

The Other Dickens: Neo-Victorian Appropriation and Adaptation

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Introducing this special issue gives us a welcome opportunity to reflect on the many acts of commemoration which have taken place over the course of the past year, and to consider the relevance of ‘celebrating’ the bicentenary of Charles Dickens’s birth in 1812. Although during his lifetime Dickens expressed disdain towards the practice of cultural memorialisation, writing in his last will and testament, “I rest my claims to the remembrance of my country upon my published works” (qtd. in Slater 2009: 618), bicentennial commemorations have focused as much on his life and personal iconicity as on his literature and journalism. They have also attested to the mutability of Dickens’s twenty-first-century identity; while events such as the international ‘readathon’ of his works that took place on his birthday, encompassing countries from Albania to Zimbabwe, have drawn attention to Dickens’s global significance, other celebrations, such as the official service at Westminster Abbey attended by the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall, implicitly co-opted him as a symbol of ‘Britishness’. The film and television retrospectives hosted in 2012 by organisations such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the British Film Institute, London, meanwhile, have signalled that Dickens’s cultural reach now extends far beyond the textual medium in which he originally worked and found fame.

As well as popular commemorative activities, Dickens’s bicentenary was marked by a wide range of academic conferences and symposia. This special issue derives in part from one such event: the international three-day conference ‘The Other Dickens: Victorian and Neo-Victorian Contexts’ organised by the Centre for Studies in Literature at the University of Portsmouth (the city of Dickens’s birth) in July 2012. This event gathered scholars in the fields of nineteenth-century and contemporary literature and culture to discuss the impact of Dickens’s work on Victorian and neo-

Victorian writing, and to challenge conventional perceptions of Dickens. Building on the critical discussions which emerged from this conference, this special issue turns its focus exclusively on twentieth-century and contemporary culture, to consider the ‘Other’ Dickens – those aspects of Dickens’s life and work that have been the subject of recent revision, reappraisal, and transformation. In particular, the contributions in this special issue aim to critically assess our persisting fascination with this canonical Victorian figure and, more generally, to reflect on the ‘Dickensian’ cultural legacy of the Victorian age in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To that effect, they examine the continued influence of changing conceptualisations of Dickens, both popular and academic, on contemporary literature (including biofiction), on material culture and consumerism, as well as on film and television adaptations of his work.

A key aspect of this dual commemoration/reconsideration is of course operated via the mode of neo-Victorianism. Both an appreciation and a revision of the nineteenth century, the neo-Victorian adequately conveys the idea of celebrating while contesting, of looking back while moving forward. From the latter perspective, 2012 has perhaps been the year of neo-Victorianism *par excellence*, performing as it did the simultaneous feat of returning to the Victorian past through Dickens’s bicentenary, and of propelling us into a very modern twenty-first century with the London Olympics. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn anticipated some of these paradoxes when they wrote in 2010 that “it will be interesting and informative to see how the Cultural Olympiad will negotiate a sense of forward-looking Britain in a global context while necessarily paying homage to the dominant figure of Victorianism writ large” – that is, the dominant figure of Dickens himself (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 245). Judging from the wide range of tributes made to both ‘Team GB’ and ‘Dickens 2012’ in the last year, it seems Heilmann and Llewellyn were right: it proved a very interesting neo-Victorian Olympiad indeed.

The bicentennial commemorations of Dickens’s birth are an example of the current drive to ‘remember’, and of the concomitant cultural fascination with appropriating and re-imagining the past. Although, in recent decades, the debates around “the uses and abuses of memory”, as well as the “certain sense of excess and saturation in the marketing of memory”, have led many to feel that “[m]emory fatigue has set in”, Andreas Huyssen notes that a preoccupation with the past continues to characterise

contemporary culture (Huysen 2003: 3). Heilmann and Llewellyn attribute this obsession with the past to the “instability and insecurity relating to the recent memories of the twentieth century, from the Second World War through to a post-9/11 landscape” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 225-226). In a time of pervasive cultural anxiety, the past offers an ostensibly safe refuge from which to negotiate and work through the concerns of the present.

Yet, if our “attraction” to the nineteenth century is, in this sense, “reassuringly nostalgic” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 225-226), the bicentenary year has confirmed that it is to a specific, Dickensian vision of the period that we seem to be drawn. In Anglophone cultures, in particular, the ‘Dickensian’ represents an eminently knowable and assimilable version of the ‘Victorian’: crucially, even those who are unfamiliar with Dickens’s works understand what is meant by the adjective derived from his name. A brief survey of British, American and Australian newspaper headlines from 2012 demonstrates that the label ‘Dickensian’ has become a convenient cultural shorthand through which to signal condemnation of repressive institutions, social injustices, such as child exploitation, and governmental or bureaucratic inertia. Perhaps inevitably, the tag has been repeatedly attached to accounts of the post-2008 global financial crisis and the austerity politics that have followed, a fact parodied by the satirical US *Onion News Network* in its spoof rolling headline “Recession hitting Dickensian street urchins hardest” (Johns 2012: 51). Yet, as the essays in this special issue demonstrate, the signifier ‘Dickensian’ is mutable and mobile, capable of supporting contradictory representations. If, on the one hand, it stands in the popular imagination for urban poverty, destitution and suffering, on the other, it is evocative of bountiful Christmases, idealised families and domestic harmony.

The productive multivalence of the ‘Dickensian’ helps to explain Dickens’s enduring cultural influence and appeal, made manifest in the continuing neo-Victorian fascination with his life and work. As Cora Kaplan suggests:

The vogue for reimagining the nineteenth century, especially through its novels and novelists, depends on the continuing currency of Dickens and his work, for without his celebrity, one suspects that a good percentage of the cultural capital

that keeps this ever-expanding enterprise afloat would rapidly depreciate. (Kaplan 2011: 81)

The heritage culture surrounding the figure of Dickens offers a means through which contemporary audiences both at home and abroad can invest in a certain sense of the Victorian, and indulge in nostalgic returns to this collectively imagined past. In fact, such returns to “the period and its literary forms”, according to Kaplan, should be called “neo-Dickensian”, rather than “neo-Victorian” (Kaplan 2011: 82). So persistent and pervasive is Dickens’s cultural cachet, he frequently eclipses other Victorian writers in the modern imaginary. Tellingly, in Dan Simmons’s Gothic novel *Drood* (2009), the narrator, Wilkie Collins, begins by introducing himself, supposing that the twenty-first-century reader will be unfamiliar with his literary works and unaware of his nineteenth-century fame; his friend, the ‘Inimitable’ Charles Dickens, however, requires no such introduction before being inserted into the narrative.

The haunting and, at times, overpowering influence of Dickens in contemporary culture is accurately described by Kaplan when she observes that

[s]ometimes Dickens seems to hover over the neo-Victorian like an avuncular but reticent deity; at others, he is all too intrusive; transformed into a quasifictional character, he stalks his virtual world and makes guest appearances in our own. (Kaplan 2011: 81)

Whether only ‘hovering’, or more actively ‘stalking’ contemporary culture, in Kaplan’s opinion Dickens and his work are forever ‘shadowing’ our present. Yet, while testifying to the hold that Dickens continues to exert over the twenty-first century, neo-Victorian appropriations and adaptations simultaneously set in motion an ‘othering’ process, whereby the familiar – his original – is transformed into new, and at times strange, copies. In addition to the biofictions and adaptations considered in this special issue, a number of neo-Victorian novels, including *Girl in a Blue Dress* by Gaynor Arnold (2008), *The Last Dickens* by Matthew Pearl (2009), *Drood* by Dan Simmons (2009) and *Wanting* by Richard Flanagan (2009), also attempt to revivify ‘Dickens’ in novel or defamiliarising incarnations.

The preoccupation with bringing the author ‘back to life’ evident in these texts may be linked to contemporary culture’s broader concern with memory, memorials, and remembrance. But ‘heritage’ must be distinguished from ‘history’, as “heritage is not an inquiry into the past but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what actually happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes” (Lowenthal 1998: x). In other words, heritage is not history at all, but a version of the past made to best suit the needs of the present. For instance, contemporary “celebration[s]” of – and “profession[s] of faith” in – Dickens’s heritage have contributed to the establishment and promotion of specific notions of ‘Englishness’ and/or ‘Britishness’ in the twenty-first century. The Bank of England’s £10 note, on which Dickens’s image featured up to 2003, goes some way towards capturing this cultural symbolic. For Juliet John, the banknote signifies “an association between Dickens and an idea of Englishness”, an association which “was no doubt chosen to convey something of Britain’s ‘greatness’, of a national heritage imparting solidity to the flimsiness of paper money” (John 2011: 74). In fact, like the Bank of England’s note, neo-Dickensian appropriations seem to be circulating in contemporary culture as a form of cultural currency and national memory.

Commenting on the contradictory nature of adaptations, Linda Hutcheon notes that they are “inherently double” and “haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly” (Hutcheon 2006: 6). Hutcheon’s observation is perhaps particularly true of *neo-Victorian* adaptations, due to the deliberate and self-conscious nature of the neo-Victorian effort to engage with a period which “had its own investment in adaptation” (Sanders 2006: 121). As Julie Sanders observes, “it was not only the writers of previous eras who were subject to the recreative impulses of the Victorians: Dickens’s novels and characters [...] enjoyed a vivid afterlife on the public stages of the day” (Sanders 2006: 121). In view of the ‘doubleness’ of the neo-Victorian project, our special issue on contemporary adaptations and appropriations of Dickens’s life and work seems especially pertinent. Indeed, all the contributions gathered here are preoccupied with the form and nature of Dickens’s ‘afterlife’ in the context of neo-Victorianism; they all consider the multiple and diverse manifestations of Dickens’s originals in the present; and they all engage with the haunting presence of Dickens’s legacy in twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture.

Our special issue appropriately begins with Karen Laird's study of the commemorative practices and drives that have shaped remembrances of Dickens during the bicentenary. Addressing three key years in the construction of Dickens's posthumous fame – 1870, the year of his death; 1912, the year of his centenary; and 2012, the year of his bicentenary – Laird's essay, 'The Posthumous Dickens: Commemorative Adaptations, 1870-2012', demonstrates that successive generations have sought to shape and adapt 'Dickens' to meet the values and ideals of their specific cultural moments, while simultaneously investing in him as a historical figure. While the stage adaptations of Dickens's works that flourished in the wake of his death gave particular prominence to his fatherly characters and, in doing so, implicitly positioned their creator as a symbolic patriarch, the centennial celebrations focused on his youthful heroes and 'Englishness', using these elements to construct an exemplary framework for modern national identity. Bicentennial adaptations, however, have taken less of an idealising turn. Focusing on the season of Dickens-themed programming broadcast by the BBC during winter 2011-2012, Laird argues that contemporary televisual biographies and adaptations, such as *Mrs Dickens' Family Christmas* (2011), *Great Expectations* (2011), *Armando's Tale of Charles Dickens* (2012) and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (2012), have foregrounded the flawed relationships and broken families that haunted Dickens's work and personal life, thereby constructing a 'fallen Dickens' who resonates with twenty-first-century cultural concerns.

Given that "Dickens's works have spawned more film adaptations than those of any other author" (Marsh 2001: 204), the implications of that mode of creative expression are given due consideration in this special issue. In 'Miss Havisham's Dress: Materialising Dickens in Film Adaptations of *Great Expectations*', Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne analyse three film adaptations of Dickens's novel: David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946), Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and Alfonso Cuarón's *Great Expectations* (1998). Their essay concentrates on the costuming techniques and adaptation strategies employed in the three films' re-imagining of the character of Miss Havisham. Her iconic bridal status is productively read by Regis and Wynne as a remnant of the past in the present, a lingering and decaying presence which needs to be annihilated to allow closure, but also to enable new beginnings to take place. Film adaptations of the novel have conveyed this paradoxical process via the

dress chosen for Miss Havisham: as Regis and Wynne argue, the semiotic value of Miss Havisham's clothing resides in its 'double' anachronism, as it is deliberately placed outside of both the time frame of the audience and that of the film.

Like the iconic figure of Miss Havisham, or the example of the bank note cited earlier, contemporary appropriations and adaptations of nineteenth-century culture highlight the hold that the period has on the present. The relationship between Dickensian heritage and contemporary finance is examined in Elodie Rousselot's essay 'A *Christmas Carol* and Global Economy: The Neo-Victorian Debt to the Nineteenth Century'. Rousselot discusses Margaret Atwood's recent re-writing of Dickens's novella in her nonfiction book *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008), focusing on Atwood's use of Victorian cultural and economic discourses to address global financial and environmental crises in the present and the potential limitations of this project. In particular, the strategies of appropriation deployed by Atwood are read in light of current misconceptions about Dickens's novella, and about Victorian economics more generally. Indeed, although *A Christmas Carol* "has established a 'heritage' image of a quintessentially Victorian Dickens who elevated feelings and people above money and commodities" (John 2011: 79), a careful reading of the novella reveals its preoccupation with commodity culture and capitalist values. Rousselot argues that the metaphor of 'indebtedness' offers a more productive means of considering both Dickens's heritage and the complex and mutually benefiting economy of literary exchange between his work and its neo-Victorian appropriations.

The issue of inheritance is also addressed in Dana Shiller's essay 'The Pleasures and Limits of Dickensian Plot, or "I have met Mr. Dickens, and this is not him"'. Examining the tension between the desire for plot and the forces of chance and coincidence that work against that desire in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), Shiller traces the presence of a similar tension in two neo-Victorian appropriations of the novel: Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (1989) and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006). Although both contemporary texts share the preoccupations of the postmodern fiction produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, especially in their consideration of the effectiveness, relevance, and at times, failure of notions of 'plot', Shiller identifies these preoccupations as being inherited from Dickens's original. Indeed, the latter is read as already containing

‘deconstructive’ tendencies which are seized upon by Palliser and Jones, and imaginatively put to use in their respective postmodern and postcolonial re-writing projects. From this perspective, both acts of appropriation retrospectively present Dickens’s *Great Expectations* as an early instance of the type of contingency and ‘randomness’ which is a distinguishing feature of contemporary fiction, and in so doing, they pay implicit homage to Dickens’s plot structure through their own plotted revisions.

Orphaned and abused children also represent the Dickensian ‘plot’ to contemporary audiences, and the next two essays of this special issue explore this trope. Elizabeth Rees’s ‘Dickensian Childhoods: Blighted Victorian Children in Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White*’ examines the intertextual links between Dickens’s work and contemporary fiction. In Faber’s novel, Rees detects a resurgence of a familiar Dickensian trope: that of the figure of the suffering child in Victorian society. Rees identifies two opposite, yet concurrent, perspectives adopted by Dickens in his work: on one hand, that of children who are refused their childhoods; on the other, that of adults who refuse to grow up. According to Rees, Faber deliberately returns to these Dickensian tropes and characters in an attempt to investigate the ‘toxicity’ of Victorian society to its children, but also to ‘refute’ contemporary celebrations of childishness in adults. Unlike Dickens however, Faber eschews narrative resolution, which Rees reads as an indication of the similarly unresolved social issues concerning children in contemporary society. Yet Faber’s neo-Victorian intervention also raises broader concerns regarding the function and implications of such fiction. Although it addresses serious issues, Faber’s novel remains confined to the realm of the past, and therefore removed from the sphere of immediate change and action in the present. In this context, some of the novel’s motives, including the depiction of graphic sex scenes involving children, are questioned in Rees’s essay.

The potentially damaging nature of the relationship between adult and child is similarly examined in Sheelagh Russell-Brown’s essay, ‘Mothers and Molls: Re-imagining the Dickensian Maternal in Charles Palliser’s *The Quincunx*’. Concentrating on the intertextual link between Palliser’s novel and one of its Victorian ‘pretexts’, *David Copperfield* (1850), Russell-Brown highlights the intersections between representations of ineffectual or absent mothering in the two. In particular, she draws attention to the texts’ shared interest in depicting the destructive effects of

economic disenfranchisement on motherhood; both Palliser's Mary Mellamphy and Dickens's Clara Copperfield are positioned as objects of sexual exchange, and this seriously compromises their ability to mother their sons. Yet whereas the harmful consequences of flawed mothering are to an extent mitigated in Dickens's novel, owing to the presence of sympathetic mother-surrogates, Russell-Brown argues that in *The Quincunx* these surrogate figures can never fully compensate for Mary's shortcomings, which oblige her son, John, to adopt a quasi-parental role while still a child. What is more, while the after-effects of maternal inadequacy are ultimately contained in *David Copperfield* by the protagonist's happy marriage at the end of the novel, *The Quincunx*'s complex inheritance plot sheds light on the unfinished implications of dysfunctional mothering, inviting us to trace the legacy of maternal failure through successive generations.

Like the child, the family is, of course, a key concern in neo-Victorian writing, owing to its imbrication in and reflection of wider social, economic and political structures, as well as cultural anxieties and ideals. The microcosmal relationship between family and nation is given particular attention in the penultimate essay in this collection, Charlotte Boyce's 'Dining with Savages and the Laws of Hostility: Performing Civilisation in *Andersen's English*'. Exploring the self-reflexive enactment of domestic and national identity in Sebastian Barry's recent neo-Victorian play, Boyce argues that its dramatisation of Danish author Hans Christian Andersen's unexpected arrival at Gad's Hill in 1857 exposes both the fissures within the Dickens family unit and the internal contradictions that destabilise the ideologies of 'Englishness' the family sponsors and upholds. Andersen's status as 'foreigner' causes him continually to misread the performed behaviours of those around him, with the result that hospitality quickly degenerates into an unsettling hostility that is not only directed outwards, but also inwards, towards the family itself. The irrevocable fragmentation of the ideal of civilised English domesticity, and of the foundational distinction between 'self' and 'other', is finally signalled through the troubling references to violence and cannibalism that coalesce around the play's representations of eating.

The final contribution to this special issue, Lillian Nayder's creative piece 'Tangible Typography', also trains a spotlight on the central Dickensian theme of Victorian familial values. Excerpted from Nayder's current work of biofiction, *Harriet and Letitia: A Novel*, this section focuses

on two of Dickens's female relations: his younger sister, Letitia Austin, and his sister-in-law, Harriet Dickens. Harriet's blindness, and her struggle to overcome the challenges associated with her disability and gender are key concerns in the piece, and forge productive links with the situations of other women in the Dickens family. In particular, the reader is invited to draw parallels between Harriet's position as an abandoned wife and that of Catherine Dickens following Charles's very public separation from her. Analogies also emerge between Harriet's literal and Charles's metaphorical blindness: the Victorian author blithely discounts his blind sister-in-law's advice on which novel and system of raised type to use in a future edition of his work for visually impaired readers, demonstrating the egotistical certainty of a man secure in his self-belief. His authority is implicitly challenged, however, by Harriet's own writings; comprised of pinpricks impressed on discarded proofs of *Household Words*, Harriet's 'tangible typography' enables her provocatively to assert her own identity by cannibalising the magazine conducted by her celebrated brother-in-law, figuratively piercing his imperious self-construction in doing so.

It is important to acknowledge that the essays collected in this special issue cannot provide an exhaustive overview of bicentennial (and pre-bicentennial) revisions, reappraisals, and transformations of Dickens and his work, nor do they attempt as much. They do, however, offer an insight into some of the predominant motifs and strategies at play in contemporary creative re-readings, including the relationship between Dickensian commemoration and neo-Victorian nostalgia; the revised representations of gender in the private sphere of Dickens's life and in the public sphere of his work; the legacies of Empire in contemporary revisions of his work; Dickens and his 'ghosts' in contemporary fiction and biofiction; and the influence of Dickensian politics on twenty-first-century commodity culture and consumerism. Although varied in their approach and scope, the articles gathered here confirm that we need to "restore to the subgenres or practices of adaptation and appropriation a genuinely celebratory comprehension of their capacity for creativity, and for comment and critique" (Sanders 2006: 160). Indeed, as Sanders observes, adaptation and appropriation "are not merely belated practices and processes; they are creative and influential in their own right" (Sanders 2006: 160). In addressing specific modes of adaptation and appropriation of Dickens's life and work, the essays collected here offer timely contributions to current

debates within the field of Dickens studies, and within Neo-Victorian Studies more widely, and aim to promote a better understanding and appreciation of our ongoing fascination with the cultural legacy of the nineteenth century in the (still) ‘Dickensian’ present.

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