Contemporary Dickens
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For Steven Marcus
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This collection traces its beginnings to a gathering of scholars at the annual CUNY Victorian Conference in 2003, a conference famous in nineteenth-century British studies circles as much for its collegiality as for its intellectual quality. Several of us who were gathered together at lunch that day—some of whom had never met before—discovered in conversation that we had all written our dissertations, over a span of two or more decades, under the supervision of Steven Marcus. One or two colleagues at the table—Oxonians, we recall—commented that “it showed”: that is, that the work of those of us who had been students of Marcus (many of whose work is represented in this volume) shared not only an enduring fascination with Dickens but—regardless of great differences in interests, style, and theoretical or critical allegiances—an identifiable interpretive ethos. As Marcus remarks on the occasion of the reissue of his *Representations: Essays on Literature and Society* in 1990, “the critical study” of literature and language “in an actual historical world, and in a culture in which we are all intractably situated, seems to me still a worthwhile thing to do” (x). And so, too, does it seem to those whose essays are included here and who have learned so much from his example.

We wish to thank a number of colleagues who in various ways assisted *Contemporary Dickens* into being. Among these are Gerhard Joseph and Barry Qualls, as well as all who participated in “The Long Nineteenth Century” conference at Columbia University in October 2005, including Jonathan Arac, Rita Charon, Arnold Cooper, Andrew Delbanco, George Levine,
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Eric Lott, Deborah Epstein Nord, James Olney, Jonah Siegel, and Patricia Meyer Spacks. The contributing authors to this volume were remarkable not only for the quality of their essays but also for their eager participation, unfailing good humor, steady (though not untested) patience, and noteworthy timeliness in meeting deadlines. Deb Nord deserves special thanks—being, in the initial stages of this project, a coeditor in all but name—as do Jesse Rosenthal, for willing and able indexing, and Sandy Crooms, our editor at The Ohio State University Press, for her enthusiastic and energetic support.

A part of Elaine Freedgood’s essay, “Commodity Criticism and Victorian Thing Culture: The Case of Dickens,” first appeared in a different form in the Coda of The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). We wish to thank the University of Chicago Press for permission to reprint. We also wish to thank the University Seminars at Columbia University for their help in publication. Many of the ideas herein benefited from discussions in the University Seminar: Modern British History.

A note on the text: Following John O. Jordan’s example in The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens, we give parenthetical references to chapter numbers of Dickens’s novels (or to book and chapter number where applicable) rather than to specific editions, since too many of these are in circulation to make such citation useful to our readers. Unless the text under discussion is clear in context, it is identified by its initials (e.g., PP, OT, NN, etc.). The Letters of Charles Dickens (Pilgrim Edition) and John Forster’s Life of Dickens are also noted parenthetically (see Abbreviations).
Abbreviations

References to the novels are by book (where applicable) and chapter, unless otherwise noted.

BH  Bleak House
BR  Barnaby Rudge
CC  A Christmas Carol. References are to stave.
DC  David Copperfield
DS  Dombey and Son
ED  The Mystery of Edwin Drood
GE  Great Expectations
HM  The Haunted Man
HT  Hard Times
LD  Little Dorrit
MC  Martin Chuzzlewit
NN  Nicholas Nickleby
OCS  The Old Curiosity Shop
OMF  Our Mutual Friend
OT  Oliver Twist
PP  The Pickwick Papers
SB  Sketches by Boz. References are to title of sketch.
TTC  Tale of Two Cities
UT  The Uncommercial Traveller

Forster  The Life of Charles Dickens. References are to volume and page.
Introduction

DEIRDRE DAVID AND EILEEN GILLOOLY

No other author in the English-speaking world occupies quite the place in both the popular consciousness and the literary tradition as Charles Dickens. On the one hand, he is, as John Jordan has noted, “widely recognized as the preeminent novelist of the Victorian age and a major figure in world literature”—at once both quintessentially English and internationally influential, animating the novels of Dostoevsky as vividly as those of Mark Twain or, more recently, Peter Carey. On the other hand, he is known to millions who have never read a word he penned. Only the Bard enjoys greater name recognition, yet the adjective “Dickensian” conjures a more vivid set of associations than does “Shakespearean,” and Scrooge cuts a more familiar figure in our market-driven global economy than Lear or Hamlet or Macbeth. Although the Victorians as a whole constitute a source of nostalgic fascination for contemporary audiences (witness the relentless production in recent decades of television miniseries based on nineteenth-century novels), Dickens’s appeal is of a special kind—owing not only to his formidable powers of imagination and description, his staggering output, and his persistent presence in our collective unconscious, but also to his having himself personally ruminated upon so many of the social problems, values, and ways of knowing that currently engross us. Almost every contemporary concern that can be traced back to the nineteenth century—from financial credit and social welfare to secularism and commodity culture—seems to have elicited some sort of response from the Inimitable.
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It is not surprising, then, that Dickens—sneered at, condescended to, or simply dismissed by a great many early-twentieth-century modernists—should have become, as Deborah Epstein Nord notes (in the final essay of this volume), a favorite object of critical inquiry during our own historical period. Since the mid-twentieth century, scores of monographs and essay collections attest to his remarkable and eclectic topicality. As the Longman Critical Reader (1996), edited by Steven Connor, points out, “the very contradictions within Dickens’s writing which posed such a problem for earlier critics, now offer enormous interpretive opportunities for contemporary issues such as language, gender, selfhood, space and power.” As a whole, Dickens criticism currently values the ease with which his literary corpus yields to the pressure of late-twentieth-century theoretical preoccupations. Dickens Refigured: Bodies, Desires and Other Histories (1996), for example—a collection of essays edited by John Schad—sets out to identify “the foreign bodies” and their “desires, histories” that populate “Dickens’s fiction and prose.” Dickens and the Children of Empire (2000) and Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds (1999) are similarly focused on “foreign bodies,” but of a more material sort: while the former seeks both to unpack the imperial analogy—pervasive in Dickens’s writing—between children and colonized peoples and to reconsider Dickens from a postcolonial perspective that has “re-envisioned” the center and the periphery, the latter considers Dickens from both “global” and “regional” points of view, often placing him within new conceptual worlds as well: “new media (film, television, the internet) and new theoretical frames (feminist, postcolonial).” Perhaps the most satisfying, because the most comprehensive, of the recent essay collections is the Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens (1999), which covers “the full span” of Dickens’s fiction from a number of thematic, formal, and theoretical approaches. In offering considerations of Dickens on “childhood, the city, and domestic ideology” as well as of his serial publication, his “distinctive use of language,” and his “relation to work in . . . illustration, theatre, and film,” it suggests both the variety of Dickens’s own investments and the diversity of critical engagements his work prompts.

Although Contemporary Dickens is similarly committed to presenting some of the most intriguing work being undertaken in Dickens studies today, it differs conceptually from recent collections in two important respects. First, it seeks to disclose the nineteenth-century origins of many of those issues that currently absorb us: not only was Dickens fully contemporary with his age—his concerns, enthusiasms, and ways of knowing and representing being shared by, often shaping, those of his contemporaries—but he is also our contemporary. As Anny Sadrin points out, Dickens was both “a great Victorian” and “a great precursor of Modernity.” From constructions of gender
and sexuality to environmentalism and Englishness: such areas of inquiry currently in high fashion—areas often assumed to have been epistemologically unavailable to critics before the late twentieth century—are shown in these essays to have been identified, pondered, and sometimes even problematized by Dickens himself. In their Introduction to Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle, Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente argue that “interdisciplinarity”—“dominated by the figure of Michel Foucault” in its most popular and recognizable guise as cultural studies—“can only lay claim to the kinds of theoretical and practical ‘breaks’ that it assigns itself by distorting or suppressing its relation to the past.” Like the essays in Disciplinarity and other recent work by Anderson and others, the essays collected in Contemporary Dickens explore the genealogy of contemporary ideas and question the originality of our current ways of knowing: upon examination, postmodern epistemology appears to be less a “break” from our Victorian past than a feature of its development.

The second primary contribution of this volume lies in its illuminating the particular importance of Dickens, particularly late Dickens—as a novelist, reformer, activist, ethicist, psychologist, anthropologist, and biographical subject—in the critical reassessments being undertaken across the disciplines. As we are clearly not the first to notice, the popularity of “high theory” in departments of literature has subsided, and though “new historicism” remains strong, there are new currents in twenty-first-century literary criticism, new approaches—often eclectic or hybrid—to topics that once seemed, to critics writing in the final decades of the late twentieth century, to be exhausted of interest. Moral philosophy, the psychology of the emotions, liberal theory, life writing, nationalism and national character: all are being rediscovered as compelling objects of study, competing successfully for attention with race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and other such modes of analysis that have dominated professional inquiry in recent years. Far from representing a nostalgic return, however, Contemporary Dickens looks at these once-familiar topics from fresh perspectives that take into account the vital contributions made by Marxist, feminist, deconstructive, psychoanalytic, new historical, and other late-twentieth-century strategies of reading.

We have grouped the essays under three headings that we believe raise questions and concerns that not only are of current critical interest but also, in many cases, caused Dickens himself to ponder. The essays collected in Part One, “Ethics and Narrative,” explore the multiple and sometimes conflict-
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In ways in which Dickens gave narrative form to the moral and religious anxieties of his age. In chapter 1, “Dickens, Secularism, and Agency,” George Levine begins with the claim that the Victorian novel resists at almost every turn a providential explanation for social difficulty. Dickens’s novels, perhaps more pervasively than those of any other Victorian writer, strikingly and paradoxically reveal this secularity in their own insistence on the providential. With *Little Dorrit* as his representative example, Levine analyzes Dickens’s elaboration of the raw secularity of the world that presses upon the overtly Christian framework of the novel, embodied in the diminutive person of Amy Dorrit. For Levine, this most somber and densely plotted of Dickens’s novels reveals a struggle to fit an ethical resolution of social misery within the narrative frame of providential explanation: his analysis discloses Dickens’s engagement with issues of moral philosophy that press upon us today, particularly the debates about secularism, creationism, and intelligent design.

In chapter 2, “Dickens and the Goods,” Robert Newsom charts the biographical and intellectual forces that shaped Dickens’s understanding and shows that virtually all of his narratives, from *Sketches by Boz* to *Our Mutual Friend*, are driven by a powerful ethical imperative: simply put, the “goods” of religion, for Dickens, rest in a duty to do good, here and now. Unembarrassed about the transparency of his moral positions, Dickens returns again and again to the simple but challenging question of what is good and what is evil, and Newsom—in showing how the novels advance an imperative to be useful, to do good, and to bring happiness to all—explores the mix of Utilitarian and “Christian” values that characterize the ethics of Liberalism, as we have inherited it from the Victorians.

Offering such moral instruction as that delivered by Betsey Trotwood in *David Copperfield* (“Never be mean in anything, never be false, never be cruel”) as a remedy for social malaise has long subjected Dickens to charges of sentimentalism. In “The Poverty of Charity: Dickensian Sympathy” (chapter 3), Nancy Yousef defends Dickens against what some critics have seen as an embarrassing aspect of his art. Arguing that such charges betray a general suspicion of affective display, Yousef considers Dickens’s engagement with the problems of philanthropy as part of an intellectual tradition reaching back to the eighteenth century and forward to contemporary debates within ethical theory. If Levine and Newsom find unresolved conflicts and unambiguous moral imperatives in Dickens’s narratives, then Yousef places Dickens’s engagement with those conflicts and imperatives in a history of moral philosophy.

Whether ambiguous or transparent, Dickens’s ethical narratives depend upon storytelling, yet, as Richard H. Moye notes, the Victorians regarded
the making up of stories with moral suspicion. Taking *Hard Times* as his example, Moye argues in “Storied Realities” (chapter 5) that while Dickens accepted the inevitability of making fictions (how else, after all, can we know our own past or understand our nation’s history?), he also insisted that we choose our narratives wisely if we are to constitute a viable moral community: we must have healthy stories, enabling fictions, that allow us to know and to love one another. In *Hard Times*, Dickens teaches us to recognize the “good” fiction from the “bad,” to marvel at Sissy Jupe’s inventive imagination and to despise Bounderby’s self-serving fictional biography.

The ethical significance of narrative is equally crucial in John Bowen’s analysis of *The Haunted Man*, a strange, melancholy, and neglected text. Exploring the relationship between adult life and childhood misery (Dickens wrote *The Haunted Man* just before beginning *David Copperfield*), Bowen shows in chapter 4 that Dickens’s exploration of memory has a close affinity with certain nineteenth-century psychological theories of split and doubled minds and with debates about the nature of material and psychic conservation. Identifying a narrative of family thick with strange figures, weird repetitions, and ghostly effects, Bowen also elaborates its ancillary meaning as a social and political allegory that emphasizes the nature of ethical responsibility to the poor. *The Haunted Man* thus both investigates the persistent strangeness of the self and defines the nature of our ethical and social obligations to others.

By virtue of the Inimitable’s seemingly inexhaustible interest in everything around him, the essays gathered in Part Two under the rubric “Material Culture” explore such phenomena as Dickens’s participation in the Victorian construction of Christmas, his preoccupation with the environment, his obsession with a world of things, his appearance on a ten-pound note, and his postulation of a tension between a world of stilled moral perfection and a world of movable, mutable objects. In “So, This Is Christmas” (chapter 6), Joseph W. Childers sets out to answer many questions that arise from the conjunction of Christmas and English national identity: among them, what different roles, depending on social class, did individual English people play in constructing a national experience of Christmas? Childers argues that the best-known version of Christmas, coded in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, is specifically and indelibly English: its concerns include the contemporary problem of the poor, a particularly English school of political economy, and the traditions of English Christmases past. At the heart of this version of Christmas is a basic contradiction: on the one hand, an insistence on a muted Christian socialism that restores human sympathy and, on the other, a celebration of the individual’s ability to effect social change.
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“Was Dickens green?” is the question posed by Karen Chase and Michael Levenson in chapter 7. From Sketches by Boz to Our Mutual Friend, they trace Dickens’s engagement with contemporary environmental issues—issues that, by the middle years of his career, had reached emergency status in London, always the site of what they term his “green reflections.” Not only was Dickens a passionate campaigner for the retention of some “green spaces” in the metropolis: the memory of pastoral is a constitutive principle of his fiction. Linking modernization and social trauma, Dickens—from the coming of the railway in Dombey and Son to the crisis of rags and paper explored in Our Mutual Friend—emerges in this essay as a committed social activist, likely supporting organic farming and protesting global warming, were he alive today, as well as continuing to advocate for land conservation.

Elaine Freedgood’s primary interest (in chapter 8) is in making us grasp the difference between what she terms a Victorian “thing culture” and what we now broadly term “materialism.” We have lost our ability to appreciate Dickens’s world of “things”—a world that he did not always present to the reader as damning evidence of a heartless commodity culture. In an innovative turn, Freedgood claims that it is the criticism of Dickens’s fiction that has led us to underestimate the value of “things,” and she critiques that criticism to unveil its misreading of the crowded Dickensian instantiation of the particular. Freedgood asks us to look through and beyond the materialist prism that preoccupies so many in Dickens studies today: in Dickens and in Victorian culture at large, not all objects are bad objects. If Nancy Yousef seeks to recuperate Dickens’s oft-disdained sentimentalism, then Freedgood aims to rescue Dickens from readings undertaken from the perspective of a reductive materialist analysis.

Dickens on a ten-pound note—his many modes of utterance represented by the titles of his novels appearing in small, faint print on the front of the note and swirling behind the assertion “I Promise to Pay”—is the paper object that constitutes the subject of Tatiana Holway’s essay (chapter 9). Where Chase and Levenson concern themselves with the production of paper that may be said to produce the ten-pound note, Holway is interested in what the note itself signals: Dickens as literary capitalist, the embodiment of the convergence of money, written language, and identity. Examining in great detail the origins of modern attitudes toward paper money, Holway explores the dramatic growth of a credit system that in mid-nineteenth-century England led to the burgeoning of middle-class wealth through the accrual of interest and to Dickens himself becoming a literary capitalist in more ways than one: making investments with profits from the sale of his novels, expanding and diversifying his business ventures, capitalizing on the republication of novels
in cheap editions, inventing himself through his writing, and using his name as the ground for all of these representations.

While Holway draws our attention to both the symbolic and the literal circulation of paper and representation, James Buzard (chapter 10) focuses on Dickens’s delight in inventorying a world of literal and symbolic circulating currency. For Buzard, *The Old Curiosity Shop* is the most anti-Dickensian of Dickens’s novels: the figure of Nell, always moving yet always emblematic of a perfect stillness, threatens to negate the fecund power with which Dickens multiplies characters and incidents and puts himself into circulation, as it were, in the literary marketplace. If *The Pickwick Papers* is a novel whose miraculous comic inventiveness may be described by the trope of inventory—a list of separate items (characters and incidents) placed one after another, preserved in their plurality—then in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Buzard argues, Dickens hurls against his own narrative-propagating powers the story-negating inertia of Nell. Her stillness—symbolic of a refusal to become an inventoried item—tends to make all the going to and fro that exists around her seem empty and meaningless.

As we hope is apparent, close reading is a common trait of all of the essays in *Contemporary Dickens*, but an especially important one to those in Part Three, “Contextual Reading,” which examines select scenes and characters within the context of Dickens’s personal history or his greater historical circumstances—circumstances that often resonate powerfully with our own. Eileen Gillooly draws our attention in chapter 11 to Dickens’s parental affections, anxieties, and ambivalences. Beset by the challenges of his ever-increasing family and the disappointments presented by his children (particularly his sons, for whom he was especially ambitious), Dickens comes to find wish-fulfilling relief in inventing alternatives to the nuclear family. The aggrieved child, of course, is always at the center of Dickens’s narratives, but Gillooly shows that Dickens occasionally pauses to consider the parent-child relationship from other affective positions as well (*Nicholas Nickleby*’s mothering of Smike, for example). Father to scores of children, fictional and otherwise, Dickens consistently found his imaginative offspring easier to identify with and to project upon than he did the biological sort. Indeed, in *Bleak House*, he rewrites his personal domestic script with an altered cast of characters, directing them in their roles as the ideal children missing from his own household.

By closely questioning the ways in which literary and cultural criticism describes itself as a mode of “interrogation,” James Eli Adams in chapter 12 shows how the novel has become the principal territory for a hermeneutics of suspicion. For contemporary critics, the Victorian novel, in particular, always
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has something to hide: it postulates the existence of a fundamentally private subjectivity that results in making everything the subject of interrogation, in bringing everything under suspicion, including the agency of the author. For Adams, the Bardell v. Pickwick courtroom scene of Pickwick Papers is the locus classicus within Dickens of such a way of reading. There Pickwick functions as the innocent screen onto which are projected the interrogating sexual suspicions of his audiences. Adams urges us to abandon our naïve assumption that Victorian novelists did not know what they were up to in representing sexuality, demonstrating that Dickens’s own engagement with sexuality is a good deal cannier and more knowing than we have previously acknowledged.

Deirdre David also asks us to reconsider what we think we know about Dickens, to take into account not only the sentimentalized virtue of Dickens’s women characters but also their destructive fury. “Little Dorrit’s Theater of Rage” (chapter 13) examines Dickens’s ambiguous political response to “the condition of women” question at the very moment he was composing a novel giving powerful expression to some of his female characters’ feelings of injury, injustice, and revenge. Miss Wade and Tattycoram, for two, reject social codes of feminine conduct and instead stage numerous theatrical scenes of vengeance—a mode of protest that utilizes nineteenth-century theatrical “attitudes,” specifically rage and martyrdom. At the end of the novel, we see Dickens beating a fainthearted retreat from a politically feasible, if fictional, remedy for the social malaise that is the origin of women’s anger both in Little Dorrit and in the public sphere at the time of its composition.

Whether we read Dickens from the perspective of narrative ethics, moral philosophy, or materialist analysis, we do so within the context of prior Dickens scholarship. In the final essay of this collection, Deborah Epstein Nord considers how Dickens came to be such a rich and enduring subject of contemporary interpretation. “The Making of Dickens Criticism” (chapter 14) examines the terms in which the best-known of Dickens’s detractors—George Henry Lewes, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and F. R. Leavis—evoked and depreciated his fiction: the infantilism of his imagination, the inappropriateness of his novels for the adult reader, his instinctive but uneducated talent. Such disparagement was, nationally speaking, English. It was not until the mid-twentieth-century, with the postwar emergence of Freudian and Marxist readings of literature, that Dickens became, particularly in America, a complex subject of sophisticated critical analysis. The “childishness” of his novels was discovered—notably by Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling—to be a fecund source of Freudian explications of the persistence of childhood within adulthood, and his brilliant metaphor of society as prison (expressed most
fully in *Little Dorrit*) spoke powerfully to a population raw with memories of World War II and yet tinged with political idealism.

Nord reminds us, too, of the importance of Steven Marcus to Dickens studies. If Wilson and Trilling—along with Philip Collins, Humphry House, and J. Hillis Miller—brought *Bleak House, Little Dorrit,* and *Our Mutual Friend* to our critical attention, we owe the serious study of the early Dickens to Marcus and his still-influential book *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (1965). Marcus is also among the first to have shown that a close reading of texts widely judged to be nonliterary could be richly productive of local literary meaning and broad cultural concepts. Indeed, as the author of *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England,* which Michel Foucault famously acknowledged to have prompted him to write *The History of Sexuality,* he can be said to have inspired a new mode of inquiry, one that we would now call cultural studies.  

Equally attuned throughout his writing to the political and the psychological, to the material specificity of historical life as well as to the transhistorical aspects of lived experience, Marcus has helped not only to make Dickens our contemporary but to shape our contemporary habits of critical exploration and analysis as well.

**NOTES**

4. Wendy Jacobson, ed., *Dickens and the Children of Empire,* 11; Anny Sadrin, *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds,* xiii, x.
7. Anderson and Valente, *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle,* 8, 15.
8. Suzy Anger also traces the genealogy of our ways of knowing to the Victorians. See *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture,* edited by Anger, and her critical study *Victorian Interpretation.*
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