

Contingencies and Masterly Fictions

Contingencies and Masterly Fictions:
Countertextuality in Dickens,
Contemporary Fiction and Theory

By

Lauren Watson

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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“Not [heard] of Jarndyce and Jarndyce?” said Mr. Kenge [...] “in which I would say every difficulty, every contingency, every masterly fiction, every form of procedure known in that court, is represented over and over again?”

—Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

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INTRODUCTION

“THE SAME RESPECTED FRIEND IN MORE ASPECTS THAN ONE”: DICKENS, INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE *CONTRE*

See! A token of life [...] The spark may smoulder and go out, or it may glow and expand, but see! The four rough fellows, seeing, shed tears. Neither Riderhood in this world, nor Riderhood in the Other, could draw tears from them; but a striving human soul between the two can do it easily. (Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*)¹

The quotation which provides the heading to this introduction is taken from the title of chapter 3 (Book 3) of *Our Mutual Friend*, Charles Dickens's last completed novel. Published in 1865, the novel contains some of Dickens's darkest writing, confronting themes of death and dismemberment but also following the processes of rearticulation and transformation. Chapter 3—which describes Rogue Riderhood's death and resuscitation after falling into the river Thames—contains just one of many aqueous immersions mentioned in the novel. In most cases these immersions are terminal but sometimes they also offer the opportunity of reformation and reanimation. It is significant that the criminal Riderhood drowns for a second time later in the novel, finally and fatally engulfed by the waters having failed to morally reform after his first brush with mortality.

The description of Riderhood's resuscitation, quoted above, is a scene that illustrates a recurring but unspoken concern in the novel. In his introduction to the 1997 Penguin edition of *Our Mutual Friend*, Adrian Poole interprets Riderhood's soul “striving between two states” as an articulation of the radical liminality (or “suspense” [*OMF*, p. 439] as Dickens himself writes) which characterises the novel. He finds in this literal struggle for consciousness a metaphor for the split, dialogic nature of the text as it negotiates two opposing, yet strangely correspondent, drives within itself. It is this dramatic and indeterminate “suspense”

between the wor(l)d and an uncanny abyss that yields “no sign” (*OMF*, p. 439) which engages the reader, as surely as it stirs the sympathies of Riderhood's fellow bargemen. In the following extract, Poole takes the body as his own metaphor for the text, with the “soul” representing reference and meaning. “Nothing” in Dickens's last novel, he claims:

is certainly dead nor entirely alive [...] The idea of a completely finished product is a fiction, and so is the idea of purely raw material. All matter has been used before and will be used again. Everything and every body is partly composed of the dead-but-not-gone, which will in turn decompose and be shaped into new forms of matter. Meanwhile, what of the life it temporarily houses, its “soul”? ²

This model of decomposition and regeneration is figured in the detrital heaps of Boffin's Bower, the specimens in Mr. Venus's taxidermy shop and, more obliquely, in the numerous and diverse “recycled” texts which combine to form the novel itself. Dickens “multiplies old stories, tempting readers to see them for the fictions that they are” (p. xv), holding them up “for the reader to recognise and even to analyse” (p. xvii). The discourses of fairy tale, scripture, theatre and the popular press are broken down and rearticulated in the novel, such as in the many references to Little Red Riding Hood, Noah's Ark and the plays of the popular nineteenth-century dramatist, James Sheridan Knowles. This leads Poole to argue that transfiguration is the major theme of the novel and “repetition, endlessly varied” (p. xi) occurs at all levels within the text—most fundamentally within signification itself. Similarly, the propensity of composite textual bodies to break down and generate new products, and the ability of those products not only to reflect the instability of their progenitor but also reflect *upon* their own fragile composition, becomes the major theme and practise of this book. Dickens (the “respected friend”) is presented in a new aspect by those contemporary texts which self-consciously engage with his fictions via the rearticulation of Dickensian styles or themes. In this study, texts by Peter Ackroyd, Peter Carey and Graham Swift are read in parallel with the Dickens novels that directly or indirectly influenced them. It is this *intertextual* dialogue which suggests the *intratextual* dialogism at work in both Dickens and these contemporary texts. The liminal space which these postmodern novels cultivate between originality and replication, autonomy and difference, refers to the split economy of signification itself and the creative use which literature makes of this split. Literary productivity is defined, I argue, by a strategic negotiation of the unstable structures of signification. The peculiar susceptibility of Dickens's texts to this sort of reading/rewriting lies, I suggest, in the

dramatic instability of their negotiations, the strenuous manoeuvring and ill-disciplined management which Dickens's novels perform on many levels. Foregrounding the transactions involved in literary productivity, Dickens's work makes strenuous demands upon its readers—including those whose readings take the form of fiction.

What is labelled transformative textual “recycling” by Adrian Poole is defined by others as *intertextuality*, a term which has played a crucial role in post-structuralist criticism and has attracted multiple definitions. From Harold Bloom's Freudian argument that textual influence is a manifestation of the paradox of Oedipal relations, to Julia Kristeva's Bakhtinian suggestion that it is an articulation of the self-difference of signification, the relationship of one text to another has excited great theoretical interest.³ Kristeva, in particular, has worked extensively on the idea of intertextuality, drawing on Bakhtin's theory of *dialogics* to account for the traces of other texts within a single work of literature. Dialogics suggest that all discourse, no matter how apparently coherent and self-contained, is riven with other voices (“heteroglossic”) because of its status as a product of social difference.⁴ Intertextuality, for Kristeva, is a manifestation of dialogic structure at the level of the literary text. Intertextuality not only provides a necessary reminder that the text inherits the doubleness of the word—that it is locked in structures of difference as well as being a mark of meaning—but also suggests that this explicit doubleness is what constitutes literature's unique power. Literature, for Kristeva, invokes a radical plurality which disturbs monologic repressions. Intertextuality (the capacity of each enunciation to evoke other enunciations) is the clearest expression of this, a macrocosmic performance of a more discreet and carefully managed linguistic economy. The theory of intertextuality developed in this book owes much to Kristeva's work on this subject. However, intertextuality plays a more complex and dynamic role in the textual relations established by the following chapters, to the extent that the term itself seems inadequate in describing the theoretical potential of such encounters. The analogies established between these diverse texts are not simply identified as an inherent quality of literature or an illustration of post-structuralist semiotic theory but are also used as a reading practise, a means of strategically juxtaposing texts in order to generate a deconstructive dialogue between them.

The practice of intertextuality formulated in this study works under the broader category of Jacques Derrida's *contre* or “counter”. The *contre* is a work (textual or otherwise) which places itself against a hegemonic structure, opposing that body yet simultaneously emulating its desires and deficiencies.⁵ The cultivation of this relationship between an institution

and its ambivalent counterpart allows a critique to develop which discloses the ambivalence of the institution itself. Derrida uses the presence of the *contre* to locate a productive doubleness in institutions similar to the one identified by Kristeva in literature. This is a model which is explored in more detail in chapter 1 but for the purposes of this introduction it should be noted that the intertextual—or, more precisely, *countertextual*—relationship between texts serves a similar critical and deconstructive purpose. Each text not only evokes its seemingly monologic literary counterpart but simultaneously *provokes* it, agitating the productive self-difference within it. It is important to emphasise that neither Dickens nor the contemporary text can consistently be ascribed the status of “institution” or “counter-institution” (although it might be tempting to claim the title of *contre* for the modern, theoretically-aware novel). In this work each text in turn acts as *contre* or institution, both deconstructing the machinations of its counterpart and resisting interrogation within the space of each chapter. Such democratic dialogues do not privilege one text over another, granting a permanent metaphysical status to one particular novel or discourse. The practise of countertertextuality locates the difference at work in all discourse, and illustrates the discipline which is used to organise/manage difference. It discloses the modes of repression which any text inevitably reproduces (however imperfectly or inconsistently) from the sign system which constitutes it. Undoing this repression and unlocking the infinite productivity of language, it instigates new interpretations of Dickens, contemporary fiction and theory.

These deconstructive countertextual dialogues are established through the proximity of texts. This proximity may be established by the writer who explicitly aligns his/her text with another via shared motifs, characters or plots. This can be used as a conservative force, a means of cultural saturation as well as a means of critique.⁶ Proximity can also however be established by the reader, who may choose to cultivate a relationship between two texts which apparently have little in common and develop a dialogue on a more oblique level. In this book both models are used, as countertextuality is demonstrated to be a method of writing and/or reading. Countertextuality’s position as a product of reading is especially significant in my treatment of theory. Many of the contemporary theoretical essays used in the following chapters are quite unrelated to Dickens and are generically very different. In the context of countertextual reading, however, Dickensian images, themes or structures emerge in these works which unsettle theory’s metaphysical status and disclose its position as writing. These literary tropes implicate philosophy in the same semiotic processes which generate poetic language, formulating a *poetics*

of theory which qualifies post-structuralism's intellectual authority and prevents it from becoming unresponsively and unproductively dogmatic. In such readings theory works on two levels, which is perhaps indicative of its own self-difference. On the one hand it serves an exegetic function, providing ideas to unlock the repressions of the literary text. For example, in this study theory helps to identify the incidences of displacement which occur in text, as authors transpose the ambiguity and contradiction of signification onto the characters, imagery or plot of their novels. On the other hand theory also performs a metacritical function as it enters into dialogue with the novels themselves, identifying instability in the text through its own self-acknowledged instability. This is especially characteristic of post-structuralist criticism, which often punctuates its theory with literary tropes. Rather than simply displacing self-difference onto the object of its study, such criticism also recognises the dialectical structure of its own philosophical status: as well as disciplining the drives within signification it also stirs them up in a distinctly literary manner, acting as both institution and *contre*. In such a reading the question is not simply "what does theory tell us about the text?" but, more problematically, "what does the text allow theory to say about itself?"

This book establishes a method of triangular countertextual reading, in which the instability of one text resonates with and generates an analogous instability in its supplementary other(s). Each text is not an autonomous artefact in itself, but is both a product of other texts and a reading of those texts. This is most obvious in the case of those contemporary texts which are self-conscious re-writings or adaptations of Dickens's novels, self-consciously saturated with Dickensian themes or characters. Often produced by authors who are also critics, these novels have a metafictional intent: language becomes the subject of their scrutiny as well as the means of articulating their ideas, and the participation of the individual in signifying practice (as either writer or reader) is foregrounded. Such novels repeatedly cross the boundary between theory and literature, reading and writing, their ambivalence a legacy from (and to) the literary productivity of Dickens. Here, the author becomes a surrogate Dickens reader; identifying the instability of Dickens's novels, he/she finds in this instability the opportunity and material for his/her own interpretations. They also find, however, this same instability replicated in their own work. Their interpretive responses manifest the doubleness of the novels they engage with, mirroring both their drive for reference and the difference which they embody. Often exhibiting the same repressive strategies used by Dickens's texts to contain the motility of signification, they also convey the power of his literature to unsettle these disciplinary measures.

Through this practise of surrogacy, the actual Dickens reader is also implicated in countertextual dialogue and his/her own interpretations are shown to be a product of the same process of negotiation. It is a process that is enacted both externally (within the Dickens novel itself) and internally (within the ambivalent structure of an individual reader's response). These precarious acts of diplomacy—mediations prefigured at some level in/by all the texts discussed in this book—are not only productive but also dynamic. Negotiations are reopened with each new reading; not just with each new individual who encounters the text but with existing readers who approach the novels in a new context. Culture, history, identity and politics (countertexts in the widest possible sense) affect the terms of these negotiations. They all curtail the productivity of the text at certain points and allow for readings which are historically, socially or personally specific. An inevitable conclusion of this study is that reading becomes an analogy for writing, as both are defined as strategies for dealing with the doubleness of signification.⁷ Both are ways of managing difference: of admitting difference in so far as to allow signification, but disciplining it before it can erase imaginary ideas of presence and meaning, status and authority. It has already been suggested earlier in this introduction that Dickens's texts amplify their own precarious and tortuous negotiations, their productivity defined not so much by polite diplomacy but by an all-out struggle between the opposing drives of signification. Veering erratically between reference and difference, the conclusion of this study will argue that Dickens's texts (particularly the later novels) fail to consistently enforce discipline and prove unable to displace instability solely onto their subjects. They display a narrative vacillation between fact and fancy, philosophy and literature, which not only dramatises how signification is generated but also generates readings that are similarly ill-disciplined, over-determined and unstable. This being the case, it could be argued that this study problematises its own conjecture by remaining unmoved by Dickensian instability. It maintains philosophy and upholds the possibility of reference, displacing literary ambivalence onto the novels which are the objects of its scrutiny. This is a matter which will also be examined in the conclusion, as this book itself submits to deconstruction

Each of the following chapters places one of Dickens's later novels alongside a contemporary text and a piece of post-structuralist criticism, engaging each of the three texts in a countertextual dialogue which generates deconstruction. The first chapter aligns Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) with Peter Ackroyd's biography *Dickens* (1990) and Jacques Derrida's performative account of deconstruction "Ulysses Gramophone:

Hear Say Yes In Joyce" (1984); it identifies the counternarrativity which exists between (and indeed within) the texts and the deconstructive junctures which these split structures afford. Ackroyd's text is a biographical/theoretical experiment that alternates between potentially self-negating criticism and confident empiricism. The metacritical intent is encapsulated within the formal instability of the text, with its interwoven voices of "Ackroyd" as both theoretically-aware, self-questioning Critic and authoritative, transcendent Biographer. This duality is punctuated by "remarkable" fictional interludes which may (or may not) be read as theoretical. The idea of the *re-mark* is derived from Derrida's description of deconstructive opportunities in the works of James Joyce in "Ulysses Gramophone". Derrida describes the re-mark as a metacritical/metafictional moment where the text encounters itself as signification and reveals its *iterability* or self-difference. His criticism introduces a deconstructive re-mark between its own dissonant discourses, a strategy that allows both the articulation of the philosophical and the simultaneous, ironic dislocation of philosophy by its unspeakably anterior Other. The placing of two discourses, images or voices alongside one another in a text is a strategy that Derrida calls *countersigning*. This internal textual debate reveals and confronts the epistemological questions that constantly dog the representational enterprise, and it is this vacillation between exegesis and the ludic which is traced through Ackroyd's biography.

In *Bleak House*, remarkable moments of deconstruction are also generated by the same oscillatory dynamic enacted in Derrida and Ackroyd. They are instigated through the use of duplicate spaces (the two legitimate/illegitimate Courts of Chancery) and dual narrators (the voices of the Narrator and Esther), by binary relationships in which the *contre* becomes a source of contamination, instability and latent hostility—"a dirty hanger-on and disowned relation of the Law".⁸ As s/he negotiates these remarkable moments, the reader is obliged to perform parallel acts of negotiation within a split structure. As in "Ulysses Gramophone" the perplexity of self-difference empowers readers, enabling them to restore philosophy in myriad forms and reanimate the text as a meaningful entity from within itself. By performing such analogous acts of interpretation, meaning is restored by readers even as it finds itself broken down by the presence of difference in the text itself. In negotiating the "difficulties [and] contingencies" of Ackroyd and Dickens's "masterly fictions" (*BH*, p. 923), the reader ensures that the text does *not* die at the moment of the re-mark but survives in the difficult and contingent fictions of its readers.

Chapter 2 examines the acts of writing and reading through the practises of interpretation and adaptation. It examines how far readings of

ambivalence inevitably become ambivalent readings, an issue which is especially pertinent to the conclusion of this book. This chapter aligns Peter Ackroyd's novel *The Great Fire of London* (1982) and Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855) with two theoretical works: Roland Barthes' analysis of Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible* in "The Third Meaning" (originally published in 1970) and James Kincaid's playful study of the Victorian novel, *Annoying the Victorians* (1995). It deals with the idea of literary representation and critical resistance within the postmodern metanarrative, using Ackroyd's conceit of cinema and performance as its main theme. It demonstrates how Ackroyd, Dickens and the lead character of the novel (a film director engaged in adapting *Little Dorrit* for the screen) are shown to share an acute anxiety regarding the interpretive productivity of visual or literary imagery. They all betray the neurosis which Barthes identifies as the inevitable condition of those who articulate the dialogic structure of signification through the practise of *writing*, and which can prove contagious to those who read also. Drawing upon the vocabulary of Barthes' article, in which he locates a problematic third stage of interpretation sparked by the *obtuse meaning* of Eisenstein's cryptic images, I encounter analogous moments of visual overdetermination in *Little Dorrit*. Echoing Kincaid's identification of the "blurred" or ambiguous quality of Dickensian imagery, I suggest that Dickens's self-reflexive undermining of representation is symbolised by a text which repeatedly moves in and out of focus. This idea is further extended by a reading of illumination and darkness as metaphors for presence and alterity respectively, in both *The Great Fire of London* and *Little Dorrit*. I also examine the position of the shadow in both texts, arguing that the foregrounding of this ambivalent entity serves to mark the doubleness of writing. It works, I argue, as a motif for iterability; a tentative articulation of an unspeakable temporal and spatial otherness contained within the text and (in the case of *Little Dorrit*) its illustrations. The eventual destruction of the film set in Ackroyd's narrative corresponds with the final chapter of the novel, empowering the reader to deconstruct the author's own post-structuralist position through the intervention of a text which has so cleverly represented his ideas, thereby restoring the importance and power of literature as a self-reflexive product.

The last two chapters of the book answer the criticism often levelled at post-structuralism: that deconstruction is a-political, only interested in destroying/reformulating textual bodies and institutions.⁹ Both these chapters reinforce the observation that the dialectical structure of signification is also the structure of political power, of class and gender identities. In psychoanalytical terms, it can be traced back to the

structuring of consciousness itself, as subjectivity develops in response to a culture which is itself marked by the same doubleness as the individual psyche. In Chapter 3, I read Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860) in dialogue with Peter Carey's postcolonial and metafictional reworking, *Jack Maggs* (1997), in order to examine the practice of *mimicry* as it is enacted both between and within the novels. Using Homi K. Bhabha's various critiques of the paradoxical function/effect of mimicry in relation to imperial subjectivity, I suggest that mimicry is shown to be a mode of—and a threat to—hegemony's self-image and its constructions of otherness. On a narrative level, I associate this with the acts of forgery and counterfeiting (with all the Derridean implications of that word) which are performed within the plots of both novels. These acts imply the strategic production of defective copies which mimic ostensibly genuine articles: hybridic imitations whose production represents a negotiation of the contradictions of identification and a reinforcement of categorisation, but which simultaneously return to the surveilling eye to unnerve the status of apparently authentic identities and archaic categories. In *Great Expectations* mimicry uncannily reveals the ambivalent structure of middle-class identity, before being reappropriated to rearticulate spurious notions of an essential, classless gentility. Countertextually, this movement is reactivated by the infringement of the mimetic postcolonial novel upon the body of the English canon, an infringement which devalues Eurocentric/Imperial literary authority even as it participates in its economy. Such problematic imitations are described as *bad copies*, and their menace lies in their contagious imprecision and insubstantiality. Recalling the mutant monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (another intertext of *Great Expectations* and *Jack Maggs*), the bad copy returns like the proverbial bad penny — problematising the categories of self and other, creator and created, archetype and stereotype. A "misshapen creature [...] impiously made", the mimetic body disturbs identity and destabilises power-relations, its perverse and persistent attention deconstructing the object of its affection.¹⁰

Chapter 4 reads Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) alongside Graham Swift's novel *Waterland* (1983) and Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), and its length marks both the complexity of the criticism used and its attempt to synthesise the narrative theories of the preceding chapters into a new frame of reference. I use the psychoanalytical vocabulary of Kristeva's work to examine how political revolution and literary productivity can both be read as a replaying of primary psychological processes: specifically that founding moment of subjectivity and signification which Kristeva calls the *thetic break*. By

reading revolution as a re-enactment of the journey from infantile semiotic schism to mature symbolic subjectivity, I argue that the portrayal of riot and political reformation in *A Tale of Two Cities* represents a second-degree thetic break. In Dickens's text there is a violent liberation of primal semiotic drives (represented by riot and its description in terms of multivalent fluidity) followed by a re-negotiation of the terms of the symbolic order; this illustrates Kristeva's theory of transposition, which has already figured in this introduction. The thetic break can only be completed—and transposition realised—if the subject is fully reintegrated back into the symbolic order at the end of the process and hence rendered meaningful. In this way the political success of the revolution ironically depends upon the subjugation of the riotous forces which generated it, forces which are embodied in the energetic but nihilistic figure of Madame Defarge. Only through her death can discipline be restored, revolution articulated and a new body politic emerge. This body, however, remains *in process*—Kristeva's term for the ambivalence which produces the subject, an ambivalence which is exacerbated and “brought to consciousness” through the act of revolution.

This reading is then opened out to discuss how far the literary (or, as Kristeva calls it, poetic language) can be considered a revolutionary activity, enacting a second-degree thetic and producing new symbolic forms which are replete with the semiotic charges which produced them. Kristeva suggests that literary discourse recalls the semiotic through its *genotext*, admitting those charges which are repressed by the symbolic during its development. In “exporting semiotic motility across the border on which the symbolic is established” the writer becomes “the bearer of death” (Kristeva), his text acting as a conduit to those forces which threaten to collapse the symbolic and force it to rearticulate itself in new and creative ways.¹¹ Referring to the many images of death and resurrection in Dickens's text, I examine how the genotext is conveyed in *A Tale of Two Cities*, how the rearticulation of the symbolic phenotext is achieved and the extent to which Dickens is comfortable with the unstable productivity of his text.

The images of fluid insurrection and bodily resurrection found in Dickens's text find an echo in Swift's *Waterland*, and in the second half of this chapter I use the liminal and unstable topography of this novel as a metaphor for the revolutionary nature of poetic language. The Fens, I argue, embody the idea of doubleness and dramatise the motile economy of signification which “poetic language” itself performs. As a metaphor for writing, the instability of this landscape proves subversive and even the most symbolically dogmatic forms of discourse (specifically grand

historical narratives) find their univocal status eroded after contact with this mixed body. The waterways which cut through the land are made to represent the semiotic and its narrative genotextual traces, with the locks and banks of the canal system marking the disciplinary mechanisms established by the symbolic. In this way, difference is portrayed as being at the service of the symbolic order; it is subject to the strict boundaries and categories which this order uses to organise the dialectical drives of signification. However at moments of political, historical or personal unrest in the book, the waters temporarily overcome the land and the topography is left irrevocably changed or transposed. This semiotic superfluity recalls both the depiction of political revolution given in *A Tale of Two Cities* and the description given in Kristeva's *Revolutions in Poetic Language* of literary productivity. I draw upon Kristeva's later psychoanalytical works to identify those characters in the novel who feel most profoundly alienated from the symbolic and vulnerable to semiotic assault; in this section I draw on the ideas of *objectal depression*, *melancholia* and *writing-as-therapy* outlined in Kristeva's study of the poet Nerval, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989). In *Waterland*, monolithic constructions of identity and text are eroded and restored in non-dogmatic forms by a novel which remains self-consciously "in process".

Finally, the conclusion of this book uses the images of manufacturing (specifically weaving) suggested by *Hard Times* (1854) to illustrate the conspicuous doubleness of Dickens's texts, and the effect which this has on Dickensian readings and writings. Describing Dickens as "The Great Manufacturer" I argue that his polarised texts dramatise productivity in a uniquely extravagant manner, their negotiations not performed "behind the scenes" but exploding upon those scenes in spectacular fashion. Dickens's disciplinary strategies and his authoritarian, imaginary fantasies are shown to be inconsistent and ineffective against the sheer dynamism of his texts. The excessive length, generic instability and narrative unpredictability which were once considered by critics to be signs of an "ill-disciplined" mind are, in the context of this work, melodramatic demonstrations of the uncontrollable and dialogic nature of literary productivity.¹² This conclusion is informed by many examples of Dickensian post-structuralist criticism published over the last three decades. Initiated by J. Hillis-Miller's landmark deconstructive introduction to *Bleak House*, this thesis is particularly indebted to the works of Steven Connor, Audrey Jaffe, James Kincaid, John Schad and Julian Wolfreys.¹³ All these critics have responded more favourably towards Dickens's overt instability, making the various types of paradox identified in his texts the object of

their interest rather than a force to be disciplined and resolved. Some contemporary writers have also begun to use this same instability as the theme and mode of their own works; in this way, I argue that Dickens could be considered profoundly metafictional—a proto Magic-Realist, rather than a failed Realist.¹⁴

This conclusion leads to a deconstruction of this study itself and an examination of the ways in which it represses the doubleness so confidently diagnosed in Dickens and his literary heirs. I self-reflexively locate the ways in which my own reading reinforces discipline in order to protect its own academic status and value. I do this by drawing upon the descriptions of reading provided by texts in preceding chapters, specifically those (such as *Hard Times* itself) which describe the repressive strategies of displacement and containment used in philosophical, academic and critical discourse. Using these descriptions I also look for instances at which these strategies could be seen to “fail” in my book, for those remarkable moments when the extreme productivity of Dickens overtakes my work and—in a final demonstration of countercontextual dialogue—incites it to reveal its own productive doubleness.

Notes

¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Adrian Poole (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p. 440. Subsequent references are given in parentheses with the abbreviation *OMF*.

² Introduction to *Our Mutual Friend*, *ibid.* pp. ix–xxiv (p. ix).

³ Kristeva introduced the term “intertextuality” to French academe during the second half of the 1960s. In works such as her 1966 essay “Word, Dialogue, Novel” (in *Desire in Language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora and Alice Jardine [New York: Columbia University Press, 1980], pp. 64–91) she presents Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas to a western audience for the first time and begins developing them, using the idea of “dialogics” to formulate post-structuralist semiotic theory. At almost the same time in America Harold Bloom was introducing a distinctive new version of literary-critical psychoanalysis and drawing attention to the self-divided nature of texts (specifically Romantic poetry) in *The Anxiety of Influence: a theory of poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). In this, as in later essays, he argues that poetry is characterised by a Freudian anxiety; it is torn between the patrimonial linguistic inheritance derived from its literary forefathers (what Bloom calls a sense of “belatedness”) and its desire to be original, autonomous and influential in its own right. It is an anxiety which is shared by readers and critics as well as writers. In *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), Bloom argues that:

Poetic meaning [is] radically indeterminate. Reading [...] is very nearly

impossible for every reader's relation to every poem is governed by a figuration of belatedness [...] A poet attempting to make this language *new* necessarily begins by an arbitrary act of reading that does not differ in kind from the act that his readers subsequently must perform on him. (Bloom, p.69)

⁴ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by M. Holquist, trans. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981) and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by C. Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984). In the latter work, originally published in 1963, Bakhtin describes the novels of Dostoevsky (a writer often compared to Dickens) as "dialogic" products, whose literary power lies in their "double-voiced discourse" and radical heterogeneity. Dostoevsky's texts, he argues, illustrate that:

The word is not a material thing but rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of dialogic interaction. It never gravitates toward a single consciousness or a single voice. The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. (Bakhtin, p. 201)

⁵ Jacques Derrida's descriptions of the *contre* and the counter-position of his own work can be found in many of his last works. These include *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. by Maurizio Ferraris (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 50, and "A Certain "Madness" Must Watch Over Thinking" in *Points: Interviews 1974-1994*, ed. by Elizabeth Weber, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 339-65 (p. 346).

⁶ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁷ Roland Barthes' definition of writerly or "scriptible" texts, detailed in his book *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), is significant here. Writerly texts are those that invite the reader to become an active producer of meaning, consciously struggling with the self-difference of language in a way that mirrors the processes of the text itself. This is in opposition to readerly or "lisible" texts, which encourage the reader to view him/herself as the passive consumer of stable signs and monolithic meaning. The nineteenth century realist text might be seen as the apotheosis of readerly discourse, but in the course of Barthes' analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine* this example of the lisible text gradually takes on the ambivalence of the scriptible. By this conversion Barthes implies that scriptibility is less an inherent quality of the text and more a product of reading, although it could also be argued that some texts are more resistant to writerly interpretations than others. The suggestion that Dickens's texts are profoundly unstable and thus encourage scriptable readings is explored in more detail in chapter 2, where the works of Barthes are also examined in more detail

⁸ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 99. Subsequent references are given in parentheses with the abbreviation *BH*.

⁹ Post-structuralism has been attacked most vociferously, not by traditional "Leavisite" critics (see conclusion), but by some Marxist and feminist theorists

who feel that its concentration on semiotics fails to address how language discursively materialises in society and is used to create actual power relations. By consistently demolishing any idea of structure—deconstructing concepts of identity, politics and culture—such critics argue that post-structuralism demoralises humanity, its persistent nihilism trivialising the value of personal empowerment and political action. They accuse it of being defeatist, impotent and academically narcissistic. In *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) Terry Eagleton attacks Anglo-American interpretations of French theory, criticising post-structuralists such as Paul De Man for representing deconstruction as a purely textual practice rather than extending it to the “texts” of psychology, politics and history:

The view that the most significant aspect of any piece of language is that it does not know what it is talking about smacks of a jaded resignation to the impossibility of truth which is by no means unrelated to post-1968 historical disillusion. But it also frees you at a stroke from having to assume a position on important issues [...] A further benefit of this stance is that it is mischievously radical in respect of everyone else’s opinions, able to unmask the most solemn declarations as mere dishevelled play of signs, while utterly conservative in every other way. Since it commits you to affirming nothing, it is as injurious as blank ammunition. (Eagleton, p.145)

Similarly, Kristeva’s writings continue to attract the anger of many Anglo-American feminists who accuse her of either essentialising women by privileging the maternal body, or denying feminine identity altogether and belittling collective action. In *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1985), Toril Moi concludes an otherwise sympathetic assessment of Kristeva’s work by criticising the lack of direct political engagement in her writing:

In the end, Kristeva is unable to account for the relations between the subject and society. Though she discusses in exemplary fashion the social and political context of the poets she studies in *La Révolution du langage poétique*, it is still not clear why it is so important to show that certain literary practices break up the structures of language when they seem to break up little else. She seems essentially to argue that the disruption of the subject, the *sujet en procès* displayed in these texts, prefigures or parallels revolutionary disruptions of society. But her only argument in support of this contention is the rather lame one of [...] homology. Nowhere are we given a specific analysis of the actual social or political structures that would produce such a homologous relationship between the subjective and the social. (Moi, p.171)

¹⁰ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Angus Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 354. Subsequent references are given in parentheses with the abbreviation *GE*.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 70.

¹² These accusations of “ill-discipline” are explored in more detail in the conclusion, where John Ruskin’s and F.R. Leavis’s ambivalent responses to Dickens’s writing are discussed.

¹³ J. Hillis Miller, Introduction to *Bleak House*, ed. by Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 11-34.

Specific works which have proved particularly valuable to my reading of Dickens include Steven Connor's *Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), Audrey Jaffe's *Vanishing Points: Narrative and the Subject of Omniscience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), James Kincaid's *Annoying the Victorians* (London: Routledge, 1995) and John Schad's *Victorians in Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) and *The Reader in the Dickensian Mirrors* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Apart from the authors specifically discussed in the following chapters, I give further examples in the conclusion to this book.

CHAPTER ONE

“A DIRTY HANGER-ON AND DISOWNED RELATION OF THE LAW”: COUNTERSIGNATORY NARRATIVES AND DECONSTRUCTION IN DICKENS’S *BLEAK HOUSE*, PETER ACKROYD’S *DICKENS* AND JACQUES DERRIDA’S “ULYSSES GRAMOPHONE”

The word “contre”, counter or against, can equally and at the same time mark both opposition, contrariety, contradiction *and* proximity, near-contact [...] The word “contre” possesses these two inseparable meanings of proximity and vis-à-vis, on the one hand, and opposition on the other [...] it happens that for a long time I have “cultivated” or “allowed to be cultivated” in numerous texts the formidable ambiguity of this “contre”. (Jacques Derrida, “Countersignature”) ¹

I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages. (Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 62)

Peter Ackroyd’s *Dickens* represents a radically new and ambitious approach to biographical writing on more than one level. As its ambivalent reception by reviewers demonstrates, the text makes different demands upon its readers than previous (and subsequent) biographical works by the same author, most of which are characterised by an adherence to generic convention.² Many critics were uncomfortable with the esoteric literary interludes incorporated within the biography, to the extent that when the biography was reprinted these interludes were removed (only to be later reinstated).³ The most disturbing aspect of the biography was its perceived postmodern status, specifically the playful, performative language which repeatedly destabilises the relationship between reader and narrative, author and subject. The text not only provides an inordinately detailed and

comprehensively researched account of the “life and works” of Dickens but also dramatises within its alternate fictionalised narrative the problem of reference and interpretation. The deconstructive use of double narratives is a strategy identified and performed by French theorist Jacques Derrida, whose work on the *contre* (and its textual manifestation in the *countersign*) informs this chapter. Ackroyd’s text, like Derrida’s, demonstrates the impossibility of maintaining a static epistemological model of writing, and presents a self-conscious oscillation between narrative voices, critical positions and generic forms. It establishes competing theoretical paradigms that engage in dialogue with each other and subsequently reveal the dialogic nature of their own procedures. The contradictions and paradoxes established *between* these paradigms instigates indetermination *within* theoretical discourse, breaking down the binary positioning of the textual and metatextual asserted by theory. In Ackroyd’s texts, claim Gibson and Wolfreys, “the structures of identity will just not stay in place, their architectures refuse to stay still”. “In doing so”, they continue, “[these texts] disturb any overarching system, any perceived or perceivable architectonic form”.⁴

By parodying the discourses of both empiricism and structuralism, Ackroyd’s text disabuses theory of the ideal of metalingual distance and introduces a sense of ambiguity as to where *meaning*—“the assertion of being in any given system” (Gibson and Wolfreys, p. 33)—lies. The recognition of theoretical writing as literary, as well as philosophical (with all the connotations that those terms hold in a post-Derridean context), marks Ackroyd’s text as deconstructive: it draws attention to its own position “astride the boundary of fiction and criticism, being both a secondary critical act and an act of creative production”.⁵ This Janus-faced position, argues Derrida, is at the heart of literature’s vitality. It is necessary for the repeatability and the difference, the unstable mix of the general and the singular, which occurs within all writing and which is mirrored in the reading process. Such an argument holds implications not simply for theoretical discourses therefore, but also addresses the issue of meaning as located in fictional texts. Just as the presence of a singular and idiomatic creativity can be detected within a text that overtly aligns itself with philosophy, so too should the presence of the philosophical be detectable in a literature that attempts to define itself as purely and playfully fictional.⁶ If fiction serves a philosophical—as well as a creative—function, this not only confirms the metafictional status of these texts but also allows for less fashionable concepts to enter the fray, such as referentiality, universality and coherence. This idea is also played out in *Dickens*, as the fictional interludes which trouble the empiricism of the

main body of the text also ironically reinstate philosophy and generate new theoretical models to explain their subject (be that Dickens or the nature of biography itself). These models are, Derrida argues in “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes In Joyce”, destabilised in turn by further dialogue between themselves—dialogue which establishes a “space for a re-marking which [...] in the same double way, defies and calls for translation”.⁷ A further level of interest occurs in the relationship between Ackroyd’s *Dickens* and *Bleak House*, another novel of dual narration where dialogue between/within the epistemologies of the omniscient narrator and Esther Summerson serves to “re-mark” the text: this split text also performs the unstable migratory economy of signification, as meaning is recurrently articulated and destabilised at all levels.

In his introduction to *Derrida and Literature*, Derek Attridge details the self-conscious paradox of Derrida’s engagement with literature. This engagement, he suggests, re-enacts the irony of reading; reading, for Derrida, is an exercise that responds simultaneously to the textual traces of the formal and comprehensible, and the idiomatic and ambiguous. Derrida labels literature that appeals overtly to the former impulses (whilst repressing the latter) as “philosophical”. Theory works, Attridge suggests, “under the sign of philosophy”:

Literature has often been read in terms of a dominant meaning or form; although a given critical tradition may emphasise one of these at the expense of the other, or insist on their interdependence, this does not diminish the determining force of the philosophical categories themselves.⁸

Such writing searches for meaning in notions of origin (biographical, historical, socio-economic, psychoanalytical) or goals (aesthetic, moral, spiritual or political), and presents itself as metaphysical, mimetic and inherently truthful. The philosophical, it could be argued, is what gives language its substance and lends it the appearance of *presence*; it ensures that the drive to name, to communicate that name and hence establish meaning, survives.⁹ There is an otherness to the philosophical, however, which represents an unspeakable openness—an “undecidability which is also always an opportunity and a demand, a chance and a risk” (Attridge, p. 5). Such an unnameable absence creates a space for creativity, allowing the continuity of interpretation, the freedom to find different names and to establish alternative meanings. Derrida calls evidence of this internal vacuum, among other things, “aporia”, “difference”, “the trace” or “the supplement”—although he does so in the knowledge that, by naming it, he ironically attempts to force it back into the realm of presence and the philosophical.¹⁰ And it is here that the central irony of textuality lies: it is

this otherness, the strange undecidability within language, which licenses the rearticulation of the philosophical. Derrida's difficulty in finding a critical term to describe that which both encourages and eludes meaning demonstrates that these categories are not, and can never be, self-contained and that both terms are simultaneously at work in literature as it is written and read. Even discourses that align themselves strongly to the philosophical (for example literary theory or biography) cannot escape ambiguity; in such cases, ambiguity proves not only to be their subject, but is also inescapably replicated in their own creative formulations. Reading demands that such otherness must remain a precondition of the philosophical, as surely as the manifestation of the philosophical within literature ensures the possibility of repetition, translation and interpretation. The name that Derrida gives to this co-implication of presence and difference is *iterability*, the potential of the text (or any sign system) to be read as both familiar and strange.¹¹ Attridge states that:

Iterability- which overruns the conventional borderline between substance and accident, necessity and chance- both makes meaningful items and events possible, and prevents them from being meaningful in the sense that philosophy [...] would ideally want- single, self-identical representations of prior, whole meanings. (Attridge, p. 18)

In addition to the unstable categories which Attridge identifies ("substance and accident, necessity and chance") one could also add the categories of "masterly fictions" and "contingencies" which figure so prominently in *Bleak House* and in the title of this book itself.

"Ulysses Gramophone" confronts the specific problem that such a thesis presents to the post-structuralist critic: namely, how one acknowledges the activities of this literary otherness even whilst engaged in one of the most philosophical of intellectual disciplines. Is it possible to address the iterability of one's own criticism without a vocabulary to locate that nameless term which the philosophical attempts to domesticate, downplay or even deny? Any attempt to isolate this term textually—to name, dissect and discuss it from without—is necessarily a philosophical strategy, a repression of that double bind which literature contains within itself. One way of approaching this paradox is through performance, through acting out different literary discourses alongside one another. These discourses inevitably demonstrate the philosophical drive, but the difference between them implies the ludic otherness which allows creativity, resists stability and escapes control. The staging of the space between counter-discourses provides an intimation of the idiomatic, the singular and the unrepeatable within the operation of literature. Derrida