

Both *Madame Bovary* and *The Man Who Loved Children* explore the lives of women who suffer from intellectual and verbal poverty. Emma and Henny are unable to perceive the hollowness of the language of wisdom and significance to which Homais and Sam lay claim. Only Louisa comes to understand that the platitudinous language of her father is a vehicle of deception and self-aggrandizement, a perversion of true intellectual discourse.

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Dickens's Phenomenological Reality

One does not have to accept the phenomenological nature of all perceived reality—although I think I might—to recognize that the “reality” we experience in works of literature can be so described: “It is a commonplace of phenomenology that any given act of consciousness is a highly complex and highly structured *synthesis* of elements and ‘forms’ which, though they can be isolated for purposes of analysis, are given together inseparably in the united whole which is an actual act of consciousness. Elements of ‘the imaginary,’ of ‘the fictive,’ of ‘the past,’ of ‘the historical,’ of ‘the cultural,’ of ‘the ideal,’ surround and are inextricably *given with* any complete act of perception, not to mention the qualities of feeling, mood, volition, or emotion such an act may contain as well.”¹ So much so, in fact, that any thorough and sensitive reader or critic might respond to such formulations much as M. Jourdain took the news that he had been talking prose all his life. Or, as Merleau-Ponty says, get the impression “not so much of encountering a new philosophy as of recognizing what they had been waiting for.”² Such recognition has by now found a home even in the pages of *PMLA*.³

Five recent interpretations of the reality in/of Dickens's fiction show the range and limits of this literary “reality.”⁴ All five of these books, even Slater's, show how we could experience Dickens's writings, what forms our acts of consciousness toward them could take.

¹James M. Edie, “William James on the Structure of Experience,” *New Essays in Phenomenology* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), p. 235.

²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “What Is Phenomenology?” in *European Literary Theory and Practice*, ed. Vernon W. Gras (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 70.

³See, for example, Thomas E. Lewis, “Notes Toward a Theory of the Referent,” *PMLA*, 94 (May 1979), 459-75.

⁴Robert Newsom, *Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Barry Westburg, *The Confessional Fictions of Charles Dickens* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1977); John Romano, *Dickens and Reality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Michael Slater, ed., *Dickens on America and the Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978); Michael Steig, *Dickens and Phiz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

Michael Slater's *Dickens on America and the Americans* makes us ask how all-inclusive yet selectively referential our consciousness of a specific Dickens work or theme can allow itself to become—to the extent that we can control such consciousness or, at the least, give certain “elements and ‘forms’” privilege. For Slater has enthusiastically gathered, with little evaluation, material from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *American Notes*, Dickens's letters and speeches, and mid-nineteenth-century pictorial images of the objects of Dickens's literary and extra-literary attention. The following comment illustrates both Slater's method and its limitations: “This is some of the most powerful writing in *American Notes*, but I have not included any of it in this anthology because it seems to me to transcend the matter of America altogether” (“Introduction,” p. 28). Such exclusions limit *Dickens on America and the Americans* to biography and history, and on the most literal and documentary level. I hope it is not ungracious to label the pictorially handsome and diverting result as, in both the least and best senses, naïve. Slater's excerpts, most of which once existed within their own full literary text, have been exiled from it toward or into another arbitrary text centripetal, extrinsic, even irrelevant to that reality Dickens created for himself and his readers the only way he knew how, in the forms it took for him.

Michael Steig's *Dickens and Phiz*, on the other hand, takes us constantly back into Dickens's reality. By narrating the close collaboration between author and illustrator and glossing the even closer interaction between illustration and text, Steig adds a genuine dimension to our experience of all Dickens's writings fortunate enough to have been “interpreted”—there can be no other word—by Phiz's iconographic skills and vision. Such interpretations earn their way into our consciousness of these writings by the illustrations' own interest and authority along with their relation to the writings. For as Steig shows in great and fascinating detail, “we find that the illustrator is at once collaborator, attempting to express the author's intention visually; interpreter, offering his own comments on the meaning of the work; and perhaps even an *artist*, sometimes creating independently valuable works of art. The paramount problem for readers of Dickens, a problem at once both aesthetic and interpretive, is how to ‘read’ the text and illustrations in conjunction with one another” (p. 3). Moreover, Steig rightly refuses to bind us to a narrow historicity, for “even if not a single Victorian reader recognized the complexities of the illustrations they are there, like the complexities of the texts” (p. 5).

Even more prodigiously illustrated than *Dickens on America and the Americans*, *Dickens and Phiz* is also a guide to the shape of Hablot Browne's career and to early-nineteenth-century book illustration generally. But we are never too far removed from our direct experience of Dickens's reality, and Steig constantly turns our outer and inner eyes back toward it. There, with Steig's guidance, we may discover—as perhaps Dickens himself sometimes did—not only “an important fact to be dealt with in the illustration, which thereafter will become an integral part of the novel” (p. 171), “ideas which if stated baldly in the text would strike the reader as mawkish” (p. 119), and “thematic commentary by means of emblematic details, formal parallels between contiguous and scattered plates, character placement, physiognomy, and several kinds of external allusion” (p. 63); but even, and above all, “disturbing visual evidence of his text's implications” (p. 56).

At first glance Barry Westburg like Steig and even Slater lays out the phenomenology of Dickens's “confessional fictions” diachronically in time from *Oliver Twist* through *David Copperfield* to *Great Expectations*. Robert Newsom and John Romano on the other hand, as we shall see, primarily examine Dickens's relation to “reality” synchronically in structural and epistemological space. All

three proceed toward Dickens's reality by way of an implicit or explicit mid-twentieth-century phenomenological reassessment of the nature of reality itself. Moreover, although each critic chooses to emphasize certain of Dickens's writings, together they bring most of the major novels into the argument and thus offer, taken together, a reevaluation of Dickens's total fictional art and its modes⁵ of reality.

If for Westburg Dickens's three confessional novels are synchronically "both the compulsive repetition and the strategic renewal of a single creative act" (p. xvi), nevertheless they form a diachronic "shift from representational, mimetic art of a kind of abstraction, an art of pure construction, an art of internal rather than external reference" (p. xvi). They become more self-consciously reflexive until "the artist's life is decomposed in favor of the activity of art itself" (p. xvii), and "*Great Expectations* confesses itself as a fiction about fiction-making, and in this sense it is self-critical" (p. xvii). At which point "Pip's life story," which some of us had still thought the novel was about, becomes "the pre-text for this final self-commentary" (p. xviii). By now we may wonder whether, as Newsom says of Hillis Miller, Westburg "overshoots his mark and, brilliantly, demystifies fiction itself" (p. 13). For, to quote Newsom again, "we know *Bleak House* is a novel and that therefore its characters 'exist only in language.' But what we know is not necessarily the same as what we believe, and I suggest that most readers of the novel believe in its characters" (pp. 13-14). In the mean time, and granting that Westburg invites us to consider only certain of Dickens's novels and those only in a certain way, what does he have to offer?

He identifies four themes: "time, growth, identity, and fiction" (pp. xviii, 1, et passim), "mutually implicated in self-conscious developmental narratives, in confessional fictions" (p. xviii). These four themes are central enough to any prose fiction to justify close scrutiny from whatever perspective: objective or subjective, empirical or phenomenological, old or new. The question then becomes whether the themes' "mutual implication" will allow us, from Westburg's "confessional" perspective, to retain the full possibility of the dialectic with other critical perspectives. The answer to this question must recognize, by our phenomenological premise, not only Westburg's own strategic emphases, but the context of previous Dickens criticism against which such emphases are weighted.

As a "predevelopmental fiction" *Oliver Twist* is significant to Westburg first for what it is not: "emptiness" (p. 5), "no direction" (p. 6), "no temporal depth . . . not a *Bildungsroman*" (p. 11). Against these lacks can be set the novel's "providential myth" (p. 10) and, to Westburg more interesting, its intimations of a real if ambiguous "identity crisis" (p. 14) for its child hero at the hands of Fagin and its more direct illustration or symbolization through the thieves of many "problems of identity" (p. 19), above all "the concealments that language makes possible" (p. 22) and "the practice of guile" (p. 24). Confined in this novel to "the complex mental life of criminals" (p. 24), such "explorations—or, rather, constructions—paved the way for the psychological treatment of character in the developmental novels" (p. 24) and give at least the "rudiments" of a genuine "time-consciousness" (p. 28).⁶

⁵Compare Howard Gardner's recent use of this term in *The Quest for Mind* (New York: Knopf, 1974), pp. 204-09.

⁶In a fascinating appendix Westburg extends our consciousness of the novel to include history and biography by tracing *Oliver Twist*'s "complex pattern of allusion to personages and events in seventeenth-century Parliamentary politics . . . which, in fact, leads us to discover the autobiographical-confessional dimension" (p. 193). This Joycean pattern also strikingly exemplifies "the uncanny" which, as we shall see, Newsom finds phenomenologically characteristic of Dickensian reality.

All this, while convincing by its own terms, is almost antithetical to John Romano's version of the same novel. Nancy, for example, whom Westburg hardly mentions, Romano finds "the hero proper," so that "Pip shares the *topoi* of heroism not with Oliver but with Nancy: the change of heart, the self-discovery through self-sacrifice, the return to 'original nature'" (pp. 136-37). What for Westburg was *Oliver Twist's* nearly irrelevant "providential myth" (p. 10) Romano expands by "quasi-allegorical interpretations and interpretation by schema" (p. 119) into the novel's central, objective, thematic "sentimental criticism of philosophy" (p. 128). Romano finds this "sentimentalism" as real as the identities Westburg discerns inhabiting the novel's underworld, if not more real, a moral strength that "has for its cause an unwillingness to trap or confine the real force of good, and that . . . can itself be honored as intelligent and realistic" (p. 120). Where Westburg cites Erik Erikson, Norman O. Brown, and R. D. Laing, Romano cites Marx and Raymond Williams. Yet both, like Newsom, make considerable use of Steven Marcus, whose own writings on *Oliver Twist* as well as Westburg's and Romano's persuade us that the book's full phenomenological reality can contain both "a predevelopmental fiction" and "a novel of social evils" (p. 136), and no doubt also, if one wished to demonstrate it, a look at "the romantic side of familiar things."

Not only is *David Copperfield* central to Westburg's confessional form of Dickens's reality, but Westburg's special approach is central to *David Copperfield* in a way it may not be to *Oliver Twist* or even *Great Expectations*. With Q. D. Leavis's chapter in *Dickens the Novelist* and Spilka's *Dickens and Kafka*, it restores the novel to the rank it held in earlier Dickens criticism, but with a fuller phenomenology of its subjective reality: subjective at once to its hero, its narrator, and its author. Even the novel's full original title, "Personal History, Adventures, Experience, and Observation," suggests to Westburg *David Copperfield's* major phenomenological dimensions. In two long chapters Westburg takes us, as does the novel, from the self-recapture of repetitive memory toward the self-knowledge of nonnarcissistic education. Taking clues from such critics as Poulet, Lacan, Bachelard, and Sartre, Westburg looks closely at memories, mirrors, space, and language, to chart the major stages of David's journey. But neither David as hero or narrator nor even Dickens as novelist have reached that goal by the novel's compromised ending, in which the future fails David, whose story, unlike Dickens's, is over. With that ending David can journey existentially no further; by his choice of that particular ending, Westburg reminds us, Dickens begins to move beyond this fictional self to others.

O'er leaping Esther's narrative in *Bleak House* and other indirect forms of "confession," Westburg completes his study with *Great Expectations*. How can I suggest, apparently paradoxically, that his confessional analysis, no matter how relevant, is less central to the phenomenology of this work? There can be no quarrel with Westburg's first argument, that "Pip is a creature of passage in a much fuller sense than David is, much more supple in change" (p. 115). His second argument, that "*Great Expectations* is confessional partly in that it dramatizes its author's imaginative development as a writer of narrative" (p. 117) is more problematic, and the problematic term is "dramatizes." Any late, great work of fiction will evidence or embody its author's development; but "dramatizes" proposes a degree of reflexive aesthetic allegory we may feel to be central neither to the genre of the novel nor to Dickens. Nor even to *Great Expectations*, confessional though it clearly is in other vivid and complex ways: formal, thematic, autobiographical, even cultural. Again it may help to recall Newsom's distinction between what we are quite genuinely persuaded to "know" and what we continue, nevertheless, to "believe."

I have nothing but the highest praise for Westburg's thoughtful, sophisticated presentation of *Great Expectations*' confessional form and that form's well-known thematic burdens—a total synthesis to the point of originality of the vast explicatory industry carried on over three decades of Dickens criticism. In this fourth chapter Westburg gives us this form and these burdens definitively. In his fifth chapter he turns partly away from Pip's much fuller, more supple passage to begin his second argument: "how Dickens has intensified his life-long explorations of the significance of art and the imagination" (p. 159), "what Dickens's most remarkable fiction has to tell us about itself" (p. 160), while at the same time, significantly, carrying on with his previous concerns. For Westburg, Dickens tells Pip's progress with an art so *artificial* and *abstract* (his emphases) that it must "reveal the fictiveness of this assumption," "this structuralist, *Bildungsroman* logic, which traditionally shows good coming out of evil" (pp. 167-68).

However, paradox upon paradox, Dickens's persuasive portrayal of Pip's existential reality wins out, for this reader, over Westburg's brilliant exposition of its fictive artifice or perhaps, to be fair, by means of it. Pip's story, fuller and more meaningful than ever, remains in the center of *Great Expectations*, enriched by the full phenomenology of its confessional form. Westburg's short concluding chapter, which emphasizes that material in *Great Expectations* which indeed, for a moment, "supports the view that the work is at once ethically neutral, messageless about life, and yet still significant as an aesthetic confession, a confession about, and by means of, art" (p. 180), that "the Dickens narrative of time and growth is a confession about fiction-making itself" (p. 185), even this forceful conclusion cannot displace Pip's human story from the novel's center. Which may be what Westburg really intended all along.

As already suggested, Romano's "reality" and Newsom's "things" cover a wider phenomenological range than Westburg's "confessions." Moreover, they point our attention toward a Dickensian reality more substantial both in itself and in its relation to the world's reality, but never naively so. For both critics also reject any strictly empirical, commonsense ontology for the "world" and question unqualified mimetic critical standards that derive from such an ontology, standards by which Dickens's "reality" was, in older, simpler times, found wanting. In fact, although neither book shows explicit awareness of the other, they move out, in different directions, from a common core of phenomenological conviction about Dickens and, by implication, about reality.

Romano's reading of *Our Mutual Friend* suggests to him that "for Dickens, all epistemologies are false epistemologies, by virtue of the mental act of imposing form upon reality in which they consist" (p. 46). Newsom, in turn, finds in *Bleak House* Freud's "uncanny," a "tension . . . between two quite different frames of reference, the commonsensical and rationalistic view of scientific skepticism on the one hand, and the primitive belief in the supernatural on the other" (p. 66). Both these propositions lead directly to Romano's conclusion that *Dombey and Son*, for example, evinces "another kind of relationship to reality in the novel, equal in importance to verisimilitude, and equal at least in its claims to the denomination of 'realism'" (p. 166), and also to Newsom's that "the multiple and divided selves of [Bleak House] are not simply the products of Dickens' pyrotechnic toying with uncanny effects, but the necessary effect of living in a world which is chiefly characterized by its repression and suppression of the past" (p. 92). Both critics, for similar and obvious reasons, engage Ian Watt in a vigorous critical debate.

Romano and Newsom found their respective studies on the close, very perceptive analysis of the phenomenology of a single novel: for Romano, *Our Mutual Friend*; for Newsom, *Bleak House*. But where Romano extends his discoveries helpfully to include other Dickens novels whose "reality" requires similar reassessment, Newsom expands his phenomenology of *Bleak House* to include its biographical and cultural significances and to hazard an hypothesis about the novel as a genre. Such expansions lie well within a great novel's legitimate phenomenological identity. Biographically "one encounters the same sort of insistent and ferocious, even if quite delicately veiled, resonances and reverberations between the life and the book that we have seen operating in the book itself and that, to my mind, are essential to the experience of reading the book" (p. 97). Culturally *Bleak House* is both "a typically Victorian statement about the loss of faith" (p. 113) and, less typically, "one of the first examples we have of the late Victorian doctrine of the will to believe" (p. 116). Finally, and of importance to readers of any prose fiction, not just Dickens's, "to characterize the novel as an unstable, synthesizing genre" (p. 141), as Newsom's final chapter convincingly does, "very much changes the traditional shape of the history of the novel" (p. 142). Thus "the tension that is suggested by Dickens's phrase, 'the romantic side of familiar things,' and that, as we have seen, is embodied in a host of ways by his novel, is I believe the same tension—or family of tensions, perhaps—that is centrally organizing generally in the novel as a form" (p. 149), a tension that in *Bleak House* "is discovered to be deeply problematic" (p. 150). To conclude, "as long as novels maintain their capacity to amuse us with their play between the empirical and the fictional, they will retain the capacity deeply to unsettle us, for as long as reality is something that *can* be played with, it will remain, like all toys—no matter of how highly serious or educational a kind—something that can be broken" (p. 151).⁷

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⁷Or, as Gerald Graff even more skeptically puts it, "the view of literature as the sovereign orderer of reality and our most valuable means of making sense of the world is strangely licensed by our view that reality is not susceptible to comprehension and management" (*Literature Against Itself* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], p. 7).

The Triumph of Parody and Pun over San-Antonio's Literary Aspirations

For over thirty years the novels of San-Antonio have entertained French men and women and have made him France's most popular writer of detective stories. The most conspicuous qualities of San-Antonio's novels are plot and language; plots distinguished by their imaginative, often inspired, complications, coincidences and melodramatic surprises, and a virtuosity of language which has few rivals in all of French literature. The basic linguistic technique employed by San-Antonio is the pun, but he also exploits other verbal manipulations such as the mixture of classic French, popular language and slang, the use of foreign words, malapropisms, unexpected similes, and the creation of colorful new expressions.