Reading Dickens Differently
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Edited by Leon Litvack and Nathalie Vanfasse
### Contents

- **List of Figures** vii
- **Notes on Contributors** ix
- **Acknowledgements** xiii
- **Abbreviations** xv

**Introduction** 1  
*Leon Litvack and Nathalie Vanfasse*

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#### Part I  Reconfiguring Dickens 13

1. **Dickens's Burial in Westminster Abbey: The Untold Story** 15  
   *Leon Litvack*

2. **A Tale of Two Brothers: Reading Differently Dickens's French Revolution** 47  
   *Lillian Nayder*

3. **Parallel Lives, Converging Destinies: Charles Dickens and Thomas Babington Macaulay** 61  
   *David Paroissien*

4. **Decent Restraint Spurned: Dickens, Penal Policy and Conflict at Cold Bath Fields Prison, 1846–1850** 75  
   *Neil Davie*

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#### Part II  Reincorporating Dickens 93

5. **A Somatic Experience of Dickens's Fiction** 95  
   *Georges Letissier*
6 Dickens and Lawrence: Mimicry, Totemism, Animism  113
   Michael Hollington

7 Wreckage and Ruin: Turner, Dickens, Ruskin  125
   Jeremy Tambling

8 Boz without Phiz: Reading Dickens with Different Illustrations  149
   Chris Louttit

Part III Resetting Dickens  165

9 Speculation and Silence: Reading Dickens by Instalment in Time, at the Time and for Our Time  167
   Pete Orford

10 Dickens Touches the Sky: Urban Exploration and London’s Greatest Author  185
    Gillian Piggott

11 Dickens as Icon and Antonomasia in Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate  207
    Francesca Orestano

12 From Movable Book to iPad App: Playing A Christmas Carol  223
    Claire Wood

Index  243
List of Figures

**Figure 1.1**  Telegram from Charley Dickens to George Holsworth, 9 June 1870 16

**Figure 1.2**  Arthur Penrhyn Stanley (1815–1881) 18

**Figure 1.3**  Frederick Locker (1821–1895; later Locker-Lampson) 19

**Figure 1.4**  The Grave of Charles Dickens in Poets’ Corner (1870) 28

**Figure 1.5**  First page of Dickens’s funeral fee account, Westminster Abbey Funeral Fee book, 1811–1899, folio 233 30

**Figure 1.6**  Second page of Dickens’s funeral fee account, Westminster Abbey Funeral Fee book, 1811–1899, folio 234 31

**Figure 1.7**  John Everett Millais, *Charles Dickens After Death* (1870) 35

**Figure 1.8**  Death registration certificate for Charles Dickens, 12 June 1870 36

**Figure 7.1**  Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti Painting* (1833) 128

**Figure 7.2**  Robert Brandard, engraving of Turner’s *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844) 131

**Figure 7.3**  Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon coming on (“The Slave Ship”)* (1840) 137

**Figure 7.4**  Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Wreck Buoy* (c. 1807; reworked 1849) 138

**Figure 7.5**  James Tibbits Willmore, engraving of Turner’s *The Fighting Téméraire* (1839) 140

**Figure 8.1**  Fred Barnard, drawing in undated letter 154

**Figure 8.2**  Fred Barnard, plate depicting (L to R) Esther, Caddy Jellyby and Mrs Jellyby (1873) 155

**Figure 8.3**  Fred Barnard, plate depicting (foreground L to R) Mr Gridley, Miss Flite; (background L to R): Inspector Bucket (seated), George Rouncewell, Phil Squod, Mr Jarndyce (seated), Esther Summerson, Richard Carstone (1873) 155
List of Figures

Figure 8.4 Fred Barnard, plate depicting Lady Dedlock (1873) 156
Figure 8.5 Fred Barnard, “Jo” (1873) 158
Figure 8.6 Fred Barnard, Miss Jennie Lee as “Jo”; Theatre Royal Edinburgh poster (1885) 159
Figure 9.1 Characters’ appearances in the monthly numbers and chapters of The Mystery of Edwin Drood 177
Figure 9.2 Character presence in the first monthly number of The Mystery of Edwin Drood 178
Figure 9.3 Character presence in the first three monthly numbers of The Mystery of Edwin Drood 178
Figure 9.4 Character presence in the first six monthly numbers of The Mystery of Edwin Drood 179
Figure 9.5 Twitter feed for Eugene Wrayburn (@OMF_Eugene), from Our Mutual Friend Reading Project 182
Figure 11.1 The Twins Jacob and Evie Frye, from Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate 210
Figure 11.2 Thames River prospect, at Westminster Pier, from Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate 210
Figure 11.3 Palace of Westminster from high elevation, surveyed by Evie (L), and Jacob (R), from Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate 212
Figure 11.4 Dickens wax figure at Madame Tussauds, London 213
Figure 11.5 Visual representation of Dickens, from Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate 215
Figure 12.1 Cover image from Chuck Fischer’s A Christmas Carol: A Pop-Up Book (2010) 225
Figure 12.2 London street scene, from Chuck Fischer’s A Christmas Carol: A Pop-Up Book (2010) 227
Figure 12.3 “Come to Life” panorama from Stories from Dickens for Boys and Girls (1935) 231
Figure 12.4 “Marley was dead,” screen capture from Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol: For the iPad 234
Figure 12.5 Scrooge in his counting-house, from Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol: For the iPad 235
Figure 12.6 Stave One pop-up, featuring Marley’s Ghost, from Chuck Fischer’s A Christmas Carol: A Pop-Up Book (2010) 236
Figure 12.7 Stave Four pop-up, featuring the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, from Chuck Fischer’s A Christmas Carol: A Pop-Up Book (2010) 237
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Abbreviations

Note: References to Dickens’s fictional works will be indicated in the text by abbreviated title (see below) and chapter number, or book and chapter number (in the cases of Great Expectations, Our Mutual Friend and A Tale of Two Cities). References to Dickens’s letters will be indicated in the text by volume and page number from the Pilgrim edition.


Abbreviations


Introduction

Leon Litvack and Nathalie Vanfasse

... that very word, Reading, in its critical use, always charms me

(Our Mutual Friend, book 3, chapter 10)

“Reading Dickens Differently” may seem a truism. One might well ask: how can different readers not have distinct and idiosyncratic interpretations of Dickens’s work? Moreover, from a narrower academic perspective, how could any scholarly essay or book not professing to offer a new light on Dickens’s work hope to be published? The bold assertion which predicates this volume stems from other considerations – namely the realisation that we can no longer take for granted the broad readership and traditional scholarly interest in Dickens, who was once an indisputable part of a universally shared Western heritage. While the author’s association with Christmas is still an important part of his widespread appeal, this does not necessarily translate into a unanimous familiarity with his texts among the general public, or a continued interest in the critical strategies and pervasive certainties that have been the mainstay of Dickens studies since the 1970s – if not before. The present volume’s claim to read Dickens differently also stems from concerns about the very future of reading and interpreting literary texts. Scholars have bluntly voiced disturbing questions concerning the purpose of literature (Compagnon 2007), or the place it holds in our cultures and societies (Citton 2010). These anxieties extend to the print medium itself, which is described by Robert Coover, in an essay provocatively entitled “The End of Books,” as “a mere curiosity of bygone days destined soon to be consigned forever to those dusty unattended museums we now call libraries” (1992).

Scholarly endeavour itself has also been called into question. Well-known critics such as Harold Bloom (2000) and Tzvetan Todorov (2007) have bemoaned the excessively interpretive and professional turn taken by the study of literature in the twenty-first century, and the way it seems to have cut readers off from what
Leon Litvack and Nathalie Vanfasse

these critics consider as more spontaneous and existential readings. Indeed Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus argue for an abandonment of criticism: they maintain that an “immersion in texts” can facilitate an “attentiveness to the artwork itself as a kind of freedom”; they add that in relinquishing the “demystification” offered by criticism, “we might grope toward some equally valuable, if less glamorous, state of mind” (2009, pp. 16, 17). This denunciation has given rise to two kinds of reactions: some focusing on why one should continue to read literature (Hillis Miller 2002), and others insisting that one should continue not just to read but also to engage in critique in a more innovative manner that does not necessarily seek to unlock some truth concealed in a text. Alternative strategies for “doing” criticism have been offered by, for example, Citton (2007), Jouve (2010), Schaeffer (2012) and Felski (2015). Anker and Felski succinctly outline the problem:

There is little doubt that debates about the merits of critique are very much in the air and that the intellectual or political payoff of interrogating, demystifying, and familiarizing is no longer quite so self-evident. Even those who insist on the continuing salience and timeliness of critique are now often expected to defend and justify what was previously taken for granted. (2017, p. 1)

The present volume endeavours to offer several ways forward, by means of critiques that demonstrate how innovative strategies for reading Dickens differently can excite new generations of literary aficionados, and can assist in revising and refreshing the ways in which more experienced readers approach the Victorian author’s texts. Interdisciplinarity and diachrony are at the core of this project, which brings together approaches that are microhistorical, legal, political, penological, corporeal, intertextual, visual, conversational, social, ambulatory, perilous, ludic, technological and tactile.

Thus, rather than take refuge in the narrow confines in which many established scholars were originally trained, this collection of essays endeavours to address head-on the problem of critique’s running “out of steam” (Latour 2004, p. 225). It provides space for some of the new voices and perspectives on Dickens that seek to “associate the word criticism with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions, habits of thoughts” (Latour 2004, p. 247; emphasis original). While it is true that any scholarly endeavour on Dickens is likely to have as its impetus “Reading Dickens Differently,” this volume purports to push the boundaries of current thinking about the author.

The innovative interests and research methods represented by the authors brought together in this project combine with – rather than replace – traditional interpretive practices of literary studies. They build upon the history of reading and of reading practices, delineated by critics such as Blasselle (1998) or Cavallo and Chartier (2001), and upon book history in the West, as discussed by Barbier (2012).
They follow Hans Robert Jauss’s reception studies (1982), in that they analyse the meaning or interpretation of Dickens’s work by different groups of readers, as well as the evolution of these readings over time. The work by Stanley Fish (1980) and Wolfgang Iser (1980) on the implied reader, and the studies by Normand Holland (1975) and David Bleich (1975, 1978) on actual readers, also provide a theoretical background for this collection of essays. So does the research on the sociology of reading by Jacques Leenhardt and Pierre Jozsa (1982), in whose view reading establishes an exchange between two world visions, each of which is transformed in the process. This book draws on Umberto Eco’s theories on the role of cooperative interpretation in reading (1979), and on the work of Michel Picard (1986), who considered reading as a game whose stakes are high, and in which the reader/player is deeply involved in the process and takes significant risks. Rules, according to Picard, organise the complex relations between readers and fiction, and the process of reading resembles an adventure on which readers embark. *Reading Dickens Differently* capitalises upon the arguments of N. Katherine Hayles (1999, 2012) and Jay Clayton (2003), about how a digital environment can endow texts with innovative features that influence reading and interpretation practices. The essays in this volume resonate in spirit with other recent explorations of different forms of reading, such as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus on “surface reading” (2009); Franco Moretti and Matthew Jockers on “distant reading” (Moretti 2013; Jockers 2013); and Daniel Shore’s call for a new “cyberformalism,” that foregrounds a qualitative linguistic approach to digital archives (2018).

The book is organised into three parts. The first, entitled “Reconfiguring Dickens,” offers four case studies that address central—though under-researched or overlooked—aspects of Dickens’s life, and avail of recent developments and trends in biographical studies (see Renders et al. 2017; Magnússon 2017), to offer corrections and reshapings of received opinion. They display intimate and open-minded critical acumen about their common protagonist, and each performs a forensic examination of evidence, in order to demonstrate the creative possibilities inherent in challenging canonical views of the author.

Leon Litvack uses previously undiscovered archival material to reassess our knowledge (gained particularly from John Forster and close family members) regarding Dickens’s death and burial, and to read these events with fresh insight. This essay employs recent developments in critical biography—particularly a multi-disciplinary approach (Hamilton 2014, p. ix)—involving analysis of documentary evidence, visual images, financial accounts, ecclesiastical protocol and funerary custom to yield results previously unimagined by those who have written more traditional literary biographies. Litvack demonstrates how a microhistorical emphasis, which reduces the scale of observation (see Peltonen 2014, pp. 110–114), and thus facilitates the examination of minute details in the crucial period 9–13 June 1870, reveals a different narrative from the one promoted by John Forster in his authoritative *Life of Charles Dickens* (1872–1874). Litvack’s essay offers an “untold story” of almost Dickensian mysteriousness, 150 years after the events.
Lilian Nayder proposes a completely new understanding of *A Tale of Two Cities* in the light of the complicated relationship between Dickens and his youngest brother, Frederick, who went on trial in 1859 before the Court for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes. The essay, which also reduces the field of study to focus on a particular familial crisis (see Magnússon 2017), examines the intricacies and complications of the relationship between the two Dickens brothers, to demonstrate how the author wove this thorny biographical episode into the plot of his historical novel. This rich source material, including personal letters and reports of legal proceedings, provides unexpected insight into Dickens’s inspiration for his text, and on his representation of the French Revolution. Conversely, it also allows the novel’s plot to be viewed through a new biographical-cum-historical perspective, thus yielding a new reading of Dickens’s life itself.

David Paroissien’s contribution demonstrates how a seemingly minor gap in our knowledge of Dickens’s otherwise well-documented biography – namely his daily life as a Parliamentary reporter in the 1820s and 1830s – can shed capital light upon his later career as a writer of fiction. While working at the Palace of Westminster as a reporter for the *Mirror of Parliament*, Dickens came into contact with one of the most prominent historians of his time: Thomas Babington Macaulay. This occurred at a unique moment in the history of nineteenth-century Britain: the agitation for the First Reform Act – a time when Parliamentary debate was particularly animated. The young Dickens, perched in the gallery looking down upon proceedings, was most assuredly a reader of the political life of his time: he saw and heard key debates from a vantage point that shaped his political ideas and his view of history. Indeed, Macaulay’s influence (together with that of Thomas Carlyle) spread to Dickens’s notions about the writing of history and historical novels. *Barnaby Rudge* in particular resonates with echoes of Macaulay, who induced Dickens to read history differently, by focusing less upon political trends and more upon the social – and indeed the anecdotal.

Neil Davie uses fresh evidence from prison archives and reports of legal proceedings to provide a fuller understanding of Dickens’s complex and paradoxical engagement with penal policy throughout his life. The research on the “silent” and “separate” systems, and on the situation at Cold Bath Fields Prison in London, emphasises an evolution in Dickens’s artistic concern with imprisonment. The essay also reveals new sources of inspiration for the author’s journalistic contributions – especially his article “Pet Prisoners” (1850). As in other studies in this section, the use of private correspondence, as well as official reports and newspaper accounts, sheds new light on Dickens’s personal circumstances, and confirms the value of the biographical “turn” in reassessing previously assured accounts (Renders et al. 2017, p. 10).

The second section of this volume, entitled “Reincorpotating Dickens,” achieves its ends by employing physical and visual strategies to assess bodily sensations, facial contours, physiognomies and visual stimuli. New readings are offered
through interdisciplinary and intertextual lenses, focusing on neuropsychology and a corporeal phenomenology of Dickens’s work; Modernist rereadings incorporating mimicry, totemism and animism; a reassessment of the importance of painting and visual rendering to Dickens’s textual representations; and an investigation of the inextricable link between a particular pictorial style of illustration and the reader’s understanding of the text. All of these reading strategies build upon such research as that by Malcolm Andrews on public readings and performance (2006), as well as on arguments concerning literature as a form of praxis (Albrecht et al. 2018). Here, however, the performance is reversed: it does not involve the author as a reader, but rather the individual consumer of Dickens’s texts who, in some instances, becomes a performer in the attempt to effect alternative readings. In the wake of the studies by Marielle Macé on reading and being, and the styling of existence (2011, 2016), this section connects reading to ways of life and styles or ideas (including shapes, modes, regimes and allures; see Macé 2016, p. 1) that can be seen as performances delineating forms of authorship. The essays range from the analysis of the somatic (or corporeal) dimensions of reading in the essays by Georges Letissier and Michael Hollington, to renewed visual reading of Dickens’s work in the contributions by Jeremy Tambling and Chris Louttit. They build upon Nicholas Dames’s groundbreaking study of the affective physiology of Victorian novel reading, which injects the activity with dramatic “passion” (2007, p. 42).

Letissier builds upon reader‐response theory to rethink the reading of Dickens’s work through the connections between body and text, in what Pierre‐Louis Patoine calls an “empathetic reading” (2015). Letissier uses this critic as a starting point, to develop a corporeal phenomenology of reading the Victorian author’s work, involving bodily stimuli, phantom sensations, voices and heartbeats emanating from the text – not to mention dissociations of consciousness and even skin and muscular sensations. This innovative mode of reading draws on neuropsychology, among other scientific disciplines, to provide a radically reconceived idea of reading, based on physiological novel theory and somatic theory.

Michael Hollington’s essay partakes of hermeneutical strategies centred around a reconfiguration of the Victorian body – to paraphrase Peter Capuano (2015). It picks up on the idea of corporeal reading to explore a particular “rewriting” of Dickens – D.H. Lawrence’s *The Lost Girl* (1920) – in a familiar context: that of an ostensible Modernist repudiation of Victorian convention, which nevertheless draws copious sustenance from its rejected sources. The distinctively new feature involves a performative engagement, in three ways, with some cardinal Dickensian themes: the first, a pronounced capacity for mimicry, and a preoccupation with voice in the creation of, and differentiation between, characters; the second, an appreciation of the resemblances between human physiognomies and the facial contours of animals such as birds – particularly ravens, of which Dickens was particularly fond; the third, an “animistic” treatment, relating people and things in satirical ways. Hollington identifies *The Lost Girl* as the most important site of Dickensian engagement for Lawrence.
Kinaesthetic readings of Dickens’s work take on another, more visual, dimension in the contributions by Jeremy Tambling and Chris Louttit. Tambling demonstrates that John Ruskin’s writing encourages a reading of Dickens’s work that reshapes the novelist’s art through the work of the painter J.M.W. Turner. Tambling explores a “Turneresque” Dickens, who manages to produce through his very style images that parallel those of the painter; the effect is felt in the “French road” chapter in *Dombey and Son*, which functions as Dickens’s textual version of the painting *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844). A sensation similar to that produced in watery, illuminatory works like *The Slave Ship* (1840) and *The Wreck Buoy* (1807, 1849) may be felt in the escape scene in *Great Expectations*. Conversely, Tambling argues, Ruskin’s writing on Turner highlights the similarities between Turnerian images of London and Dickensian verbal renderings of the city. Both writer and artist delight in the depiction of ruins and wreckage; the dissolution of solid forms and structures and the return to shapeless primeval landscapes are, Tambling argues, at the heart of both their representations, as they strive to reach beyond appearances. Paradoxically, Ruskin’s reading of Dickens’s work failed to capture some of proto-Modernist features that he identified so aptly in Turner’s painting, because those features were even more unsettling in Dickens’s writing; the result, the essay concludes, is that Ruskin unconsciously shunned them, but, ironically, needed them to inform his critique of Turner.

Chris Louttit picks up on the idea of reading Dickens’s visuality, tackling the novels through illustrations and, more particularly, through images that have been neglected, in the Household Edition published after Dickens’s death. These depictions show how the illustrator Fred Barnard adapted his visuals to the new public taste of the 1860s and 1870s (which had outgrown the work of Phiz), and how in turn these updated illustrations interacted in a different manner with the original text. Louttit’s study not only foregrounds the incompleteness of Dickensian texts without their illustrations; it also raises the question of readings induced by posthumous illustrations that Dickens did not oversee: these images yielded new interpretations of the text that resonate with their time. In these evocative interpretations of Dickens’s work (more numerous than those of earlier illustrators), images become essential to the understanding of particular passages – particularly of a novel like *Bleak House*. The essay also examines the possibility of exploring these visual renderings of Dickens’s work even further, with the assistance of digital tools that make this field of research available to a wider range of viewers/readers, thus providing incentives to study illustrations in innovative ways. This section of *Reading Dickens Differently* moves away from a “symptomatic reading” that focuses on a meaning that is “hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure,” (Best & Marcus 2009, p. 1) and towards a “surface reading” that embodies a “pure, untranslatable sensuous immediacy,” focusing on the immediately “evident” and “perceptible” in the text and its accompanying visualisations (2009, pp. 10, 9).
The final section of this collection picks up on the idea of “surface reading,” while turning its attention to the ever-evolving field of new media technologies (see Wardrip-Fruin & Montfort 2003; Lister et al. 2009). It concentrates on digital platforms, social media, interactive applications and virtual/augmented reality, and on how their use has fostered cutting-edge readings and appreciations of Dickens. These essays raise essential questions for readers in the twenty-first century, concerning how new media affect continuity and change in reading Victorian authors; immersion in texts and their representations; reader’s perspectives (whether physical or ideological); social forms, user-generated content and commentary on narrative; gameplay; and the technological shaping of everyday life (see Lister et al. 2009, pp. 44–50, 114–124, 176–178, 221–224, 286–306, 254–265).

Pete Orford’s contribution on the online reading of Dickens’s work builds on the research of Jay Clayton (2003) concerning Dickens’s presence in cyberspace. The essay outlines an interactive, communal and social strategy with respect to online reading by instalments that takes it far beyond existing projects, like that conceived by Robyn Warhol (n.d.), which does not allow for reader feedback. The projects Orford discusses demonstrate that reading Dickens online proves distinctively different from reading him in the nineteenth century, as the monthly parts first appeared. While the internet may, in some ways, recreate the experience of Victorian instalments, this research demonstrates that readers do not approach the text in the same anticipatory ways as their forbears: they look ahead, and often peek at the text’s resolution; they bring their twenty-first-century concerns and contexts to bear upon discussions; they welcome the open-endedness of an unfinished work like *Edwin Drood*; and they embrace the extra-textual fluidity made possible through the game-playing of social media. Thus Orford’s essay usefully explores the experience of reading a text in the making. It also resorts to computational data sampling in order to measure the significance of characters, and this, along with the digitisation of Victorian serial novels, highlights the growing importance of digital humanities in reading Dickens differently. However, the digital experiences depicted in this volume differ from Moretti’s conceptions of “distant reading” (2013) or Matthew Jockers’s macroanalysis (2013), in that they do not resort to mass data, but instead apply statistical tools to close reading in order to demonstrate textual complexity, and to identify sites that compete for readers’ attention.

Like Orford, Gillian Piggott explores ways of reading that were at least partly characteristic of Dickens’s own time; but she adds an innovative layer, through an exploration of twenty-first-century recreational trespassing in the built environment. The strategies and trajectories of urban explorers, or “Urbexers,” are usefully and evocatively compared to Dickens’s perambulations across London. The association between Urbex and the internet is evident in its very terminology, which refers to “infiltration” or “place-hacking,” thus introducing new media technologies – particularly augmented/virtual reality video – into its practice. Many aspects of Dickens’s metropolitan writing are of interest to Urbex: his ability...
to create incessant movement and variety; the pictorial, aural and even moving images he conjures up in his fiction; his obsession with representing the vertiginous experience; his fascination with speed; the minute delineation of urban space, with all its strange enigmatic points of connection and disconnection and the continual re-enchantment of the everyday. Piggott proposes Urbex, which forges furtive yet intimate connections with the city, as a new form of reading that facilitates the investigation of sites situated beyond boundaries; thus this analysis reveals, as Dickens’s work does, the hidden aspects of cities.

Francesca Orestano considers reading as game-playing, and looks at a recent video game involving Dickens’s world. Her essay examines Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate, launched in 2015 by Ubisoft Entertainment, and the way it transposes and reprocesses Dickens in a new medium adapted to the expectations of a twenty-first-century online community. Reading Dickens is transposed into playing a game involving the author as a character, and also as a metonymy for the entire context and atmosphere of Victorian London. This supposedly Dickensian décor draws on a wealth of historical visual documentation, used by the creators of the game to make it seem as accurate and realistic as possible; images from the game enhance this conception for the reader. In some ways the presence of Dickens resembles the efforts by John Wall and others at North Carolina State University to recreate the world of John Donne and his sermons at St Paul’s Cathedral in 1622, in the Virtual St Paul’s Cathedral Project (see Wall 2014, n.d.); here, however, the creators of Assassin’s Creed are less interested in the particularities of Dickens as a producer of texts, and more in him as an evocative representative of his age. In Assassin’s Creed there is an emphasis on well-researched, stunning visuality, which far outrisps that of the St Paul’s project; it also embodies the somewhat eerie elements of ghosts and simulacra. Dickensian fiction is condensed into the pure action and electrifying urban exploration which the players actively control. The Victorian past and the present of the twenty-first century are conflated in this new digital narrative form, which reinvents the ancient tradition of epic writing, with its heroic characters and scale.

Claire Wood also concentrates on visualisations – this time of A Christmas Carol, in the form of a pop-up book and an iPad app, both conceived by the American artist Chuck Fischer. The essay investigates the possibilities that such visualisations of the Carol have for drawing “reader-interactors” into the story and prompting them to reflect on their own capacities for transformation. Wood demonstrates that the movable components – whether in engineered paper or in electronic form – compel readers to adopt a hybridised mode of engagement; those who engage with the text in these innovative ways become, Wood argues, active participants in Scrooge’s reformation.

The enduring value of this final section lies in the fact that while taking into account recent technological tools or games, the strategies employed encourage readers to become aware of broad concerns surrounding the consumption and interpretation of canonical literary texts, that will stand up to scrutiny long after
we forget about Twitter, iPads and Urbex. The essays exemplify how, in order to merge with our digital culture, the forms literary reading can adopt involve the creation of “a new set of players, locations, rituals, and use values for reading literary fiction” (Collins 2010, p. 3). In this set-up, the players have an enhanced role in the creative process: reading becomes less a matter of uncovering hidden meanings and structures, and more of a “translation” of Dickensian texts into exciting new arenas (Felski 2016, p. 218).

Reading Dickens Differently revitalises our perception of Dickens and his work, and offers alternative strategies for engaging with a Victorian author and his texts. Taken together, the 12 essays enhance ideas about “curating the humanities”: a strategy for “guarding, protecting, conserving, caretaking, and looking after” texts that might, without fresh consideration and recurrent use, slip into oblivion (Felski 2016, p. 217). Such a nurturing attitude also applies to the critic, who, according to Latour, looks after a critique that is “constructed” and is “fragile and thus in great need of care and caution” (2004, p. 246). To carry the metaphor of curation a bit further, Stephen Greenblatt usefully distinguishes between the “resonance” of a museum object, that must “reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world,” and the “wonder” an object excites, stopping a viewer in his or her tracks, “to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention” (1991, p. 42). Dickens and his works can do both, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the recent exhibitions mounted by the Charles Dickens Museum in London, including “Charles Dickens: Man of Science” (2018) and “Global Dickens: For Every Nation on Earth” (2019). The displays and associated programmes of activities actively seek out new audiences, forge new connections with other institutions and tell stories that inspire visitors to remark, for example, that “few realise that [Dickens] was also one of his era’s great scientific communicators” (Shepherd 2018, p. 361), and that “Dickens’ depictions of medical conditions were not only acutely observed but also sometimes pre-empted professional recognition” (Moore 2018, p. 392). This volume has the capacity to do the same, in reassessing Dickens so as to highlight his resonance and his wonder.

In order to facilitate the relevance and excitement necessary for reading Dickens differently, what is ultimately required from scholars and readers alike is a change in disposition, in the way described by Christopher Castiglia in his essay entitled “Hope for Critique?” He argues that we must move away from the gravitas inherent in the “habituation” of current critical practice, with its “transcendent” claims of objectivity, and towards an “imaginative idealism” called “hopefulness.” In this way, Castiglia believes, scholars can develop “more inventive and experientially diverse” strategies for the assessment of texts and authors. Criticism can thus be freed to occupy “an imaginative space coexisting with and perpetually troubling the imperative here and now within which new ideals, new versions of the real, can be envisioned.” He concludes: “Some dispositional change is necessary for critique to get a second wind, to bring to the surface the imaginative idealism that has always been criticism’s greatest strength and best hope” (2017, pp. 213, 216,
Reading Dickens Differently offers such dispositional hopefulness, and allows new sensations, new interrogations and new aspirations in the study of this most iconic of authors to take root, and ultimately, to flourish.

References


