THE OLD STORY, WITH A DIFFERENCE

*Pickwick’s Vision*

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For J. Hillis Miller

Oui, il y a de l’amitié à penser
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AND A NOTE ON THE TEXT

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All references to The Pickwick Papers are taken from Mark Wormald’s edition of the novel (London: Penguin, 2003) and are cited parenthetically as PP.
Introduction

Centuries are the children of one mighty family, but there is no family-likeness between them. We ourselves are standing on the threshold of a new era, and we are already hastening to make as wide a space, mark as vast a difference as possible, between our own age and its predecessor.

—Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *On the Ancient and Modern Influence of Poetry* (1832)

Fundamentally, form is unlikeness . . . every difference is form.

—George Eliot, “Notes on Form in Art” (1868)

So much we can see; darkly, as through the foliage of some wavering thicket . . .

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34)

I. About This Book

In addressing at length Charles Dickens’ first novel, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1836–37), what is this book about? What does it think it is doing, and around what focal points will it circle? The visible, visuality, visibility, vision, visions, visualization, invisibility, view, prospect, observation, perception, sight, insight, hindsight, foresight, introspection, retrospection, eyes, reflection, appearance, spectacle, spectacles, optics, magnification, apparitions, phantasms, microscopes, telescopes, focal point, dream, looking, gazing, glancing, mental picture, hallucination.

Not every term here will be treated in equal measure. However, each in some manner will be seen to touch upon every other, and so to inform the
skein of words, the lines, motions, and rhythms they enable, and the images they shape, giving us to apprehend and to imagine that which we cannot see with the naked eye, from page to page across the novel. We are dealing here with the intimate proximity and unbridgeable distance by which sight touches. Each term is of significance to the ways in which The Pickwick Papers makes us feel and, equally importantly, perhaps “before all,” makes us see (Conrad 1988, xlix). The echo of Joseph Conrad’s famous statement concerning the work of narrative art is deliberate, for it announces a relationship between differing senses of sight with regard to what the literary can or at least strives to cause to appear, and the effect that such an appearance can produce. That which is caused to appear, or which by chance we might come to see, can involve reception of, and reflection on, the work of memory, or traces of the past. Where this is the case, such manifestations will be addressed through consideration of envisioning.

Having stated my focus as starkly as possible, I would like to make a few brief comments on what The Old Story, with a Difference: Pickwick’s Vision is not about. It is not about text and context, at least not in any direct or straightforward fashion. Nor is it about Pickwick’s relation to “history” in any simple manner. My concerns are not to do with understanding the history of the period, even though, inevitably, some of the novel’s relation to the historical and the issues in which they are intertwined will arise. I am not claiming to present through my reading a view of history, nor should my reading of the text be considered in terms of either a return to history or a consideration of what John Brannigan has described as “the status of history” in the text (1998, 2). I will have occasion to trace or otherwise allude to certain histories, or particular genealogies and “archiviologies,” to borrow Jacques Derrida’s neologism (1996a, 34).1

Inevitably it will be necessary to make clear particular material and cultural and historical resonances as these solicit the structure of Pickwick. But it has to be said from the outset that no sustained effort is made in the present volume either to historicize or to contextualize Pickwick, if by either “historicization” or “contextualization” one understands a process of grounding the literary text, and thereby stabilizing meaning or identity. Such processes venture making the strangeness of literature safe, of domesticking, corralling, and policing its play. They can often be read as aiming to construct for the text if not one stable meaning then a structure of meanings commensurate with one another, through the tracing of aspects, assumptions, or ideologies of a text as if these were simply the signs of its historical moment and that this were all that made up the literary text.
Critical gestures and practices of historical contextualization run the risk of reducing both the literary text and the act of reading to instrumentality. And if this is true of straightforward acts of historicization, arguably it is even more the case in modes of reading where the text’s only use-value is as an exploitable phenomenon for exposing and exploring the power relations of a particular social, cultural, ideological, and historical moment. Such a reading might claim that *Pickwick* enacts through its modes of comedic representation a series of momentary subversions of cultural manifestations of power via parody, pastiche, satire, or whatever, only to witness the closure of subversion and a return to order in a vision of sentimental benevolence.

However, what is overlooked in such a manner of reading is the literary text as *literary*; any “mode of analysis . . . that sees the text as an organismic unity or uses it for a totalizing purpose (as when the right or the left speaks for history) is *blind*” to the literary (Hartman 1989, 19; emphasis added). What goes unseen are those instances of dissonance that exceed disidence, which allow the reader a reflection *on* and *of* his or her being and agency as being marked by difference. To read in this fashion and to insist on the significance of the literary text is not to suggest literature or the literary as privileged mediums, or of being more significant than other forms of document. It is, however, to insist on the singularity of the literary, the grammar, rhetoric, and on the discursive networks that mark it as what it is and not something else. The literary, in its modes of envisioning and representation, might allow us to see the other of history. For in the literary—this uncanny phenomenon that cannot be given the identity of *concept*, but which is more precisely a barely discernible notion—“the true *image* of the past flits by. The past can be seized on as an *image* that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability” (Benjamin 2003, 390).

Whatever the literary might be, however we might define provisionally the probably undecidable structures and manifestations of this disquieting, hybrid, quasi-identity, it comes to articulate the past, but not by recognizing it as it was. Instead, it may be said, after Walter Benjamin, that the literary appropriates “a memory as it flashes up in [that] moment of danger . . . [that] threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it” (391).

The “literary” is thus irreducible to and incommensurable with discourses of history, sociology, or politics. If *Pickwick* is a success in the early nineteenth century, this is because it signals to its readers through those parodic imaginary visions of a recent past a constellation of cultural identities available to memory, and which are in danger of being forgotten in
the desire to mark as great a distance from that past as rapidly as possible. In this *Pickwick* announces the crisis—that which Benjamin identifies as danger—of the moment as a crisis of vision and representation, even as it affords its readers a glimpse of the difference of their being from their predecessors and their becoming different. How does one see oneself in seeing one’s difference from one’s parents? And how may this vision maintain the traces of the past without being overwritten by them? What are the proper perspectives for the reiteration of particular visions of Englishness?

This is in part what *Pickwick* may be seen—and read—as bringing into the light, through a double process of focalization that simultaneously looks to the past and to that which is to come. In this way, the reader is “enabled to find and recognize himself in the actions of the fictitious individual” (Costa Lima 1988, 135) but also to perceive one’s difference in the imaginary vision of the fictional individual’s failure to see oneself in the proper light, and thus to be a *figure* of fun, the prosopopeic manifestation of a tropological cultural structure. The structure of vision is one that therefore offers the chance of producing for the reader what J. Hillis Miller calls a *self-reading* (of which I shall have more to say, below; see Miller 1987, 81). However, in order to apprehend this structure the literary text must be read on its own terms, and this is what I seek to do here, examining a range of tropes, metaphors, motifs, and other figural and structural devices to do with vision and all its non-synonymous cognates.

Also, in reading *Pickwick* I am not making claims about the novel in general or as one manifestation of “literature” or “the literary.” No statement about the literary text can be raised justifiably to a concept, much less a generalization. For this reason “literature” can “only be exemplified and the examples will of course all differ” (Miller 1991, 231). We cannot, and must not, program our reading of the literary, whether according to a generalizable politics of reading, or in instituting a program, a method of reading, repeatable from text to text. The application of and, more importantly, to historical context is simply one means by which we generalize, stabilize, and resort to the program or method of analysis. What is missed—what remains here and here but unseen—in such acts of reading is, as I have just stated, that every example on which we draw will necessarily differ from every other.

Therefore one must come to see the text as other, and as a singular other. Ethically, the demand of reading is to respect and respond to the singularity of the text, as far as possible. This strange entity we call the literary is a unique weaving because, unlike any other mode of production, it produces virtual, visual realities generated by the oddity of a specific form
of interrogation. This demand is encapsulated in the demand: what if?—
which subsequently we respond to by proposing an answer through the fic-
tion of the as if. (Of this figure—as if—there will be more to say, 
particularly in the afterword.) Answering such a question produces phan-
tasmic, imagined worlds that, when you come to think of it, are not a lit-
tle uncanny because they are so like the realities we inhabit and yet they are 
not wholly like them, either. Thus literature and the literary offer us innu-
merable countersignatures to the real, to “history,” to the past. If “the past 
is a foreign country” then the literary is its language (Hartley 2004, 1).

Or let us say it is apprehensible, at the very least, as a translation and 
memory machine. The literary is, we might say, a mnemonic communicat-
ning, albeit partially, improperly, and in a ruinous fashion, between het-
erogeneous historical or material instances. The literary can remind us, if 
we are open to its call, that its acts of envisioning are inescapably and inti-
mately implicated in the becoming of our identities. The literary is that 
name for a certain exteriorization of memory and its phantasmagoria, 
which figure a significant aspect of our being, and by which we are haunt-
ed. With this in mind, therefore, I seek to explicate in the present volume 
not so much a direct understanding of the historical and its traces as a read-
ing of the translation of particular motifs and signs already adverted, as 
these in turn are implicated in the projection of certain cultural identities 
and the processes of their becoming. Furthermore, I do so with an eye 
toward how these mediate and are mediated by the workings of memory 
and a sense of the past. Or instead say pasts—for there is more than one 
past at work in Pickwick that comes momentarily into view. In addition to 
the matter of “history,” these have to do with memory, intertextuality, and 
being. There are others, doubtless. But it is only on the fewest examples 
that we will focus.

II. About the Title (Oblique Illumination)

So much for what this book is about; but what of our title—The Old 
Story, with a Difference: Pickwick’s Vision? Deliberately cryptic, it never-
theless provides the reader with an oblique illumination or illustration— 
illumination of that illustration and illustration of how illumination takes 
place—of the work of those figures and tropes that were announced at the 
very beginning of this introduction. There is much that circles about the 
structural and semantic relations of the title that is not merely playful. In 
a performative manner, and in the spirit of that mockingly obtuse first
The sentence of *The Pickwick Papers* (itself concerned with illustration and illumination, as we shall have occasion to observe), our title brings before the reader's eyes all the concerns of this study, even though they may as yet remain invisible. This being the case we would therefore beg our readers' indulgence for the following circumlocution.

About this title, at which the good reader will have looked carefully: *The Old Story, with a Difference: Pickwick's Vision*. The question is one of what will have been seen there or otherwise overlooked. (And this is very much apropos reading and seeing Pickwick critically.) After all, titles, like citations, “give the tone through the resonance of a few words, the meaning or form of which ought to set the stage” (Derrida 1996a, 7). Ought to indeed, though this conditional caveat announces the impossibility of guaranteeing the attention given to looking—which is also to say reading—and the manner of perception.

If the anastomotic link I seek to bring into view between looking on the one hand and reading on the other seems, if not swift, then at least fanciful, it should be remembered that perception is that act of sensuous or mental apprehension, whereby knowledge has the chance both of being collected and received. Perception appears to announce that which makes the connection between seeing and reading, and which might be missed in the seemingly merely technical term looking. Perception announces that “indispensable sense of imaginary . . . vision [that] tends to involve both actual looking and interpreting, includ[ed] in literary reading” (Bal 2002, 37). What might have been seen or overlooked, received or missed, in a title is all the more crucial when that title, or part of it at least, is also a citation, however invisibly this might pass us by, and especially when it is a case of “capitalizing on an ellipsis” (Derrida 1996a, 7). Such capitalization, and the ellipsis that makes it possible, is observable only if one perceives the citation paradoxically by its absence. A concern is announced with what escapes and exceeds empirical observation in the chance of other modes of vision, perception included. Yet whether or not one notices the absence of that mark announcing an erasure, the force of its opening is still in operation, and perhaps all the more forcefully so for being invisible to the naked eye. Perception of the citation as citation might bring back that which has been excised or repressed in the inscription, that which is not seen coming back partially to the mind’s eye as it were, as the sign that sight or vision of particular kinds are inextricably bound up with memory, and with a certain acuity with regard to insight apropos the past.

This is what my title announces, however elliptically. In effect what is inscribed in the title is also what the title gives us to see. There are thus
two focal centers in the title. Or let us say, more precisely, in the two parts of the title, one on each side of the colon, observation of which encourages a binocular rather than a monocular examination. On the one hand, there is the matter of seeing, of vision, of sight and interpretation. My title comments on the translation effects of sight and vision, as these are observed to take place in *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. One particular aspect of the translation is its rendering of the past. This takes place throughout *The Pickwick Papers* through the generation of the images and phantasms belonging to a phenomenal reality produced by sight, by looking, by the response to visions and other phenomenal manifestations. On the other hand, there is that interest in narrative transmissibility, and the concern with the ways in which marks, signs, and traces of the past (*the old story*) come to be transmitted through their iterability (*with a difference*), in order that the reader might have the chance to see the past, though never as such, only through the interpretive lens by which the materiality of history is transformed into the materiality of the letter (on which materialities and their significance to this study, along with a third, the materiality of vision, I shall comment further in the introduction).  

Hence the matter set out in plain sight before the reader, even though everything that is there, in the title, is not necessarily revealed instantaneously or to the same degree for every reader. Seeing and reading take time; duration cannot be anticipated; revelation is uncertain, its effects uncontrollable and unreliable; and perception, that sensuous apprehension or sentiment in response to the visions, images, and apparitions of introspection and retrospection, is not always trustworthy as it attempts to traverse the gap between one historical moment and another, in an act of imaginary “focalization.” I take the term “focalization” from the work of Mieke Bal. As Bal points out, “focalization” is equivalent neither to “look” nor “gaze” and yet touches on both concepts. Instead, it names “what becomes visible through the movement of the look” (Bal 2002, 37, 39). Perceiving such acts of apparition and manifestation projected, illuminated, and engendered in such movement is intrinsic to my reading of *Pickwick*.  

Thus what is staged in the title does not concern the title only, as already implied. Were that the case, everything I have said thus far would seem hyperbolic, unnecessary, gratuitous. Misperception, that is to say distorted vision and misreading, might lead particular readers to take that which is taking place as, say, poststructuralist cliché, supposing such a thing—poststructuralism—to exist. In giving the tone, that which is at stake in the title also announces, however elliptically, the interests both of this reading of Dickens’ first novel and that which is already mapped by
Dickens himself. I proceed through the reading of vision and its related
tropes in the novel in order to respond to and thus review Dickens’ appre-
hension of how one sees, and interprets, albeit obliquely, one’s own his-
torical moment and, through that, one’s past as one seeks to envision a
cultural identity marked by difference from, and yet intimately indebted
to, processes of historical becoming.

So much for what my title is about: what it circles around, what I am
circling around in discussing its implications and relations to the reading
of Pickwick, as well as what—to recall the various resonances that inform
about—it seeks to get under way, what it sets in motion, what it intends,
to draw on the various meanings that play about its surface. Now, to that
surface, in conclusion of the first part of the introduction; to its double or
binocular structure by which is intimated the desire to have the reader
look about them in different directions, almost simultaneously.

The first part of my title is that partial citation to which I have already
alluded, taken from The Posthumous Papers. It comes from chapter 46, and
a conversation between Samuel Pickwick and his lawyer, Mr Perker: “it’s
the old story I suppose?” ‘With a difference, my dear Sir; with a difference,’
rejoined Perker, deliberately folding up the paper and putting it in his
pocket again” (PP 624). A scene of narration and iterability then, as the
words between the two men attest, and which iteration is staged in its
spacing and temporal relay a little further on in the conversation, as a sin-
gle phrase—“to remain here!” “To remain here?” “To remain here, my
dear Sir”—oscillates between the two men (624). The two remarks, con-
joined and edited unreasonably in my title, serve somewhat economically
to announce Dickens’ understanding of historical transitions in narrative
and cultural transmission and translation, especially as those transforma-
tions, those differences, when brought before the gaze of the reader
announce the historicity of difference, whereby an unsuturable gap
between the old story and its difference remains. And to push the strong
reading, what remains, the visible signs or remnants of “the old story,” is
only ever available because it is relayed with a difference, and thus has its
chance of coming to be perceived or apprehended at differing historical and
cultural moments—here and here and here. Therefore, within any given
moment in which we read, the past informing that moment may be
glimpsed, however obscurely—this is what comes to remain here but never
simply as itself. One is thereby afforded the chance of a view of how the
present moment both comes into being and how it strives to mark its dif-
ference from its predecessor, to echo the words of Letitia Elizabeth Landon
However, this is not only a matter of the mark, sign, or trace. This moment between the lawyer and his client is a scene also of eyes, looks, gazes: Mr Perker is observed in passing “glancing eagerly at Mr Pickwick out of the corners of his eyes” (624). That view askance affords the reader a moment typical of Pickwick’s structures of vision and perception, as we shall have occasion to observe in the following chapters; hence my choice of this narrative scene as being exemplary of the work of the narrative as a whole. For what is to be seen here, looking slightly to one side or back at the implied position of the reader, is that he or she is invited simultaneously to observe the scene, witnessing Mr Pickwick and his responses to his lawyer, and also to watch Mr Perker looking at Mr Pickwick. The structure of looking is one of difference and relay, and possibly what might be termed anamorphosis or refraction (discussed further in the first chapter). I use the last term somewhat loosely. It may be said, though, and with some justification, that in being directed to look at how Perker gazes, the reader’s eye becomes redirected in such a manner as to be able to observe both Pickwick and Perker and to register the type of look; or, to put this another way, to take note of the rhetoric of the gaze on this occasion. That this is made possible can be seen through the agency of the narrative eye, which sheds a light on—thereby changing the direction of narrative illumination—a specific location in the representation as a whole. Within the apparently simple scene a structural displacement occurs. Illustration provides illumination not only of itself but also of how illustration illustrates and illuminates, the temporal difference by which reading and seeing the phenomenal reality thereby being made visible. This difference-within-vision echoes that relay named iterability that we have already had occasion to view in the verbal exchange.

Briefly in conclusion of this section of the introduction to the second part of my title: Pickwick’s Vision. Much about this may be said to have come into focus already. I wish to pause over its structure a little more, however, before proceeding. Note that the possessive in the phrase is a double genitive. It articulates the structure of the expression even as it displaces from within univocal meaning and, with that, any single perspective. Both objective and subjective, it announces and identifies both the vision of the world of Pickwick, the novel and the trope of vision with which so much of the novel is interested in offering as examples of vision at work. The world of Pickwick, then: how one comes to see that world, how its characters see, or believe they see—themselves, their friends, and those all around them—and how seeing is always prone to distortions in its involvement with narrative apprehension.
Another double genitive: the difference by which vision is enabled, or by which a vision comes to appear, and the difference to any thinking of the past that the idea of vision makes. *The Old Story, with a Difference:* Pickwick’s Vision opens to the reader particular views of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club,* to the visions and sights it stages. The perspectives and views offered here are of course those that the novel already anticipates with a difference, and to which my reading is therefore merely a response. What comes to be seen is that Pickwick, a rhizomic excess not easily containable by critical commentary, intervenes in, ruptures, and remakes the narrative mediation of a tripartite and heterogeneous identity through the projection of successive vignettes and stereotypes. The facets of the identity and the modes of its becoming thus envisioned involve the English middle classes, a particular sense or manifestation of Englishness and, with that, the identity we now refer to with hindsight as “Victorian.” How it achieves this, and how the novel may be read as communicating its singularity with regard to the vision it produces, is what is to be explored. As if it were some strange kaleidoscopic optical device, Pickwick may be said to illuminate through sharp and often satirical juxtaposition a few of the ways in which those heterogeneous middle classes we call the Victorians saw themselves, and how they believed they saw themselves becoming different in distinction from previous generations through their experience of events and occasions still haunted by the traces and structures of earlier cultural practices and beliefs.

In order to pursue this explication, my reading engages with those narrative codes of the novel already anticipated in my title, and illustrated above. Particularly, what is of concern throughout *The Old Story, with a Difference* is what I take to be an early nineteenth-century concern, perhaps even an obsession: how does one view the past? How does one perceive the relationship between the after-time of narrative and the materiality of history, the traces of which become rematerialized through the phantasmic view afforded by the narrative? What might be the roles of memory or feeling, phenomenological perception and introspection in the translation between the events or facts of the past and verbal or visual anamnesis in its manifestation as storytelling? The emphasis on the visual throughout my introduction is not chosen carelessly, as should now be plain. As I have argued already and will continue to show in detail, such figures are central to Pickwick’s modes of production. Take, for example, two figures having to do with visualization and graphic iterability, stereo-
typing and the vignette, both of which in this double relation announce those concerns that mobilize my title. Moving our understanding of these terms beyond the purely technical, it will be argued that the novel’s embedded tales (which will be considered in my final chapter) are vignettes in a very particular, if idiomatic manner. Serving as “illustrations,” via which the connection between narrative and visualization becomes foregrounded, as with the more conventionally understood vignette, the tales appear for the most part at the ends of chapters. Dickens’ use of the tales partakes of both senses of vignette, the printed ornamental design and the photograph. In doing so, it causes through narration and the personal memory of the past on which that narration relies the momentary visualization of that past. Such an act of envisioning is double, because the narrative produces its image both intra- and extradiegetically—for the characters in Pickwick to whom the tale is being told, and to the readers of Pickwick. Through processes of cultural stereotyping Dickens causes us to “see” the anachronistic being of particular characters, including Samuel Pickwick, and thus to see ourselves in our perception of our differences from them. The stereotype and vignette may serve as the vehicles for satire and parody, and with that the caricatured delineation of particular facets of Englishness, but in these modes, sentiment and affection as the articulations of memory—and the images so encouraged—are also at work. What occurs perhaps is the possibility that the reader might come to envision the other within oneself, or otherwise to see oneself in the mind’s eye as the same, though with a difference.

It should be remarked, however, that, in considering the projection of English cultural identities in the early part of the nineteenth century it is not that Pickwick shows its readers to themselves directly. The novel is not a mirror or simple representation of its times; at least, it is neither solely nor simply that. Rather, if the reader comes to see oneself, partially or at all, it is as through a glass darkly, to echo Carlyle’s own distortion of Corinthians (1991, 84). Carlyle’s ruined citation, taken as one of the epigraphs to this chapter, itself belongs to an attempt to address the problem of reading, narrating, and deciphering the past and the present moment of inscribed reflection in relation to whatever is taken to be the past, as this comes to be apprehended through the motif of vision. And it is important to understand that the double question of perception and perspective, whether one sees empirically or in the mind’s eye, is bound up closely with the comic structures of The Pickwick Papers. Distortion of vision—performatively doubled in Carlyle’s “pastoral” reinvention—gives access to comic perspectives, which, by their modality, acknowledge (as I have observed) the difference
between, and therefore the visible forms of, one age and another. This in turn makes and marks as wide a space, as vast a difference as possible, to paraphrase the words of Letitia Elizabeth Landon. What comic, often satiric comparative critique brings into focus is that every difference, on which the comic effect of initial resemblance relies, in differing formally produces its own image through unlikeness rather than similarity, to invoke George Eliot’s aphoristic apprehension, given above (1990, 232).

IV. THE REPRESENTATION AND RHETORIC OF BECOMING

Already implicit in what has been said so far is the fact that however one speaks of a historical moment what is at stake always involves a double question: of narration and representation, and the continuous movement therein between the verbal and the visual. One writes, delineates an event, a series of events, a period of time, and one does so in response to the reception of so much white noise, so many garbled signals, all being transmitted from some threshold that is the imagined projection of our perception. In writing so as to tune out particular frequencies while tuning in to others, one reads—if by reading it can be taken to mean that a number of signals, fragments of otherwise irreparably lost wavelengths, are gathered into some meaningful pattern, however much one might believe that one is simply reporting or recording, or however minimally one strives to interpret the information in question. The writer who is also a reader, and a reader not only of those fragments but also of what he or she writes in order to project an image of the historical moment, constructs an image, however fractured or ruptured. The image of representation that comes to be projected and enacted is the result of piecing together many smaller images, representations, and details ripped from the time of their previous inscriptions, and subsequently transmitted across time. What one reads, and the traces that one translates in the act of writing, thus presents itself in any analysis already mired in layer upon layer of archival reading and writing. Playing on the editorial fiction, the archivist who orders those documents referred to in the title of the novel as *posthumous*, Dickens deterritorializes any authority in the very act of narration. Thus *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* allows us to apprehend the textual lines of flight, its constellated interanimations of discourses and tropes, and its rhizomic field of forces, all of which come together in the production of re-presentation, of vision as revision.
What does take place therefore in any manifestation of textual becoming is inescapably a “rhetorical inquiry,” to employ Regenia Gagnier’s phrase; this inquiry in turn is comprehended as “the analysis of a particular set of circumstances, the judgements made thereof, and the persuasion to accept the judgement and its appropriate action, and it is centrally concerned with value” (1991, 4). Thus, in directing you to what cannot help but be a highly selective number of events, documents, or practices (whether material or discursive), I am both making a judgement and inviting you to accept that judgement, much like “Boz,” the fictional and therefore phantasmic, apparitional “editor” of *Pickwick*. And even while I remark that all such practices are provisional, marked by chance, it is also doubtless that I am, to a degree, imbuing a chance concatenation of disparate elements, the signs of which remain available and communicate in some manner today, with both significance and meaning. There are both forensic and deliberative processes at work in the rhetorical inquiry, and these take place “in the elaboration of a nonreductionist understanding of cultures,” as Gagnier has it (1991, 6).

Thus the “past,” “history,” “events,” all are names for what Gagnier calls “a particular set of circumstances.” Or, to put this another way, such names provide provisional rather than fixed labels for a network or, again, a constellation of relations that are profoundly textual in their interconnectedness. The literary is always this weaving and unweaving of “a particular set of circumstances,” whether those circumstances or events are wholly imagined or “based on historical events” and subsequently fictionalized and revised; the literary is always *just this* mesh of circumstances and their becoming visible. These are textual inasmuch as we do not read “moments” or “events” in isolation from one another. And they are textual, moreover, inasmuch as what we do when we think we read is both forensic and determinative, it is analytical and therefore caught up in a process of translation, as well as one of reception. The “past,” so called, has in fact already undergone a translation effect, as I have remarked; for it is never recuperable as such, as others experienced it, and, it has to be said, as every one of those others experienced it differently. What takes place is the impossibility of witnessing as its only possibility, as the reader is confronted with an experience of the aporetic. Dickens offers an acute and ironic focus on the encounter with the undecidable in the prosopopoeic yet invisible experience of Boz. When one considers the effect of *Pickwick’s* so-called editor on the reader, as I do in chapter 3, there are occasions when both frustration and amusement are engendered. On several occasions Boz remarks that knowledge is undecidable, that no authoritative commentary
can be made on the basis of the textual evidence, which is supposed to stand in for, and to supplement, the material, historical event. Beyond the frustration of the reader and the comedy at both the reader’s and the narrated subject’s expense, there may come to be seen, and so read, an indirect commentary on the ethical problem bearing witness to what cannot be experienced as such. Through this performative re-presentation of the aporia of reading, and envisioning, of the past, Boz reproduces and so reiterates for the reader’s experience the editorial or archival experience. And this is produced, do not forget, with a difference, thereby attesting to the differential structure that simultaneously opens to view the traces of the past in the act of representation while calling to mind the particular set of circumstances as a rhetorical moment of becoming.

V. Deciphering and Self-Reading

Clearly from all that I have said there can be no doubt that no work of literature is produced in a vacuum. No text arrives without the signs of its histories, its cultures, its ideologies. This is well known. However, this being the case, there is also no direct one-to-one correlation, and neither is the cultural relationship of text and context static. A text will bear the signs of being overdetermined by many other historical and cultural moments (see, for example, my discussion of the phrase “diminishing glass,” as found in Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers*). To recall again one of my epigraphs, Thomas Carlyle admits as much when he observes the following: “To combine any picture of these University, and subsequent, years; much more, to decipher therein any illustrative primordial elements of the Clothes-philosophy, becomes such a problem as the reader may imagine. So much we can see; darkly, as through the foliage of some wavering thicket” (emphasis added). The italics illustrate telegraphically and, as it were, in an encrypted fashion the intimate relation between verbal and visual codes. Carlyle’s consideration of reconstructing a past in *Sartor Resartus* presents us with the problem of writing and reading historical events in narrative form and the problems attendant on the production of a vision of that past, in a nutshell. Historically, it might be said, with one eye on the past and the other on the present, all we can see is that, in attempting to produce a representation in the present that is clear, we see that we cannot see that well. Thus, Carlyle is happy to inform us, we read ourselves reading our own historical myopia, and without a very clear view of how to proceed. Yet if, as I argue, Dickens’ text offers a moment of self-reading of particular middle-class English iden-
tities, as these, in turn, come into an awareness of themselves in the first third of the nineteenth century, we may begin to see a strategy for proceeding in the singular vision of self-reading.

Self-reading is more than simply self-representation, although it may, on an initial glance, bear similarities to and even begin from a process of reflection as identification. Self-reading is, it might be said, the process of a deconstructive opening from within self-representation, in which an other reading begins, an other reading and a reading of the other; in short, an act of reading in excess of the reflection situated in self-representation. In such a mode of perception that is merely reflective the reader may view oneself as “an agent for whom perception is a holding onto things . . . and thus a means of maintaining oneself in the world” (Vasseleu 1998, 66). Such envisioning is comforting: for if I believe I see similarity, or even sameness, in those who, though no longer alive, share in the past my cultural identity, and therefore see in myself the possibility of a pure repetition or continuation of that identity, I apprehend the future possibility that after my death there will be others just like me. However, self-reading, which relies on a certain obliquity of vision, extends and overflows reflective representation. For, while perception of partial resemblance is necessary there is within that “contiguous touching” (Vasseleu 1998, 66) a discontinuity. The image I envision of the other is a representation, a presentation, which, in being marked visibly by difference, is apprehended as the same and yet not the same. In perceiving this, self-reading operates in—and as—a “mode of sensibility, which, in maintaining itself, parts company” (Vasseleu 1998, 66) from the intangible-visible, one’s memory of the other and the past. With that other reading there is the chance—though never more than this—of perceiving an other vision, and with it a glimpse of the other. While self-representation may be critical or, at least, a critique of social and historical self, such a critical stance can still be generated from the same ideological or philosophical positions as the identity being held up for critique and hence produce or illuminate blind spots that are, themselves, the signs of a particular text’s historicity. Thus the language of criticism and the object of the critique circulate within the same economy of identity. Self-reading interrupts and moves beyond the merely critical; at least, in principle, this is what it should do. In this movement I would argue that implicit representation of the self as marked by difference is the sign of an inauguration of modernity; and modernity’s coming into being is inaugurated, since the eighteenth century at least, by “the passage to self-representation,” both ontologically and philosophically (Colebrook 1999, 1).
However, the idiosyncrasy, the singularity of *Pickwick*’s modernity is that it re-marks its singularly “modern” condition through an archival becoming that, like Benjamin’s Angel of History, moves forward while facing backward, bearing the traces of remembrance and a condition of being haunted, as I shall explore in the final chapter. Through often satirical or parodic gestures and visions of cultural self-reading, *Pickwick* moves beyond the merely critical, unveiling otherwise “invisible” cultural and ideological habit and convention. It achieves this through its constant exploration of the comedic possibilities of representation, and the crisis within the visible to which comedy gives us access. In so doing, it brings the immaterial motion of such habits to light in their material manifestations as so many structures or cultural institutions given intense scrutiny, put under the magnifying lens of the critical microscope or pen. It is through the satirical and parodic, the farcical and lampooned, that we have the chance—though, again, never more than this—of coming to see (in both senses) that “there can be no knowledge of things in themselves. To be known or experienced a thing must be other than the knower; it must be *given* to the knower. As *known*, things are only as they are re-presented to a subject” (Colebrook 1999, 2). Yet when the mediating subject is the editor, Boz; and when that editor repeatedly affirms undecidability in the face of the limits of the knowledge being presented and represented; then representation itself, the image, envisioning, etc.—all are the visible signs of what Claire Colebrook calls the “recognition of knowledge’s position, limit, *point of view* and, most importantly, its *separation*” by which modernity comes into being (Colebrook 1999, 2; first emphasis mine). Such processes of separation, along with instances of discontinuity within representation, supplementarity, and difference, are readable as necessary facets in the work of self-reading. They produce, and are traced in, a double vision that is peculiar to the novel, as we shall have occasion to see from several perspectives. Through its various types of vision, and its invitations to its reader to consider *how we see*, while coming to see that we only see in a mediated and indirect manner, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* becomes available to the good reader as offering a timely, and yet untimely, anachronistic and haunting reminder of the importance of a certain vigilance having to do with memory, bearing witness, and maintaining the signs of the past, while looking to that which is to come.
The Old Story . . .
with a Difference

The time for reflection is also a chance for turning back on the very conditions of reflection, in all senses of that word, as if with the help of a new optical device one could finally see sight, could not only view the natural landscape, the city, the bridge, and the abyss, but could “view” viewing. . . . Then the time of reflection is also another time; it is heterogeneous to what it reflects . . .


And yet the more I think about Dickens, the less I think that “narrative,” in the ordinary sense, is a good way of describing his mode. The word that insistently suggests itself is “presentation.” For there is an unusual mobility in this narrator. He moves from place to place and from the point of view of one character after another, with much more diversity than any other novelists of his time . . . he can establish at a break a new mode. There is nothing of the uniformity of narrative of the classic realist text. And there is something else which I don’t know if we have the terms for . . . a crucial variable in the question of realist fiction . . . an element of Dickens’s writing . . . is subjunctive, which is clearly “what if” or “would that” or “let us suppose that.” In other words, he introduces a perspective which is not socially or politically available. It is a hypothesis of a perspective, a feeling, a force, which he knows not to be in the existing balance of forces that was there to be observed.

—Raymond Williams, Writing in Society (1983)

And when it is accomplished—behold!—all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest.

—Joseph Conrad, “Preface,” The Nigger of the “Narcissus” (1897)
I. PRONOUNCING PARALLAX

In focusing throughout this study on the odd, insistent recurrence of figures of sight, vision, visualization, and so on in Pickwick, I have situated a series of questions that arise in part from a struggle with determination similar to that expressed by Raymond Williams in the second of my three epigraphs (1983, 160–61), fragments of which have already surfaced in previous chapters. Though already asked, and in part answered, they should now be restated. Why do these motifs, figures, metaphors, and forms of seeing occur and recur, and why do they keep coming and going, taking place in that now of the novel’s publication in the 1830s? What, if anything, have the various figures of the visible to do with the act of narration, and, specifically, narration—and by extension the novel—as it undergoes transformation in the early nineteenth century as a result of external forces affecting modes of literary production? What do the visual and visible, sight and observation have to do with that strange notion of “history,” or with historical event, date, or fact, especially in the very singular example of a text that might best be described as articulating “historicity without history—historicity without reference to actual occurrences but only exposure of its field” (Fenves 1993, 76)? What is the novel’s relationship both to its present and its pasts, to the histories of the culture from which it arrives, and how? Finally, a question that, though not asked, is implicit in the conclusion of the last chapter: if, like Sam Weller, we only have eyes, albeit a pair, how can we “see” and so bear witness to that which is no longer available to our view, without the aid of some technology? The answer to this last question is of course that we cannot, nor do we ever, simply see. As The Pickwick Papers makes blindingly obvious, there is no sight without either the possibility of interpretive interruption, translative interference, or some form of prosthesis, most simply understood as the act of interpretation or translation itself. Any sight claiming unmediated veracity is to be distrusted if only because there is no single perspective, as all the examples of eyes watching other eyes watching others inform us.

Though he struggles to find the right words and admits as much in a vulnerable critical gesture of reflective self-reading, Raymond Williams perceives the “problem” of Dickens in the epigraph above in a way that is markedly more clear-sighted than many subsequent materialist or historicist readers of Dickens. Unlike those who forget that the time of reflection is heterogeneous to what is reflected and so, perhaps, see only a strange reflection of themselves that they misperceive as the figure in (or of) the Dickensian
text, Williams apprehends in his grasping after the proper language the opening of a temporal and spatial network composed and discomposed by multifarious lines of sight. The motions within this weave produce a performative presentation, a visionary staging rather than a merely constative narrative in Dickens in general, but arguably particularly in *Pickwick*. The “subjunctive” perspective that finds its appearance most obviously in those hypothetical spectators and observers but also in the redirection of the reader’s gaze toward another line of sight in any given scene opens the point of view from within itself to the perspective of the other.

This visionary structure is formulated by Kant in “Dreams of a Visionary Explained by Dreams of Metaphysics.” “Formally,” Kant reflects, “I viewed human common sense only from the standpoint of my own; now,” he continues, in language that admits of the temporal disjunction inherent in the act of seeing oneself seeing,

> I put myself into the position of another’s reason outside of myself, and observe my judgements, together with their most secret causes, from the point of view of others. It is true that the comparison of both observations results in pronounced parallaxes, but it is the only means of preventing the optical delusion, and of putting the concept of the power of knowledge in human nature into its true place. (Kant 1993, 15)

While not suggesting that Dickens had any knowledge of Kant, nonetheless when taking *Pickwick* together with the Kantian text, the visual structures of the former come to be refocused in a particularly sharp manner by the insights of the latter. That Dickensian subjunctive, the *what if*, echoes the Kantian *as if* (*als ob*), whereby through the spectral agency of analogy the imagination is vouchsafed a vision otherwise unavailable. In *Pickwick’s* vision the spatial displacements and temporal disjunctions that inform the structure of envisioning only operate through the pronounced “parallax” of Boz’s mediation. Distortion and doubling take place, but do so as the means whereby optical delusion is prevented in the interests of presenting to the reader’s view the text’s historicity as that optical device for giving access to self-reading from the point of view of others. *Pickwick* sees sight and thus opens the reader’s eyes not only to the sight of the recently passed, rapidly receding past, but also to the matter of how one might view that past: with one eye for sentiment and another, which in glancing through the temporal astigmatism of cynicism, parody, and satire allows for the possibility of reflecting upon one’s own identity, occasionally looking to the future also. As Lindsay Smith has argued, “vision is imaginatively powerful;
it enables forms of imaginative contemplation, the articulation of memory, and speculative projection. Vision allows us to occupy other times and spaces.” In foregrounding repeatedly the implicitly temporal and historical gap at work in “binocular dissimilarity” rather than resolving “two images into one” (Smith 1995, 4) Boz puts into play those forms of double vision we have sought to illustrate and illuminate. In coming to see this, we may also suggest provisionally that it is as if in the febrile oscillations that the editor machine sets in motion, Pickwick’s vision mediates a broader cultural “fascination with perceptual aberration” and the observable obsession in nineteenth-century visual theory across the discourses of aesthetics, psychology, and science with “vision gone awry” (Smith 1995, 5).

The problem of vision is not only historical or cultural, though. When mediated by the literary text, it admits also in the perception of “aberrations” of translation its uncontrollable effects produced by the anachrony of the trace. Boz admits as much in a dialogue between Mr Pickwick and Mr Perker: “‘it’s the old story I suppose?’ ‘With a difference, my dear Sir; with a difference,’ rejoined Perker, deliberately folding up the paper and putting it in his pocket again” (PP 624; once more a scene of eyes, gazes, Mr Perker being observed “glancing eagerly at Mr Pickwick out of the corners of his eyes”; a scene also of narrative, reading, and writing). Through the limits of the eyewitness and the supplementary necessity and failure or untrustworthiness of narrative as belated envisioning, Sam’s affirmation of a technology to come to which we were witnesses at the end of the last chapter acknowledges indirectly and by a kind of analogical apperception the conditions by which we see the past, if we see it at all. Being able to see the past at all is to tell the old story with a difference, and to acknowledge the hypothesis of a perspective—as if one could see. This is the very condition by which any perception of historicity is possible as, in its own way, the title of The Pickwick Papers gives us to understand. We come to see that the novel for Boz is another form of tele-technology. It produces for the reader visions no longer available to the naked eye. As the diminishing glass or compound microscope finds a world in solution, so too does Boz through Pickwick’s vision. The vignettes of the embedded narratives demonstrate this economically. As they project themselves into the foreground and the present moment of the narrative, thereby suspending the present and presence through the revenance of the traces of the past, so we witness the event and, simultaneously, we are in the experience. Writing, as a form of tele-technology or telecommunication that enables the transition from the invisible to the visible, brings about the transition from empirical absence to virtual, specular, and spectral presence.
In an odd fashion the figure of the patent double million magnifying gas microscope allows us to see this, as should now be clear. It fictionalizes Sam’s account, as the sign of a certain perjury, falsifying as it does avowal and testimony. In this, the ghostly revenant of technology-to-come affirms in the most indirect manner possible the work of storytelling, in the double sense of both narrating and lying. All writing is thus unveiled as a fiction, a fiction concerning the projection of the visualization of the impossible; Pickwick pursues this thread, weaving itself endlessly between the textual and visual image. As Peter Schwenger has it of narrative, there is a constant “switching between verbal and imagistic codes,” and readers must shuttle between verbal and visual systems (1999, 47, 48). While Schwenger is speaking of the act of reading in general, and, implicitly, the concomitant act of writing that produces what he calls a phantasmic “effect of existence” (49), Pickwick’s specific and singular textual loom is one that weaves in a process of constant loss and gain, two distinct sign systems as we have already affirmed, comprising what is seen and what is written. Both announce the instability of perception so that, to cite Schwenger once more, “in a perceptual hide and seek we lose the word to find the image, lose the image in the word. Reading [and writing also, in the example of Dickens with which we are interested], it seems, proceeds in rhythms, risings and fallings and alterations of perceptions” (1999, 59–60).

Writing is a fiction, a tele-technological medium of hypothetical perspectives and analogical visualization. Through its structural relationship to absence (of a being, of beings, of the past), it announces itself as a vehicle of translation that is not only spatial but also inescapably, indelibly temporal. Writing is, here and there, then and now—and now—but never as an absolute present or presence. It is thus always a reminder of its own supplementary status. If from a certain perspective this is well known for some critics, it seems necessary that we remind ourselves of the point and not lose sight of its significance on the premise or unjustifiable excuse that such critical ideas have had their day, that they are past, in the past, where they should remain and not resurface. Despite the critical desire to forget (itself a kind of performative gesture), we have to remember and so to see clearly that writing is both survival and death. Writing thus operates through a very specific kind of fiction, that of analogical envisioning caught in the phrase as if: as if, for example, we could see or visit, or have returned to us, the 1820s; as if Mr Pickwick and his friends were, if not alive, then having the capacity at least of returning briefly as ghostly illuminations through the spirit-medium of the “editor effect” or editorial
projection machine. As Jacques Derrida has remarked, “the *as if*, the fiction, the *quasi*-, these are what protect us from the real event of death itself, if such a thing exists” (Derrida 1996b, 217). Boz’s acknowledgment of this condition of writing as visionary tele-technology is there from the title onward, even as that title reminds us that we are always in a relationship to the written word akin to, analogous with, a motion of becoming visible. At the same time, however, the fiction of the *as if* that “protects” us is double. For it reminds us that we are implicated in this double movement—of becoming visible as the anticipated trace of becoming posthumous. Here, we might suggest, is one of the many signs of *The Pickwick Papers*’ historicity and the historicity of its vision, in its acknowledgment of the graphic condition of our being’s temporality. The modernity of *The Pickwick Papers*, that modernity we now name Victorian, is signalled in its acknowledgment of the materiality and temporality of being. If we receive the novel at all, we receive it not simply as a collection of comic misadventures, but also as a heterogeneous collection of *memento mori*. In order to see this, let us turn to one last moment of vision at the heart of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*.

II. The Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and to Come

At the structural center of *The Posthumous Papers* is chapter 28 (there are 56 chapters). This is “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* 360–90). That the title draws our attention to customs and degenerate times implies that the old story is very much transformed by temporal difference. We should also note that the chapter is a scene of both Christmas and marriage celebration, suggestive of an implicit double vision, having to do with remembrance of things past on the one hand and visions of life to come on the other. Though not the only tale concerned with Christmas in *Pickwick*, this particular presentation of the season is the most significant. As with the case of “The Story of the Bagman’s Uncle” and many, if not all, of the revenant tales of *Pickwick* that “enact a work of remembrance, particularly of the dead” (Bowen 2000, 76), the work of writing is revealed once more as a tele-technology, a new optical device, which brings before our eyes many haunting figures and memories otherwise unavailable and
invisible so that we are translated, coming to inhabit two locations simultaneously.

In this chapter is “The Story of the Goblins who stole a Sexton” (*PP* 380–90). To recall the words of John Bowen, if *Pickwick* is “a fictional economy” structured by “impulse, excess, and misdirection,” then chapter 28 is a concentrated and excessively singular example of this fictional economy. The Christmas chapter is marked by references to sight, to eyes, and to vision as well, even as it plays with and on the by-now-familiar tropes of *Pickwick*. Verbal misunderstanding announces the failure of communication (*PP* 365; “what I mean is . . .”). Equivocation concerning perception and its subsequent narrative approximation mocks picturesque convention: “grey twilight (slate-coloured is a better term)” (*PP* 366). Zeugma returns once more: “All the girls were in tears and white muslin” (*PP* 369). There are also instances of temporal narrative iterability, when on one occasion Boz recalls that “they had travelled over nearly the same ground on a previous occasion” (*PP* 364; emphasis added) and on another Wardle says of Joe, *yet again*, “damn that boy, he's gone to sleep” (*PP* 370). Before “The Story of the Goblins” Sam tells a tale (*PP* 375), and the reader is presented the text of a song, “A Christmas Carol” (*PP* 378–79), the graphic appearance of which announces the disjunction between what is seen and what is heard. The double moment of the song highlights the different times of experience and event that *Pickwick* has been at pains to highlight elsewhere.

The various linguistic disruptions that call the reader’s attention to problems of perception, literal or metaphorical, aside, the interpolated tale of the Goblins is not exempt from visual figures. The tale, concerning the alleged abduction of Gabriel Grub, the sexton of the title, anticipates Dickens’ *Christmas Carol* in certain respects, not least in the visions that appear to Grub at the command of the Goblin King, who pokes Gabriel in the eye (*PP* 386–89). Why mention this gesture? It seems as if the Goblin King is seeking to draw Grub’s attention to his own moral myopia and blinding self-interest in this manner. “[B]eing spirits,” the goblins “leave no visible impression” (*PP* 389). The figure “he saw” is reiterated five times in a single paragraph (*PP* 388–89) as commentary on Grub’s role as spectator and witness to the phantasmic visions of the work, the joys, and the suffering of humanity. The spectral nature of the scenes alerts the reader to the fact that Grub is both witness to the experience and in the experience itself, to recall from chapter 2 Rosalind Krauss’ discussion of the uncanny effect on the subject of the zoetrope. At the same time, however, Grub’s subject position is also that implicitly of the reader of *The Pickwick*
Papers. Moving on, Grub’s subsequent abduction is “not wanting some very credible witnesses who had seen him whisked through the air on the back of a chestnut horse blind of one eye . . . ” (PP 389; emphasis added). Yet despite all this, the fact that the historical moment of the story has long since receded and that this is yet one more retelling, it is remarked that “in the course of time it began to be received as a matter of history, in which form it has continued down to this very day” (PP 390). Sentiment, as subjective awareness, feeling, or impression, can, in the form of narration, take on the force of historical truth. However, it is not individual sentiment that enacts the transformation of the narrative. Rather, there is a collective sentiment, given expression as the cultural collective memory of the story.

It is as if the chapter is constructed as both a series of narrative frames embedded within one another and as an endless temporal loop of images. It is as if narrative aspired to the condition of phantom zoetrope, figuring in itself an impossible and excessive structure replaying over and over an excessive phantasmagoria of tropes and images, in an act of hospitality and remembrance. Each structure, each projection, invites us to see. Yet as a preface to the scenes of celebration, we read the following passage:

We write these words now, many miles distant from the spot on which, year after year, we met on that day, a merry and joyous circle. Many of the hearts that throbbed so gaily then, have ceased to beat; many of the looks that shone so brightly then, have ceased to glow; the hands we grasped, have grown cold; the eyes we sought, have hid their lustre in the grave; yet the old house, the room, the merry voices and smiling faces, the jest, the laugh, the most minute and trivial circumstance connected with those happy meetings, crowd upon our mind at each recurrence of the season, as if the last assemblage had been but yesterday. (PP 359; emphasis added)

The initial shift to present tense in the opening clause of the sentence accompanies a reflective acknowledgment of the act of writing. In a constant flux between past and present, “in which every perception is already memory” (Bergson 1999, 150), we move, “we” shuttle, between loss and gain, absence and the numerous phantom presences that “crowd upon our mind” with every temporal reiteration. The motion is also caught in both the shift from now to then and then, in its motion from looks to eyes to faces, and in the circular and temporal movements of the annual cycle and the recurrence of gathering. (One might also catch in the more obscure echoes of circumstance the motion of surrounding that encircles and gathers
together the fragmented images in a gesture of connection.) The good reader will note the syllepsistic doubling in the first sentence. The temporal recirculation of year after year finds itself doubled in the image of the merry and joyous circle, which figure exceeds its own image of the gathering of friends to announce the refolding of time past and time future in the constant slippage of the otherwise invisible time present briefly apprehended in that figure we. Our perception, our memory—which is to say not only the memory that might be ours but also the memory of ourselves—finds itself interwoven into that “multitude of remembered elements” (Bergson 1999, 150) that the citation performs as well as observes, through the inaugural, self-reflexive affirmation that we write these words now. Attention to the present yet ephemeral moment of the graphic mark as trace admits even that “our consciousness of the present is already memory” (151).

The passage thus proceeds as the inscription of visionary memory, through which, though “we” remember now, “we” are projected back to the memory of “our presence” in that company. It is not only as if the scenes had occurred, but also as if we were part of the “assemblage”—which in effect we become, in being written into the phantasy scenario. There is thus produced an overlaying of supposedly discrete times in the trope and motion of circularity. Through the vision of assemblage a composition of eyes, faces, hands, voices, looks, and laughter becomes visible as itself an assemblage of momentary visions. While the first appearance of Mr Pickwick in the novel’s opening chapter had been the occasion of that tableau vivant, designed to promote the illusion of Mr Pickwick as if he were alive, here a singular image of multiple moments comes into focus through its unfixed temporal motion. Writing’s spectral projection, with its power to produce visions, moves in several directions at once, to produce a sight more real than any empirical evidence could suggest. The spirit of the past is maintained here, through the sentiment of awareness and feeling, rather than any crass sentimentality. And this is so because, for this brief, ever-present epoch, structured through tense and pronoun, we “appear” to ourselves, as we share, we are interpellated in a community of death. For this is not only a Christmas past, it is also the spirit of every Christmas to come. In the act of writing the novel comes to confront its own imaginary. At the abyssal heart of the novel, memory, vision, and the materiality of the letter, given a phantasmic subjectivity through the editorial projection of we, come together in a performative projection, an “oratorical visualization” (de Bolla 1989, 292).

In this instant, therefore, Pickwick does not allow for the reading of
Christmas as a “sentimental utopia,” as John Bowen has argued (2000, 80). Such an act of memory, which is also an act of mourning, as the passage makes clear with its references to those who are dead, demands that we keep alive an ethical commitment to bearing witness, in excess of any mere historical record. Writing relies on the very phantoms that it conjures, in the articulation of what Alessia Ricciardi describes (with reference to the films of Pier Paolo Passolini) as the “mournful imagination” of a writer “determined to offer hospitality to an array of . . . spectralized subjects.” This suggests in turn in this particular instance a “politics of the hospitality to the Other. . . . Even melancholia is a form of hospitality to a fundamental Otherness” (Ricciardi 2003, 126). Why should such structures of visualization appear significant? What can the spectral vision tell us of history and the past that empirical evidence and textual representation confined by mimetic verisimilitude cannot? In excess of the pragmatic or empirical demands and limits of fiction writing and the guilty social conscience, by which such writing would appear to be motivated in the face of its own inability to do anything other than look, Boz’s text relies on, and risks, the resonance of a phenomenology of sentiment in its hospitality. For, in being open to the spectacle of the phantom other, it opens the possibility for envisioning what is to come. Through his “phantasmagorical vision of culture” (Ricciardi 2003, 128), Boz offers a way out of a certain historical impasse by which fiction, the novel, narrative might otherwise be bound. As the memory of Christmas suggests, a mournful reverie is perhaps the most appropriate mode, in this example at least, by which the writer may be haunted by history, and by which writing may produce visions to which future readers may themselves bear witness. Haunted by the traces of others, Boz responds by producing his own trace. In projecting visions of the past in which the ghosts of the “present” announced through the plural pronoun return to the scene of the past from its future, Boz disappears into a trace available “if not for everyone, at least for others” (Derrida 2005, 24). Attestation thus becomes, or is traced by, a gesture of confession, in this instance of one’s own temporality and finitude. Boz’s act of speaking of and to the other, in bearing witness to what cannot be witnessed except through the visionary and analogical indirection of language, thus betrays the other “by the fact that it is already mediated in . . . a general language which is not a unique signature” (Derrida 2005, 24). But it does so through the inevitable revenance of the trace that in its historicity makes Pickwick’s vision of past times possible.

From this understanding, it might be said that *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* thus arrives as an encrypted and interiorized vision of
many of the traces of English culture. The visualization of the Christmas gathering with its interpolated tales and other heterogeneous elements serves not so much to project a specifically Christian, redemptive image as to attest to the becoming posthumous of one particular manifestation of national culture and identity, in which the Anglo-Christian trace is to be read as one amongst many. Phantasmic visualization, and with that the poetics of the as if that enables the projection of the image, allows the alterity of the other to be glimpsed, while also making possible not a reflection but rather a metonymic or analogical identification. This can be seen and read at work in that performative, reflective figure of the most minute and trivial circumstance observed by Boz above, which enables the possibility of connection. It does so because the circum- of circumstance announces and thus re-marks not only the recirculation of cyclical reengeance but also the cut, the mark of the trace that announces the historicity and singularity of the material circumstance that can never return as it was. Thus the editor and translation effects of which we have spoken risk witness and betrayal in order to maintain the mediation of a binocular dissimilarity and distortion by which iterable communication has its chance. In this, The Posthumous Papers affirms literature’s responsibility to bear witness to those traces of the past that are, and remain, “as inaccessible as [they are] ineluctable” (Derrida 2001, 144). And literature’s power arrives—or has the merest chance of arriving, supposing it might be received—in that endless motion between the verbal and the visual, in what Derrida has called “imaginal transfiguration,” which is “from the very start fantastic or phantasmic: under certain conditions, of course, and this is the central problem of the pragmatic conditions of such efficacity; all history is at issue here” (2001, 151). In privileging the phantasmic over the empirical image, in exposing the instability of language in its generation of meaning, Dickens acknowledges the extent to which history is at issue, and demands that we feel responsible, that we feel accountable. In this chance, there might come, perhaps to the mind’s eye, or in the blink of an eye, the responsibility of mourning and memory in excess of and in response to any supposed control or mastery over the representation of events, whether of any present or any past.

III. INVENTING Pickwick

I return to one of my starting points. Like Samuel Pickwick I return to where I began—but, it is to be hoped, with a difference. It is a common-
place amongst critics of Dickens that *Pickwick* is readable as part imitation, part pastiche, of older literary magazines, collections of miscellanies, and their subject matter. There is nothing new in acknowledging this. What is significant in the manner of appearance of *The Pickwick Papers* is that it signals and belongs to a transformation in literary interests. As Kathryn Chittick has noted, “that Dickens first appeared in the pages not of a quarterly—he was never cultured enough even later for that—but of a monthly is a faithful reflection of a mid-century for which Dickens is sometimes glowingly given single-handed credit” (1990, 329). Yet I would aver that the extent to which Boz tells the old story with a difference remains to be considered fully, grounded as commentary on sources and influences has been for the most part on intertextual and formal analysis. Boz mocks or otherwise troubles the very forms and genres he employs, thereby signalling a distance from older modes of production, older narrative interests and structures, thereby announcing an instant of literary and cultural becoming.

One symptom of such invention readable as the signs of “becoming Victorian” or “becoming modern” is that self-conscious distanciation we have sought to address. The mode of becoming is registered in that presentation of which Raymond Williams hesitatingly speaks. It marks itself in its difference from its other and thus from its *pasts*. *The Pickwick Papers* is readable as performing for its reader a countersignature to the histories of both the text and the reader. This gesture wagers materially on similarity and difference, tradition and innovation. In this fashion a distance is inscribed, an unsuturable temporal gap opened, across which nevertheless pass the phantoms of the past, invented as shared, transmissible memories and visions. As *Pickwick* informs us, one of the ways in which this takes place is through a reading practice that aims at being subversive or ironic, thereby destabilizing meanings and identities that conventional wisdom has told us we should accept.

In order to see this more clearly, let us compare *Pickwick* with another novel that expresses the Romantic vision of the past and its attempted retrieval of the traces of history. While Ann Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* expresses an “impulse to retrieve the past . . . assisted by the conventions of the picturesque whereby a critical and creative human spectator discovers harmony” (Stabler 2002, 5), *Pickwick* counters such convention through the foregrounding of “discordant elements” in the field of vision and thus marks its distance from outmoded forms of cultural consensus. Such consensus relied on an implicit understanding of an “unspoken, but precise, set of social or cultural circumstances” (Stabler 2002, 5), which are
seen in *Pickwick* as no longer coherent and yet which persist in their return to mark the text—and, by implication the present moment of the reader. Furthermore, in contrast to the conventions of sentimental travel writing there is in *Pickwick* a repeated failure to observe “the eighteenth-century conventions . . . [involving] the encounter between two feeling individuals [engaged in] an exchange of intelligence, benevolence and civilised communication” (Stabler 2002, 5). Whether by “communication” we allude to discussion or anachronistic modes of transport, it is clear that for Boz and his readers the conventions no longer hold and are there only to be satirized and subverted.

The permanent parabasis of irony by which Boz communicates between the ruins of a past and the ghosts of the future also signals the pronounced parallax involved in seeing from differing points of view. It admits that the temporal space of the decade between the imagined events of *Pickwick* and their editorial re-presentation is porous, as are those spaces between the text and the subsequent times of its reading. Consequently, it has to be observed that something overflows the historical moment or context and any simple perception of it, doing so in an immaterial way. Arriving at another moment the excessive trace can cause a material effect in my reading that I cannot control, and which, furthermore, I cannot explain, even though I may believe that I see. As we have seen in the endless spectral circling of the circumstances of Christmas, the trace travels, but is never intact. As one of those remains of the old story that remains, it remains though never as itself; it thus remains to be read.3 “History” is at best, then, itself a permeable and problematic concept, and perhaps no longer even maintainable as a concept. The past transmits and continues to transmit signals that parasitize, inhabiting and haunting their host in a strange manner. Boz’s language and the images it conjures are we might say a swarm of phantoms. This is what *Pickwick*’s vision would have us see. In consequence, if I receive the strangeness of the text from another moment in time, if it arrives in an unforeseen manner despite institutions and conventions, this is because of a certain intensity, “the intensity,” I would like to suggest, “of border-crossing memory discourses” (Huysen 2003, 12).

This intensity, spoken of by Andreas Huysen, offers one model of what takes place in reading *Pickwick*’s vision. It identifies the somewhat spectral process in the experience of reading literature, whether from another decade or another century. It hints at how the literary intervenes in its own cultures, its own pasts—and indeed futures. The text remains, even as we read and receive it, only as the manifestation of some ghostly arrival. And this arrival is also a return, for what returns to us are those momentarily
constellated memories that have never been ours, but the images of which persist as they flash before us. As Aristotle understood, in “memory we have one kind of temporal perception that is oriented by what caused the affective picture . . . . Memory . . . constitutes . . . an awareness of pastness and past impressions” (Scott 1999, 126). If we receive such phantasms at all it is because the text refuses to remain buried as a discrete historical phenomenon, simply assignable or consignable as such. To put this differently, the spectral logic of narrative, with its differential transmission of the old stories and the visions they encourage through the force of difference, refuses to be assigned to dead letters or posthumous papers. As J. Hillis Miller has argued, certain texts “can’t easily fit . . . into history. The best works are other to their times” (2004b, 406). *The Pickwick Papers* is one such text.

Despite its canonical status *Pickwick* remains problematic because it announces its own temporal, historical otherness as well as its relation to every other. In doing so, it dispels any cultural illusion that literature is “a medium for instantaneous and continuous transmission that would postpone the cut in communications traffic” (Siegert 1999, 248–49) announced throughout *Pickwick*. And it does so furthermore before the conventions of what have become subsequently known as classic realism have had the chance to get under way. Contrary to the motions of classic realism that appear to guarantee consistency of perspective and overview, *Pickwick* proceeds by “intervals” that place “the subject in question” (Siegert 1999, 249). Dickens’ first novel thus stages an epochal suspension—that is to say, it announces nothing other than an engagement with the necessity of recognizing an inescapable encounter with fictionality, and with spectrality (Derrida 2005, 89). If it is available to our readings it is thus as other to its times and to every time. In what might be called its weak messianic hope, as envisioned through the temporal re-mark of Christmas, *Pickwick’s* vision appears to be that of “a text without end” (Siegert 1999, 249).

At the same time, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* also remarks itself as being haunted by times that are not its own. Its editorial intervention in that which is posthumous is a simultaneous act of remembering and forgetting, as Sylviane Agacinski avers, in that the very gesture of “conserving the traces aids in remembering and forgetting at the same time” (2003, 89). In its very writing, *Pickwick* issues a cautionary reminder about the materiality of the literary text: despite our best efforts to decode it the text remains other, and thus remains to be read, to come. But this remainder is nothing new. As other, it announces that which is to
come by folding back on the past, and enfolding the past into itself in a manner that is innovative. Like Boz, we have to live with and respond to the phantoms. We have to invent *Pickwick*, producing in this act of invention a vision—one among many—of differentiated, self-differentiating cultural identities in their becoming. Invention names here not the creation of something new, unexpected, radical. Rather, invention is that which allows for the possibility—but never more than this—of the coming of the other. This cannot be programmed or predicted as a reading. At most it might be taken as a gesture of opening our eyes, thereby letting the other come in (*invenire*). *Pickwick*’s vision might teach us that if we look carefully enough. And as that vision recalls, we can only prepare for such an invention and thus wager on the occurrence of this otherwise incalculable event by telling the old story, with a difference.
Notes to Introduction

1. Derrida’s coining is in part a strategic defense against the assumptions of getting to the bottom of a problem or inquiry, to speak colloquially, implicit in the idea of an archaeology. As Derrida’s comprehension of the archive demonstrates, this alternative figure, when opened to its own deconstruction, is radically abyssal.

2. I take these formulae from Paul de Man. See Rhetoric of Romanticism (1984, 262); The Resistance to Theory (1986, 51); Aesthetic Ideology (1996, 82, 90).

3. To speak of “poststructuralist cliché” is to engage in a kind of self-reflexive performative gesture; more plainly put, such a phrase is itself a cliché that proscribes further reading (or reading at all). Such a phrase is generated by what might be called an ontological desire: a will to determine and delimit an identity of critical reading that erases the differences between and singularity of certain critical praxes in the production of a homogeneous meaning, or at least an ipseity that in all truth has not existed. But then herein lies the problem. For what I have just said might be read as all too general and, therefore, subject to interpretation, yet again, as “poststructuralist cliché.” Someone therefore will have stopped reading. Certainly, they will not have seen that other things are, or could be, taking place; that, for example, there is a certain “brash” spirit behind the claims being made here (to recall the language of the series editor of the Victorian Critical Interventions Series). It must be enough for now to suggest, however brashly, that as soon as an ontology is assumed, there the reader, in falling into cliché or, more appropriately for this study, stereotype, stops reading—and therefore stops looking, stops seeing.

These comments are not simply a defense of or apologia for my critical practice. They are very much involved in an insistence implicit throughout The Old Story, with a Difference that certain modes of critical perception, however appropriate to other novels by Dickens, encounter difficulties and limits with Dickens’ first novel. This insistence remains implicit for the most part because it is not my aim to criticize other critical modes per se but to note that, with regard to ways of seeing, particularly ways in which we view the past, The Pickwick Papers has quite a lot to show us, and to show us differently.
4. Bearing in mind the definitions of these words, having to do with particular forms of printing and the repeatability of characteristics, I shall be drawing on both concepts at appropriate moments in this study.

5. The passage from which the epigraph is taken concerns Teufelsdöröch's university years, and is discussed below, in the body of the introduction.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1


2. On the literary and cultural interest in the "Cockney" as urban phenomenon in the 1820s and 1830s, see G. Dart, "The Cockney Moment (The Character of the Cockney in Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* and *Sketches by Boz")" (2003). The error, that Dickens was a Cockney, aside, the article provides a significant intervention in the historicization and cultural contextualization of Dickens' first novel. While one can become a Londoner, one cannot become a Cockney. To be a Cockney, one must be born within the sound of the bells of St Mary-le-Bow, one of the first churches to be built by Sir Christopher Wren, between 1670 and 1683, after the Great Fire of London of 1666. Dickens was born in Portsmouth.

3. Of course, whether *Pickwick* is a novel has been a matter of critical contention, as my third epigraph indicates (Schlicke 1999, 450). As Schlicke points out, A. E. Dyson's *The Inimitable Dickens* (1970) "silently refrains from discussing *Pickwick*" (450). Dyson's is not the only study, however, to omit Dickens' first novel, and were there space, it might be argued that the modernity of *Pickwick* as transformation—or perhaps deconstruction—of the ontology of the novel has not yet been properly received or read. I discuss certain notable omissions or occlusions and marginalizations below, but a summary remark is offered by Grahame Smith. In his *The Novel and Society: Defoe to George Eliot* (1984), Smith comments that *Pickwick* is insusceptible "to a reading in the general terms established by the classic modern theories of the novel" (179). John Bowen comments on the problems of *Pickwick's* form and identity for criticism, particularly the divergence between reading the novel's language and form in terms either of contingency or transcendence, in the first part of chapter 2 of his *Other Dickens* (45–51). As Bowen's notes throughout the chapter seem to indicate through the reference to critical discussions of *Pickwick* and their dates of publication, analysis of *Pickwick* decreases markedly from the 1970s onward.

There are a number of fascinating articles on Dickens' excessive pastiche-picaresque published in journals over the last quarter century, several of which I refer to in this chapter. In addition to the articles by Jonathan Grossman and


Such is the historicist imperative in criticism of nineteenth-century literature that Bowen’s analysis of the early novels, governed as it is by epistemological, linguistic, and other theoretical concerns most effectively deployed through close reading rather than the imposition of a master metaphor or trope that will recuperate texts and erase their differences, is chastised in one review for being “like new criticism” in its “tending to be sealed off from consideration of the 1830s and 1840s” (Tambling 2001, 550). Bizarrely, in a moment that to some will appear marked by an inability to distinguish clearly differing historical moments or to see effectively the difference and historicity of such critical moments, Tambling, who seems intent on establishing a family resemblance between Bowen’s book and “older Dickens criticism” (549) based chiefly on the partition of Dickens’ novels into “earlier” and “later,” then accuses Bowen of a construction of Dickens “who has been put together out of modish critical tropes” (549, for which read “Derrida”). Presumably, given Tambling’s own work on Dickens, had those critical tropes been “power,” “violence,” “surveillance,” “the state,” “the carceral,” “the prison” (for which read “Foucault”) neither would the reading of Dickens have been a “construction,” nor would the tropes have been “modish.” Tambling’s critique of Bowen’s partition of the novels is also somewhat disingenuous, given his own lack of consideration of Sketches by Boz, Pickwick, or Nicholas Nickleby.

It should not be thought that Tambling’s work is deliberately singled out. Lack of space prevents a more extended critique, but one could also include in such remarks D. A. Miller’s reading of Bleak House in his The Novel and the Police (1988, 58–106). Were one to consider assigning ontologies, or imposing critical identities, based on the critical scene, one might wish to suggest, in the wake of work by Miller, Kincaid, Bowen, Marlow, and Connor, that Pickwick is Dickens’ “poststructuralist” work, and therefore, in its play, its excess, and its difference, resists and exposes the misanthropic paucity of particular historicisms. This last hypothesis would appear to be borne out in Anny Sadrin’s passing assessment of Jingle and the two Wellers as the novel’s “deconstructors,” the justification for this being that in their improvisatory speech there is “no regard for spelling, or grammar, or syntax, or paragraph division or tense sequence” (Sadrin 1993, 27).
4. Rainsford offers a convincing comparison between Dickens’ last remarks in his preface to the “Cheap Edition”—“that a few petty boards and bodies . . . are . . . always to keep their little fiddles going, for a Dance of Death”—with the phrases “Loud sport the dancers in the dance of death” and “Timbrels & violins” from Blake’s Milton.


6. As is acknowledged in the standard critical studies, introductions, and biographies of Dickens, sales were initially slow. By February 1837, sales had increased to fourteen thousand, and the figure reached its phenomenal peak by the end of that year. Significantly, serialization meant that the novel was much less expensive, at 1s (shilling) per part, than many three-volume novels being published at the same time. Thus, serialization and cost helped the novel reach a wider audience. For a brief discussion of this, see Andrew Sanders, Charles Dickens (2003, 19). Also on Pickwick and serialization, see Sangwha Moon, “The Pickwick Papers: An Encounter of Serial Fiction and Capitalism” (2001, 53–66).


8. On language, specifically speech and Logos as apophansis, see Martin Heidegger, Being and Time (1996, 28–29).

9. To take one example, the title page of Richardson’s Clarissa (1747–48) proclaims that it is “published by the editor of PAMELA.”

10. Again, I would like to stress that my primary purpose is not to contextualize Dickens’ novel. Nor is it to offer a cultural study of modes of historical perception here. My observation has more to do with what I perceive to be the necessity of reading Pickwick differently, and so to attempt to read the difference of The Pickwick Papers.

11. Doubtless, it is because of his “failure” to read the significance of signs “correctly” that Dickens appears hardly at all in Gallagher’s study. A different “historicist” account of Dickens is to be found in Josephine Guy, The Victorian Social-Problem Novel (1996). Daniel Cottom provides a critical account of most of Dickens’ novels from a somewhat materialist perspective in his Ravishing Tradition: Cultural Forces and Literary History (1996, 112–40). Regardless of the specific details of the historicism or materialism being practiced in each of these studies, what is noticeable is the absence, not only of Pickwick, but also the novels of the 1830s, which as well as Pickwick are Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby (Twist is mentioned once by Guy). It strikes me as disingenuous in the extreme to claim, as an anonymous reader of this book in early draft form did, that Pickwick is not at issue. I would argue that it is at issue precisely because it is visibly noticeable by its absence.
Notes to Chapter Two


Notes to Chapter 2


2. I have used both words here, as both appear equally to define provisionally what takes place through the appearance of the tales in question. On the one hand, the narratives “seem” to add something unnecessary that altering or disrupts the text; on the other, the interruption causes the presentation of the tale, the “usefulness” or purpose of which in the context of *Pickwick* is, if not immediately clear, then at least to question the very form and structure, if not the constitution and ontology of the novel, and the efficacy of its own narratives. However, naive it appears, one might be tempted to ask, what does Mr Pickwick’s narrative lack that comes to be filled by these, mostly supernatural, cautionary and moral tales? And what, moreover, is the function of these anachronistic narratives in the “modern” world of the early nineteenth century?


5. As will be familiar to some, the language of speech act theory derives from the work of J. L. Austin, particularly *How to Do Things with Words* (1975). In broad terms, Austin identifies two principal speech acts, the constative and the performative. A constative speech act would be a description, such as “the sky is blue,” where the language of description is seemingly separate from that which it is in the act of representing. A performative speech act, on the other hand, is one that “does” something, such as a promise, wedding vows, or the act of naming (“I name this ship”). For a speech act to be performative, says Austin, it has to be felicitous, that is, true to its context. Therefore, wedding vows in a play or novel are not “true” performatives. However, as Jacques Derrida has demonstrated on a number of occasions, one cannot stabilize a context, and neither can one guarantee the “felicity” of the speech act’s utterance. (See Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* [1988].) This volume gathers Derrida’s earliest essays on speech act theory, including “Signature Event Context,” which appears in a different translation in Derrida’s *Margins of Philosophy* [1982, 307–30]). Moreover, as Derrida shows, there is always the possibility that a so-called constative speech act can slip into a performative one or, to put this another way, the performative is always already immanent within the constative, as is the case with the sentence and the motion
from one clause to another, concerning Miss Wardle's view of Tracy Tupman. The sentence enacts or performs the very thing it describes. For an extensive, not to say exhaustive consideration of the role of the speech act in literature, see J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (2001).

6. Hooke's *Micrographia* was not restricted in its success to scientific societies and the academic community. In his diary of 1665, on 21 January, Samuel Pepys crowds in between the lines of his regular entry, "Before I went to bed, I sat up till 2 a-clock in my chamber, reading of Mr. Hookes Microscopical Observations, the most ingenious book that ever I read in my life" (1995, 18). The mid-1660s were an important time for scientific experiment and discovery, particularly with regard to matters relating to light and optics; in the same year as the publication of *Micrographia*, Isaac Newton was laying the grounds for his theory of light and color. As I mention in the body of the chapter, following Barbara Stafford and Kevins Goodman's invaluable research, from the 1660s and throughout the 1700s, in what is termed the long eighteenth century, the question of vision and its related metaphors enter fully into cultural life through scientific, philosophical, and economic discourse.

7. See particularly chapter 8, "Of the Distance of the Picture: The Viewing Subject," 186–222.

8. Elizabeth Deeds Ermath remarks on *Pickwick's* indebtedness to the picaresque tradition (1997, 36), while in *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (1958) J. Hillis Miller observes of the novel's "Victorian picaresque" that it is "more akin to [Smollett's] *Peregrine Pickle*" and that "it seems to be purely in the manner of the eighteenth-century novel" (22). Miller also comments, however, and rightly so, that *Pickwick*, "so closely linked to eighteenth-century optimism, is really a farewell to the eighteenth century" (34). In his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Mark Wormald outlines some of the literary and cultural antecedents on which Dickens draws, while also acknowledging the "eighteenth-century picaresque fiction Dickens grew up with" (PP xiv). For a philosophical contextualization of *Pickwick* in relation to eighteenth-century thought, see William Palmer on the influence of Shaftesbury and Shaftesbury's influence on mid-eighteenth-century novelists, particularly Sterne, on the matter of sentiment (1997, 24–31).

9. Of course, it is impossible to be certain that the "scientific gentleman" is a double of Samuel Pickwick. It is, however, the undecidability that makes this brief, quite literally "unparalleled" appearance uncanny. The effect is all the more discernible, and the reading of doubleness somewhat more insistent due to the anonymity of the "elderly gentleman of scientific attainments." While the anonymous gentleman "delighted all the Scientific Associations beyond measure" (PP 532; we cannot help but speculate that the phrase "beyond measure" appears to carry in it an ironic registration of scientific discourse), Mr Pickwick's "Observations on the Theory of Tittlebats" (which, like the scientific gentleman's publication, is designated a "treatise" [PP 19]) "agitated the scientific world" (PP 16). Also like his doppelganger, Mr Pickwick is described as an "elderly gentleman" (PP 400). There are several other "elderly gentlemen" to which the novel refers, and it is not too great an imaginative feat to consider that behind Mr Pickwick's anonymous double, there is projected a world of elderly scientific gentlemen for
whom meaning and identity, source and origin, are always undecidable.

10. While I am not suggesting any direct connection between Dickens and contemporary science, the comic concussion and its illuminating effects offer the reader a brief glimpse into the interests of scientific research in the nineteenth century concerning the physiology of the senses, particularly as that research related to matters of vision and physiological optics. The principal researcher in this field was Johannes Müller (1801–1858), whose understanding of vision and his “notion of the observer [was] radically alien from that of the eighteenth century,” as Jonathan Crary argues (1990, 88). (see, especially, chapter 3, “Subjective Vision and the Separation of the Senses” (67–96), from which the citation above and other comments here are taken.) Müller had published “two influential books on vision” (89) both in 1826 and, subsequently, in 1833, his Handbuch der Physiologie des Menschen, translated into English in 1842 by Dr William Baly. As Crary shows, Müller discovered that a shock to the optic nerve “produces the experience of light” (90). An entirely coincidental parallel between Dickens and Müller is to be found in the fact that both apprehend “fundamentally arbitrary relation[s] between stimulus and sensation,” and hence the capacity, as Crary puts it, and as we have ample evidence in The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, for the observing subject to “misperceive,” because the eye “renders differences equivalent” (90). Misperception is all too common in Pickwick, as a number of the quotations and the passages from which they come demonstrate.

Notes to Chapter 3


2. Translation mine.

3. Implicit in my argument is a ghostly communication between Ackroyd’s insistence on cultural inheritance and Derrida’s enigmatic figure of the anachronistic contemporary. Were there space, I would like to argue for a reading of Samuel Pickwick as an “anachronistic” contemporary of the readers of The Pickwick Papers in the late 1830s, whose anachronistic survival in terms of that spectral Englishness (to which I have alluded) is signalled as an effect of writing and translation in the proper name “Samuel” (on which I comment below in the present chapter).

4. It will be observed frequently that identities and meanings are confused, exceeded, disturbed, and denied throughout The Pickwick Papers. Indeed, the novel relies on the eruption of impropriety from within the proper, whether the
event concerns merely the improper use of an object or involves the depiction of a social gathering. An event is transformed into a spectacle, that is to say, there is what I would like to describe as a translation effect that takes place from within a given identity, whereby something emerges from within itself as its own parody, becoming thereby a parodic critique through the emphasis on the visual aspects of spectacle of the social and cultural worlds of early nineteenth-century England through the rhetorical emphasis on excess, misunderstanding, and failed communications.

7. The double million gas microscope was being marketed in 1837 (gas being the source of illumination), as Mark Wormald informs us in a note to the Penguin edition (PP 793 n. 11). As we can see from this, Wormald is correct to suggest on several occasions that Dickens has a “bold” way with his source materials. However, it can also be remarked that historical accuracy is not, in effect, an issue for Dickens; more generally, literature, as I remark elsewhere, is irreducible to fact, date, or event, and Dickens should perhaps be read with an eye directed more to the spirit, rather than the letter of the historical.

Notes to Afterword

2. Derrida invokes the necessary relationship between feeling—translatable, however peremptorily, as sentiment—and accountability and responsibility in “The Principle of Reason” (2004a, 155).
3. The stresses on remains in the sentence should serve to draw the reader’s attention to seeing how the temporal dimension is at work within a single word and across its iterable use; a traversal is performed here, which, in its semantic oscillation brings into view, albeit somewhat obliquely, how a sign can both remain the same and yet not the same, how past, present, and future are signalled while their absolute, discrete boundaries are erased, or at least crossed, in the motion I have sought to enact graphically.
4. On the temporal fold, the other, and the notion of invention that I am invoking here, see Jacques Derrida, “Psyche: Inventions of the Other” (1989, 56).
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