does not release them from the burden of recognisability. They cannot become unlike themselves. A righteous Sikes, a Fagin who goes straight: these are impossible things.

Second, we would lose our special position inside/outside the event and, in effect, abandon the dynamic to become one of the parade. We would be *playing*, because we would be treating with our Dickens-World on an ethical basis. Even though the objects of our dispute would never change – and even though we felt we still maintained a pseudo-authorial overview of our efforts – we would become part of the ethically-driven lived-life within the work which perhaps another author/contemplator would be elevating to the aesthetic.

For Bakhtin, it is not possible for those of us who live in the world, the big world, to ‘exist’, because our lives are in a permanent condition of never being realised. According to his ideas, when we read Dickens from his printed novels we experience a determined world, a world which is not susceptible to our influence, a world which ignores us. There is a certain comfort in knowing that each time we open the *Pickwick Papers*, Mr Pickwick will still be falling for Jingle’s tricks, and still be forgiving him. This is partly why he is ‘immortal’ after all. We have also seen how the activities of Dickensians are driven by a kind of anxiety created by the nearness and inaccessibility of Dickens-World; they know of, but do not know, Dingley Dell. Hughes and Kitton are even forced to ‘make believe’ they have seen the real Manor Farm, as though *imagining* what is not really there has some power denied to the *image* that really exists. This all fits Bakhtin’s formulation as long as we agree on the reality of the work. For Dickens, even the physical presence of the novel could be seen as contentious. Is it complete without illustrations? Is the first version – in parts – the determinate source of all other subsequent revisions? And once we begin to consider where the work ‘appears’, where it is shaped and becomes perceivable – surely the only criterion which is defensible – we may find that this shape is far from being rigorously determined. We are back to our old quest, searching for the ‘real’ text of the *Pickwick Papers* – is it Mr Pickwick making notes: Boz eulogising the immortal founder of the club: or some invisible ironic version which uses the same words but to completely different effect? If we admit there is no one Pickwick, how can his existence be determinate?

Perhaps we need to be careful here and emphasise – which Bakhtin does not – the distinction between the ethically determined world of art within itself and the aesthetically undetermined notice we take of it. Because we bring our lived lives to bear upon the job of reading, we are in effect re-authoring Dickens’ consummated work, an

entity constructed from determinate material which remains undeflected by our labours, and profoundly intact.

If I am consummated and my life is consummated, I am no longer capable of living and acting. For in order to live and act, I need to be unconsummated...I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be, someone who does not coincide with his already existing make-up. (p. 13)

In the same way that we may 'author' a natural feature such as a cliff, turning it into a hero with our aesthetic frame of reference, filling-in a background not apparent to the cliff itself, we may make a Pickwick out of the work (even if only in imagination) who is himself aestheticized by a new historical literary awareness denied to his creator. But as we see from the link Bakhtin makes between 'consummation' and 'living', the Pickwick we construct will himself be of the things which *are*, and distinct from ourselves, who are merely *becoming*. This is reading. The Dickensian, additionally, seeks out a version, equivalent, original or stand-in which allows the read material the kind of freedom pertaining to the world yet-to-be. Hughes and Kitton are frustrated by the failure of their quest, and so imagine the real, and really absent, Manor Farm, to liberate the existing and present image that they have grown to love in *Pickwick Papers*. This is performance. It is thus performance of this kind, and public pageant, and adaptation, which give us the opportunity to rescue the world of Dickens' novels from the burden of existing and free them into contingency. We have already seen how Fagin has continued to grow and change: to write himself into a character who does no real harm and escapes the gallows. The unsusceptible printed text is made to yield up phantoms of contingency who have the power to acknowledge us and (thereby) soothe our grief at our exclusion from the Dickens panorama of determinate occurrence.

It is these phantoms who haunt the Dickens Country. Their power lies in their position. They are a kind of nexus between image and imagination; we can only accommodate their presence by means of a double look which recognises who they are (determinate characters who exist) but is forced to see their spontaneous assertions of becoming into the lived-in world. It is this look which wrestles with the dynamic at the heart of Dickensian tourism and which, in the end, makes it possible. This look holds together the incompatible and urgent impulses of recognition (this must be Fagin: wipes, beard

and all the rest) and nonsense (this cannot be Fagin: everyone loves him, he is on a train, he is marching with Magwitch). And since the authority of this double look relies on our own power as readers (of books, television, film and, in effect, everything) – without which there could be no recognition – we feel the delightful shock of experiencing our own presence, encountering our encountering the work. We become readers who are acknowledged by their own read material, and, at the same time, also readers who see themselves on the ‘page’ of the work, drawn into the grave and determinate dance of what exists.

5. The life aesthetic

In ‘Some Recollections of Mortality’ from *The Uncommercial Traveller*, Dickens writes about his experiences visiting the Paris Morgue. Here unidentified bodies are exhibited to the general public, in the hope that they will be recognised and claimed. Dickens describes the institution as a well-used resort of the idle and curious, placing himself at once as part of the crowd (‘Now they turned, and we rushed!’ (*UT* p. 190)) and their observer (‘The differences of expression were not many’ (*UT* p. 192)). Indeed the Custodian calls his collection a ‘Museum’ (*UT* p. 191). What Dickens says in this essay about the unacknowledged gaze is particularly interesting as we consider the grief, inherent in book-reading, which may be assuaged by the contingent world of Dickens-as-lived-life. Timothy Clark uses Maurice Blanchot to relate the essay’s treatment of the corpse to Dickens’ wider use of image. Clark picks over Blanchot’s ‘Two Versions of the Imaginary’ for a summary of his radical assessment of how image works in literature. For Blanchot, image is ‘not referable to psychology’: not subjective: not even an ‘instrument of understanding’. It is rather a ‘realm of irreducible materiality’. He explains:

we might recall that a tool, when damaged, becomes its image... In this case the tool, no longer disappearing into its use, appears... The category of art is linked to this possibility for objects to appear, to surrender, that is, to the pure and simple resemblance behind which there is nothing – but being.²

Only *being*: there is clearly a link here with Bakhtin’s *what exists*. The functioning tool has a relation to the world which is concerned with what it can do, with its potential,

² quoted in ‘Dickens through Blanchot’, p. 24.

with what it is about to achieve. It has a yet-to-be-realised presence analogous to that of the contingent world of the lived life. This is why it 'disappears into its use'. It only becomes visible when this relation is disabled; it comes to resemble itself, for what it is. It is thus irreducibly material. If we were to 'read' the tool, we would find that it was a text not susceptible to our interventions. Like Dickensians, we may *imagine* a version of the tool which would once more enter our contingent world and disappear into performing its identity in a number of ways, but the image remains, untouched, and as readers we remain unacknowledged, unseen.

Clark notes Dickens' acute observation of people crowding into the morgue. Dickens supposes there is something peculiar to the activity of looking when it concerns the dead and he takes a survey of the reactions the sees.

There was a little pity, but not much, and that mostly with a selfish touch in it – as who would say, 'Shall I, poor I, look like that, when the time comes!' There was more of a secretly brooding contemplation and curiosity, as 'That man I don't like, and have the grudge against, would such be his appearance, if some one – not to mention names – by any chance gave him an ugly knock?' There was a wolfish stare at the object, in which the homicidal white-lead worker shone conspicuous. And there was a much more general, purposeless, vacant staring at it – like looking at waxwork, without a catalogue, and not knowing what to make of it. But all these expressions concurred in possessing the one underlying expression of *looking at something that could not return a look.* (UT p. 192)

Clark remarks upon 'the close relation of the phenomenology of the corpse to the phenomenology of the aesthetic.'³ This matches Bakhtin's analysis of the aesthetic as something that exists in determinate sense, which we cannot influence but can only read. Books can manage only the determinate acknowledgement of conventional authorial intervention. Dickens is as fond of this as anyone, but his shifting registers and staged addresses remain part of the dead face of the book which we animate into the lived life of the imagination. When, for instance, he speaks to us as 'men and women' or 'Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends' (BH p. 649), he applies himself to a reader-in-the-text whose presence is part of the shape of the work, part of his own imaged object. This reader, along with the 'Dickens' who speaks to us, along with Mr Pickwick, Fagin and the rest, is incapable of looking at us. The form of Dickensian performance,

³ Clark, p. 28.

however, opens a pathway between the dead work that exists and the reader-yet-to-be, which, as we have seen, tempts the figures known from the printed text into the lived-life where suddenly they can return our look. But this pathway works in two directions. At the same time as it admits the dead who exist into contingent happening, it also allows us, as living readers, to approach the written Dickens with our own imaged determinate presence.

We know that the peculiar character of Dickens memories is that they neither belong to Dickens, nor are they remembered. They are rather a brand of occurrence perceived by readers. Dickensians thus privilege themselves through a knowledge that recalls the elevated and coherent experience of reading. With the help of Bakhtin, we can understand that Dickens memories are really existence cast in a determinate mould by the authority of art. Dickens memories are not extracts of text: they are not merely favoured scenes recalled: they are those parts of the lived-in world which provoke a shared aesthetic memorialised determination. In visiting them, the Dickensian is able to witness his or her life coming into 'existence'.

For instance, as we enter The Leather Bottle pub in Cobham, we are compelled to acknowledge its double presence. We cross the road, open the door, order a drink: but we also remember Mr Tupman and the Pickwickians. These figures depend upon our presence: but we know them as an absence. Their absence would not be here if we were not. This is the unBakhtinian participation which is not play, which does not disallow or abolish the aesthetic experience. It works because we join in through memory: one which is not ours – is not Dickens' – but is made by him. We have never been here before: we remember it. Remembering places us on the same plane as Messrs Pickwick and Tupman and, inevitably, remembering them, we momentarily recall our absent selves. We consummate ourselves through our absence and glimpse our aesthetic presence in the Dickens-World. The Dickens memory is important because memory allows us to be in the same place twice; it doubles our engagement with what we encounter. In this way we are *in*: and *see*.

This double engagement is the result of that double looking by which we read our own reading, in encountering Dickens in the world. It has the curious effect of balancing the desire of the spectator/reader or author/contemplator with an appropriate pleasure. Thus

our Dickens Heritage can be read as a freed determinate – the Fagin who waves – or the reverse, as a loose moment of the lived life fixed into existence – the Leather Bottle. It is the double look and its manipulation of the dynamic which allows these opposite processes to co-exist in the same arena or scenario. The Dickens memory is thus genuinely a kind of portal through which cultural matter can pass – either way – on a journey of transformation. This is why the search for equivalence is the central activity of Dickensians: that ‘match’ between the contingencies of the world and the determinate qualities of art – as though holes in two surfaces should suddenly pass over each other – is what makes them distinctive. It is significant too that Dickens’ own life is clearly part of the determinate side of the match, as though there is a fixed ‘Heritage’ version of Dickens’ biography which can be searched for material in the same way as the novels. This is the Dickens who appears with his characters – from R.W. Buss to the Rochester parade – and who epitomises the values of private warmth, public charity, hard work and compassion. The Dickens Country, after all, has Gads Hill at its centre. Thus our Dickensian match may be moral, as well as geographical or social. The ‘good work’ and fundraising which is apparent in the early numbers of *The Dickensian* is not a simple matter of imitation, of following the example of a much admired private individual – it is a cultural activity. By taking part – performing – in this way, the Dickensian sees the contingent self fixed in the frame of a determinate universe.

Chapter 14: Dickens time

We will take one final look at the Dickens-World. Here is 'A Message from the Mayor', printed in the Dickensian Christmas programme for 1989:

At this time of festivities, goodwill and remembrance may I welcome you to Rochester upon Medway, a City immortalised in the writings of Charles Dickens.

This second Dickensian Christmas is a result of close co-operation between the City Council and the Rochester High Street Traders, who have combined to present a weekend as may have been seen in Dickens time.

'Dickens time'. Here, well over 100 years after Dickens' death, the attributive value of his name appears to be well-established. Although the mayor follows a kind of industry convention and locates the coming action of the festival in some indeterminate past, by speaking of things of that 'may have been seen', he does not in fact promise us the historical Dickens, whether that be expressed through art or life. This is not *Dickens'* time. It is the same space where we could find the 'Pickwickian Days', not pertaining to these figures in any way implying possession, or penetration of the one by the other: only brought into proximity, syntactically and conceptually, in the nearness of analogy. 'Dickens time' is both the location and the medium of the Dickens-World. It is the place where that Dickens substance (whether we call it world or text or performance) coheres and knows itself: and the means by which it moves to assert its meaning. What, then can we see in Dickens time?

It has been more fruitful to ask: *how* can we see? The essential Dickens puzzle, picked over and worked through above, is how that which has become so enormously diffuse has at the same time managed to maintain – and even grow – its identity. What we have noticed is that this paradox is itself a reflection of the weird process of reading, in which each uncounted reader labours to produce an individual work of reading (as Blanchot would have it, *gets the book written*) and yet donates to, or participates in, a corporate and sensible work. This is why how we see determines what we see. And because we cannot read only the pure printed text, but are hungrily absorbing information from the wider book-in-the-world, as we make our work: what we see also determines what we see.

Roland Barthes uses the words 'Work' and 'Text' to distinguish between book and the idea-of-the-book, but his model of what reading does and how readers behave rings equally true even if we are talking about 'Book' and 'World', or 'Dickens' and 'Read Dickens'.

Haven't you ever happened to read while looking up from your book?¹

The non-book text – Dickens-World, the Dickens Country – grows, happens, gets read. Barthes' idea, asserted here with an appeal to his own reader, summarises a number of characteristics which energise, promote and sustain Dickens' work in all the richness of its life-in-the-world. This movement – the looking up, the looking away – suggests not a reader who is taking a rest, but one who merely reverts to a resource that lies outside the pages of the book. Unlike Yves Bonnefoy, who describes this reflex as a look away from language altogether, Barthes emphasises the continued action of reading. This is the kind of reading we have seen provoked by the diversions inherent in Dickens' novels and further stimulated by those extra-verbal commentaries, the illustrations. It is a reading which is projected out into the world, the lived-in world, where lie the contingency and openness which will be brought to bear upon the determined life of the book. But it is worth remembering that this is also a look within. It is the reflex action of recall, the diversionary glance into vacancy that actually dismisses the book, removes it as a distraction from its own essential task of getting itself read – and getting what Barthes calls the Text, written. Here is an illustration of the moment the book becomes an obstacle to its own sensible presence, in which the reader frees the mind into the space where the read book will suddenly be. It is the book on the desk of Dickens' own readings, the 'prompt copy' increasingly left behind or set aside as the performances become more and more polished. And this sensible presence, the felt identity of Dickens' work, is thus the promiscuous result of the activity of Dickens readers down the years. An entity with no origin, only a dynamic: no existence, only evidence.

Barthes describes reading as a great release, a plurality of unburdening: an activity that 'disperses' and 'disseminates' the work of the author – that indeed *destroys* the Work of the author, even while leaving it intact (p. 31). 'Reading is the permanent hemorrhage by

¹ *The Rustle of Language*, p. 29.

which structure... collapses, opens, is lost.' It is in fact 'the site where structure is made hysterical' (p. 43).

The hysteric aspects of the Dickens-World, a place where Oliver begs on Scrooge's doorstep, where Mr Pickwick catches a train, where Fagin dances to a jazz band – and indeed where 'Charles Dickens' shakes hands with them all – are surely overwhelmingly apparent. 'The text's explosive force, its digressive energy' (p. 31) has shattered the illusive coherence of the bound pages of the book and has run wild, liberated, provoked to eruption, by the power of the reader's eye. This eye, in striking Dickens, has been a witness, in turn, to something unusual and extensive. This is not the book text, but the read text, growing and being read in turn.

William Jerdan, sometime editor of the *Literary Gazette*, was fond of his involvement in the early history of *The Pickwick Papers*.² As is well-known, the series did not initially take off, but suffered low levels of sales and interest until the fourth number, when the character of Sam Weller and the illustrations of Hablot Browne appeared in the text. And no doubt either or both of these had something to do with the book's change of fortunes. But Jerdan may have played his part. He spotted something in Sam and printed the relevant extracts in the July and August issues of his magazine. So we see that Dickens' fortune, his very name, is already, at his emergence into the largest public notice, bound up with that evidence for the eruptive, disruptive activity of reading, the reading which intervenes where the book is asserting its integrity and disperses it in glorious fragments. Except of course that Dickens-World has no fragments. Encouraged perhaps by the extended permissiveness of the serialised text that 'ends' every month in a state of openness and incompleteness, Jerdan helps Sam to a new identity – helps him to stand on his own two feet. Here is no stunted excerpt but a whole and assertive read Sam entering into the life of the world. How many first came across him in this way? Is the Sam of the *Gazette* Dickens' Sam at all, when he has been deprived of Dickens' own formulation – his 'attendant atmosphere of truth'?³ Those Pickwick-unaware customers of the *Literary Gazette* were first subject, not to the compact and determinate energy of Dickens' book, but to the unpredictably constructed and open-ended event of

² Ford, George H., *Dickens and His Readers: Aspects of Novel-criticism since 1836* (New York: Gordian Press 1974), p. 5 and *Dickens*, p. 196.

³ see p. 67

reading – held to a new coherence by an echo of the affective nearness of Dickens' vision.

This balance continues as the remarkable evolving reality of Dickens today. It is thus that the Dickens-World can have no origin: who can say where their idea of Fagin comes from? The look up, away from the book includes the world: and the world is big. The mind is even larger. Fagin in this sense has no heritage that is traceably complete. And yet thus also we have a Dickens which makes sense – a Dickens for sharing. Dickens-World is an unfinished occurrence, unfinishable: a movement in which readers participate. This is why, when we talk about the erupted text, the text-in-the-world, we have to concentrate on activity, on the perpetual becoming that is the read Dickens. To find our place is the only route to meaning.

To attempt to describe how that meaning is shaped – how readers, in fact, find their place – it has been helpful to use a model of a similarly affective text, *Heritage*, and to illustrate its relationship to its dialectical 'parent', *History*. *Heritage* is the doorway that has admitted us to into the vibrant and fluid presence of Dickens-World and which has allowed us to speculate upon the nature of its functional coherence. What we have noticed is that it is no accident that Dickens' novels should be above all others urged into the lived life to grow and flourish. We find in fact his written work illuminated by its life on the street, and are enabled to see clearly the patterns of typing and motif which prepared it for such usage. More particularly, the constructed narrative of the Dickens reader's experience of reading, complete with intensive reviews, sudden vistas, and especially the prompted look away from the printed text into the unformed life of the work, suggests an art already emerging into the lived-in world.

Dickensians have long discovered that all that labour of reading leaves a delicious vacancy at the heart of things which they can only address by proving the sincerity of the work, by detecting its presence in the world. The look away from the book, for all its productive interaction with the matter of everyday life, is nevertheless an acknowledgment of the situated place of the printed text. It is there, not here. Near, but gone. Bakhtin's theories allow us to approach the crucial question of how to span this abyss of longing, by concentrating on the new entities which are produced by 'consummation', or aestheticization – the casting of experience in the received mould of

the read work. But his analysis helps us all the more in falling short of accounting fully for the distinctive operation of Dickens-in-the-world. This forces us to break new ground in acknowledging the pleasures of a text in which the impossibilities of the participating observer and the unwritten work join in profound and momentary union. So desire and satisfaction play backwards and forwards across this dynamic that promises the permanence of the determinate self, even as it conjures up a Fagin contingent enough to notice our greeting.

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