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‘The Ghosts of Individual Peculiarities’: Murder and Interpretation in Dickens

Andrew Mangham

On 9 October 1857 two lightermen working on the Thames were rowing their boat under Waterloo Bridge when they saw a carpet bag resting on one of the structure’s buttresses. They pulled up the bag ‘as soon as possible in order to seize what they considered a prize’.¹ It was very heavy and, on arriving home, they opened it: ‘A horrible spectacle presented itself to their view – portions of a human body, bones from which the flesh had been rudely torn, and garments saturated with blood’.² According to *The Times* the body had evidently belonged to a man and had been made ‘a thing of shreds and patches’; a preliminary examination of its pieces of clothing suggested that the dead man had moved ‘in the upper class of society’.³ The lightermen took the bag and its grisly contents to Bow Street station, and the remains were subsequently examined by division surgeon Mr Paynter:

The result of the examination [...] showed the bag to contain a great number of the different portions of a human body [...]. The parts found consisted of the legs, arms, nearly the whole of the spinal column, the buttock joints, and the shoulder joints. The whole of the head and several cervicals of the vertebrae, the hands, and the feet were absent. With regard to the condition of the remains, it was found that the greater portion of the flesh had been very roughly removed. [...] From the absence of the head it is impossible to guess even at the age of the unfortunate man, but from the appearance of the bones of the limbs Mr. Paynter is of opinion that the deceased was a full-sized robust man.⁴

The remains were sent to Guy’s Hospital’s Professor of Medical Jurisprudence Alfred Swaine Taylor, author of several books on medical jurisprudence including *Elements of Medical Jurisprudence* (1836), *Medical Jurisprudence* (1845), and *On Poisons* (1848).

Although he was cautious about the exact cause of death, Taylor ascertained:

In one portion of the left side of the chest [...], there is an aperture in the flesh presenting the appearance of a stab. [...] Assuming that this wound would have been inflicted during life, it would have penetrated the heart, and have produced rapid, if not immediate, death. The muscles of the chest through which this stab had passed were for some space around of a dark red colour, evidently produced by blood which had been effused as a result of this wound. This [...] led me to the conclusion that this wound was inflicted on the deceased either during life or within a few minutes of death [...]. As the organs of the chest and abdomen are not forthcoming, any opinion on the cause of death must be a matter of speculation.⁵

A rumor got abroad that the remains might have come from a cadaver belonging to an anatomy school and that a group of medical students had placed the remains on Westminster Bridge as a prank. But Taylor insisted that 'the portions of the 23 pieces of the body presented no appearance of having undergone dissection for the purposes of anatomy. [...] The clearest examination, coupled with the knowledge derived from an experience of seven years spent in the study of anatomy by dissections, leads me to the conclusion that these remains have not been employed for any anatomical purpose whatever'.⁶ Taylor did find evidence that the body had been kept in common salt, probably in order to slow the process of putrefaction while the body was stored; the corpse had also been boiled, possibly in order to remove the flesh from the bones and thus make it difficult to identify the body. If such was the intention, Taylor said, it was successfully implemented. He was unable determine how long the deceased had been dead: 'On this point', he said, 'only a speculative opinion can be given. [...] Those changes in the animal matter on which we are accustomed to rely for evidence of the period of death have been suspended. Still, an examination of the deep-seated parts of the flesh [...], has led me to the conclusion that the person of whose body these remains were a part may have been dead three or four weeks prior to that date'.⁷ At the inquest the Coroner praised Taylor for having so completely anticipated every question that could arise. The jury returned a verdict of wilful murder by some person or persons unknown.

The Times was optimistic that ‘notwithstanding the great care and the evident attempt to conceal the fact which the perpetrators of this diabolical deed had taken, murder will out’.⁸ But the murder never did out. Not only were the perpetrators never found, but the unfortunate man in the carpetbag was never identified.

Irrespective of the shortcomings of the Waterloo Bride investigation, Alfred Taylor’s science demonstrates how forensic medicine had developed into a sophisticated concern with telling stories – with excavating evidence, piecing clues together, and reading the past. It is the argument of this chapter that, as such, medical jurisprudence had much in common with the period’s literature, especially that of Charles Dickens, whose urban narratives interrogated the meanings of everyday objects, human behaviour, and the influences of past actions. In an 1860 article published as part of *The Uncommercial Traveller* series (1860-68), the author mentioned the ‘chopped up murdered man’, as he called him.⁹ ‘Night Walks’ was an example of the way Dickens often used his noctambulations as the inspiration for literary explorations of London’s more dubious spaces and inhabitants. His usual practice, he explains, involved ‘getting up directly after lying down’, whenever finding himself afflicted with insomnia: ‘going out, and coming home tired at sunrise’.¹⁰ He describes walking across Waterloo Bridge on one of these outings:

There was need of encouragement on the threshold of the bridge, for the bridge was dreary. The chopped up murdered man, had not been lowered with a rope over the parapet when those nights were; he was alive, and slept then quietly enough most likely, and undisturbed by any dream of where he was to come. But the river had an awful look, the buildings on the banks were muffled in black shrouds, and the reflected lights seemed to originate deep in the water, as if the spectres of suicides went were holding them to show where they went down. The wild moon and clouds were as restless as an evil conscience in a tumbled bed, and the very shadow of the immensity of London seemed to lie oppressively upon the river.¹¹

While there is evidence that some of Alfred Taylor's forensic methods are mirrored in Dickens's dark prose, there are also some significant reconfigurations of the professor's science. Of course, major dissimilarities stem from the fact that Taylor and Dickens had entirely different objectives. Even in his journalism, Dickens was fairly liberal with his use of symbolism and metaphor, while Taylor's solemn responsibilities as a forensic examiner appeared to have precluded any mode of interpretation that did not adhere to empirical evidence. That the enterprises of Dickens and Taylor had different aims, however, should not distract us from the explorative work that the former's writing performs with a similar set of tools as those employed by the latter. Reading the past, telling stories, and interpreting both actions and identities belong to a complex exploration of how each of these processes work. For example, the idea that the spectres of suicides hold lights to signal where they went down is an extraordinary image that embodies the forensic belief that actions leave evidentiary trails. The fact that Dickens repurposes the idea as a ghostly simile typifies a belief he has in such traces as having the fictive quality of existing beyond the currents of empiricist observation. As John Bowen notes, 'Dickens's fiction is fascinated by what is dead but will not lie down, in things or people or people-things who cross or trouble the boundaries between what was, what is, and what may be living'.¹² George Augustus Sala once said that Dickens 'liked to talk about [...] the latest murder and the newest thing in ghosts'.¹³ The description of Waterloo Bridge in 'Night Walks' indicates that the author did not see these two fascinations as unrelated: he perceived murders to leave traces that were ghostly in the way they haunted the margins of interpretation. Sala's ironic idea of a 'newest thing in ghosts' is reflected in Dickens's *Thames*, where the lights of the modern city provide an index to the sad stories of past suicides. Paradoxically, such acts of self-murder are both part of the modern world yet untouched by its progress;

their existence is evidenced through a simile that relies upon the language of forensic enlightenment yet, in making the image a supernatural one, Dickens renders the act of interpretation uncertain, unstable, and self-reflexive.

To better understand the trace-like nature of murder within Dickens's narratives, it is worth exploring the more conceptual intersections that his works create between history and crime. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), the unfinished murder story begins with a question of identification that is answered by the past:

An ancient English Cathedral Town? How can the ancient English Cathedral town be here! [...] For sufficient reasons which this narrative will itself unfold as it advances, a fictitious name must be bestowed upon the old Cathedral town. Let it stand in these pages as Cloisterham. It was once possibly known to the Druids by another name, and certainly to the Romans by another, and to the Saxons by another, and to the Normans by another; and a name more or less in the course of many centuries can be of little moment to its dusty chronicles.¹⁴

Cloisterham is better identified, in fact, through traces it retains of its long-dead inhabitants:

In a word, a city of another and a bygone time is Cloisterham, with its hoarse Cathedral-bell, its hoarse rooks hovering about the Cathedral tower, its hoarser and less distinct rooks in the stalls far beneath. Fragments of old wall, saint's chapel, chapter-house, convent and monastery, have got incongruously or obstructively built into many of its houses and gardens, much as kindred jumbled notions have become incorporated into many of its citizens' minds. All things in it are of the past.¹⁵

As in other late novels like *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), and *Great Expectations* (1860-61), the past becomes an oppressive weight upon the present in *Edwin Drood*. The text creates a fictional world in which the manners and customs of abbots and abbesses, long crumbled into dust, offer the most solid means of identifying the city. These traces never amount to anything that might be deemed 'normal' or 'usual'. In Cloisterham,

so abounding [are the] vestiges of monastic graves, that the Cloisterham children grow small salad in the dust of abbots and abbesses, and make dirt-pies of nuns and friars; while every ploughman in its outlying fields renders to once puissant Lord Treasurers, Archbishops, Bishops, and such-like, the attention which the Ogre in the story-book desired to render to his unbidden visitor, and grinds their bones to make his bread.¹⁶

In the later Dickens works, replete as they are with pessimistic and weary visions of how the modern world is thwarted in its maturation by the past, such representations of history's traces are anything but reassuring.

Cloisterham is, in fact, an appropriate setting for Dickens's murder story because the idea of the past infiltrating the present suits the forensic work that the narrative and its major investigators will need to do. The reasons for Edwin Drood's disappearance, whatever Dickens intended them to be, leave traces in Cloisterham Weir, two miles from the place where Edwin is last seen:

No search had been made up here, for the tide had been running strongly down [...] and the likeliest places for the discovery of a body, if a fatal accident had happened [...]. The water came over the Weir, with its usual sound on a cold starlight night, and little could be seen of it; yet Mr. Crisparkle had a strange idea that something unusual hung about the place.

He reasoned with himself: What was it? Where was it? Put it to the proof. Which sense did it address? [...] Knowing very well that the mystery with which his mind was occupied, might of itself give the place this haunted air, he strained those hawk's eyes of his for the correction of his sight. He got closer to the Weir, and peered at its well-known posts and timbers. Nothing in the least unusual was remotely shadowed forth.¹⁷

The Weir runs through the Canon Crisparkle's 'broken sleep, all night' and he returns to the spot the following morning:

He had surveyed it closely for some minutes, and was about to withdraw his eyes, when they were attracted keenly to one spot.

[...] It fascinated his sight. His hands began plucking off his coat. For it struck him that at that spot—a corner of the Weir—something glistened, which did not move and come over with the glistening water-drops, but remained stationary.

He assured himself of this, he threw off his clothes, he plunged into the icy water, and swam for the spot. Climbing the timbers, he took from

them, caught among their interstices by its chain, a gold watch, bearing engraved upon its back E. D.

He brought the watch to the bank, swam to the Weir again, climbed it, and dived off. He knew every hole and corner of all the depths, and dived and dived and dived, until he could bear the cold no more. His notion was, that he would find the body; he only found a shirt-pin sticking in some mud and ooze.¹⁸

This episode appears to be equivocal on the subject of whether crime-scene evidence is *usual* or *unusual*. Like the Thames in 'Night Walks', or the same river depicted in newspaper reports on the discovery of the unnamed man in the carpet bag, the river continues to flow, a symbol of the passing of time's usual current. Yet the presence of the gold watch, entangled with the Weir's timbers, is, like the carpet bag, unusual; it is a trace, a remnant of past activity, a ghost of an old play enacted on the same stage. It engenders Crisparkle's sense of the Weir as 'haunted' and becomes ominously interwoven with his troubled sleep. The idea of a haunting takes us back to the abbots and abbesses and the Dickensian constructions of the past as peeping around the margins set by the present. As with such phantoms, murder is a phenomenon that allows us to hear faint echoes of the past. Such an association is also painted in bold colours in *Bleak House* when we read about a long terrace at Chesney Wold, supposedly haunted by the ghost of a woman who was murdered, more or less, by her husband: 'Let the Dedlocks listen for my step!', she utters moments before she dies, 'and so sure as there is sickness or death in the family, it will be heard then'.¹⁹ Murder and its evidence are revenants similar to her ladyship's spectral footsteps throughout the work of Dickens: they become corroborations of the idea, writ large in forensic science, that extraordinary events leave echoes. In other words, medical jurisprudence's faith in the power of clues facilitated a belief in the significance of traces which is mirrored in Dickens's more imaginary vision of the enduring nature of human stories and the ghostly presence of the past.

Forensic science's interest in evidentiary traces was a self-reflexive investigation into the viability of objective truth – the 'whole truth' conceit, in other words, upon which the legal system based most of its solemn decisions. Medical jurisprudence's technologies of truth were often an analysis of interpretation and perception, a trend which is discernible in the science's increasing interest in photography both as a means of capturing patterns of behaviour and evidence of human peculiarities as unruly and multifaceted. In 1883 Francis Galton developed a composite form of photography which, he argued, "brings into evidence" truths which are otherwise invisible to the eye'.²⁰ Extending many of the arguments first broached in the earlier *Hereditary Genius* (1869), Galton reiterated his now-famous view that, while variation is normal across populations and species, it is possible for the process of hereditary transmission to produce 'types', or congenital subsets, who have a greater propensity towards specific abnormalities and aberrant behaviours. As 'moral and intellectual faculties' are 'so closely bound up with the physical ones',²¹ he said, problems with mind and matter often affect the same people; like Cesare Lombroso, he believed that mental peculiarities are written into the physiognomies of individuals;²² yet, unlike his Italian counterpart, Galton did not provide specimens of 'type' in numerous examples but combined a number of images into single composite portraits (see figs 1 and 2).

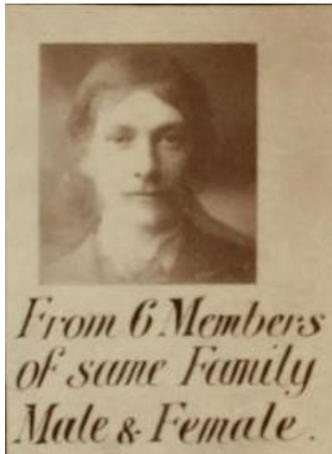


Figure 1: Composite photograph from Francis Galton's *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (1883)

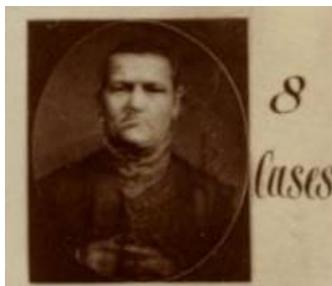


Figure 2: *The Criminal Type* from Galton's *Inquiries*

Galton hoped these composite portraits would produce a guide of 'representative' types. With the help of his colleagues and correspondents, he collected photographic images of specific human subgroups, including the criminal and the sick. In order to identify a 'central type' which indicates all that is good in a nation and reveals 'the easiest direction in which a race can be improved',²³ Galton superimposed 'portraits like the successive leaves of a book', running images under a camera with a typically lengthy exposure time (thus producing a single composite image). 'There can hardly be a more appropriate method of discovering the central physiognomical type of any race or group than that of composite portraiture', he claimed.²⁴

In discussing Galton's use of photographs, Alexa Wright argues that 'in their effort to establish a complete, objective and comprehensible social taxonomy and social order, Galton and his colleagues seem to have used photography as though it offered a

direct equivalent to reality'.²⁵ Indeed, ever since Daguerre and Fox Talbot unveiled their photographic apparatuses in 1839, the process of capturing likenesses on light-sensitive plates had promised a new dawn for realism in art and science. Edgar Allan Poe saw in early photographs a 'perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented' and 'truth itself in the supremeness of perfection'.²⁶ In his important discussion of Galton's composite portraits within the context of the rise of forensic photography, Ronald R. Thomas perceives the 'portrait of a "criminal type"' to be an emphasis on the technology's 'disciplinary powers';²⁷ Galton's 'observing machine' made 'the invisible visible' and, in its search for a representative 'type', made 'certain visible features disappear'. What constitutes individual peculiarities, Thomas concludes, were 'reduced to an insignificant blur'.²⁸ Thomas's reading of forensic technologies in the nineteenth century seeks to explore the ways in which the new discourses surrounding the representation and control of criminality belonged to what Foucault had identified in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) as an era of new and complex mechanisms of power and control. The problem with this reading, for me, is that it reduces thoughtful moments of self-reflexivity in the works of men like Francis Galton into an 'insignificant blur', or a momentary deviation from the oppressive ideological projects driven by scientific thinkers of the past. Galton's perception of photography's 'objectivity' appears to have been more complicated than both Thomas and Wright have suggested. His writing reveals, in fact, that he saw no blur as insignificant; his plan was not to make individual visible features disappear, but rather to allow them to remain as traces – reminders both of human variation and the mechanics of his photographic process. While Galton writes, 'it seems to me that it is possible on this principle to obtain a truer likeness of a man than in any other way', he carefully avoids the absolute values implied in words like 'truth' and 'accuracy', and opts instead for 'truer' and 'appropriate'. Similarly,

although his eugenic theories have often been associated with the “racial purification” programmes of Nazi Germany’,²⁹ it seems he would have rejected the idea of a ‘pure’ or a ‘superior’ race because he believed, like his cousin Charles Darwin, in the living world as thriving through the ‘endless variety’ caused by the ‘selective influences into close adaptations [organisms make with] their contemporaries, and to the physical circumstances of the localities they inhabit’.³⁰ Although nature errs, as we see embodied in the criminal and pathological types, the benefits of variation mean that we should be concerned not with assimilating people into ‘a common type’,³¹ but in seeing a less circumscriptive and less definite ‘central type’.

We see this central type exhibited in the plate featuring six members of the same family (figure 1). Here we have a composite image of ‘father and mother, two sons, and two daughters’.³² Like the central type, Galton’s composite portraiture ‘bring[s] into evidence all the traits in which there is agreement, and [leaves] but a ghost of a trace of individual peculiarities’.³³ There is nothing pure about this image; its value resides in the fact that it does not remove or assimilate its ghosts, but leaves them as traces that testify to the peculiarities of its means production. The same can be said of Galton’s thoughtful writing too. In the first paragraph of the volume in which composite portraiture is first outlined, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (1883), Galton admits:

I have revised, condensed, largely re-written, transposed old matter, and interpolated much that is new; but traces of the fragmentary origin of the work still remain, and I do not regret them. They serve to show that the book is intended to be suggestive, and renounces all claim to be encyclopaedic.³⁴

This is a book that is interested in ‘the varied hereditary faculties of different men’;³⁵ its objectives are found, then, among the peculiar, the ill-fitting, and the remarkable. Just as composite portraiture draws our attention to its modes of production and does not

succeed in being, or even seeking to be, mimetic, Galton's treatise is shaped by the traces of its composite parts and it 'renounces' any drive towards objective 'authority'.

The encyclopaedic, like the objective, aims at a total, all-encompassing view, and Galton knows that blurs, gaps, and rude juxtapositions are 'suggestive' of something less absolute. It is worth reminding ourselves of Pierre Macherey's *Theory of Literary Production* (1966) at this point, particularly the following passage:

What begs to be explained in the work is not that false simplicity which derives from the apparent unity of its meaning, but the presence of a relation, or an opposition, between elements of the exposition or levels of the composition, those disparities which point to a conflict of meaning. This conflict is not the sign of an imperfection; it reveals the inscription of an *otherness* in the work, through which it maintains a relationship with that which it is not, that which happens at its margins.³⁶

This is certainly true of Galton's *Inquiries*'s content as well as its form. Concerned with otherness in hereditary transmission, and stitched together using a range of past sources, Galton's text contains images and narratives that lay bare what happens in the margins. We can see in the family of six (figure 1), for instance, a ghostly shoulder belonging to the family member who was too tall to fall within the margins set by the other family members. This shoulder is, in Galton's words, a ghost of an individual peculiarity. If we accept the claim that composite portraiture is a 'truer likeness' of type than other forms of representation, we gather a sense how Galton's realism is very different to the potentially encyclopaedic or objective modes of realism which he appears to have rejected. This is not a direct representation of the subject as it is in reality, but a palimpsestic layering of representations that highlights not only shared characteristics, but the extraordinary traits that fall outside the borders of the usual as well.

In contrast to Thomas's focus on discipline and control, Nancy Armstrong has argued that the composite portrait shares with Dickens's literature a concern with

veridical perception. Both text and photograph, she argues, do not 'even try to represent what was actually there [...], even though both produce a remarkable density of visual detail to indicate that we in the presence of something real'. Galton, like Dickens, determines 'the locations at which the multiplicity of urban phenomena will become visible for what they truly are'.³⁷ And yet, in its interest in traces, blurs, and ghosts of individual peculiarities, composite photography, like Dickens's writing, betrays a more complex interest in the signifiers of what things *were*, or the traces left by the *processes* of interpretation rather than the interpreted thing itself: 'To know the conditions of a work is to define the real process of its constitution, to show it is composed from a real diversity of elements which give it substance'.³⁸ Dickens shares Galton's interest in the building-blocks of representation and identification. For him murder is an example of an individual peculiarity; it appears to haunt the composite portrait created by time's passing and shows Dickens to be interested in the characteristics and limitations of identification as *act*.

Richard D. Altick wrote some time ago that 'the normally insignificant transactions of everyday existence' in the Victorian age were illuminated by murder as they would by the flash of a camera: 'Witnesses, abruptly snatched from the usual obscurity of their lives, must recollect trivial circumstances which, had it not been for the fortuitous intrusion of a murder, would never again have figured in their memories'.³⁹ Murders are useful to historians, Altick suggests, because they are extraordinary moments that shed light on the ordinary; they illuminate, lurid as it may well be, a way through an interminable labyrinth by virtue (if such a word might be used in this context) of their extreme nature. Notwithstanding, the pictures described by Altick are very two-dimensional, or static: murder is the flash of a camera as Poe envisaged it – the correct capture of real life. Dickens, however, was regularly

dismissive of naïve realism. In the first volume of *Household Words* he famously attacked John Everett Millais's 1849-50 painting *Christ in the House of His Parents* for its literalisation of the New Testament:

You will have the goodness to discharge from your minds all Post-Raphael ideas, all religious aspirations, all elevating thoughts; all tender, awful, sorrowful, ennobling, sacred, graceful, or beautiful associations; and to prepare yourselves as befits such a subject –Pre-Raphaely considered – for the lowest depths of what is mean, odious, repulsive, and revolting.⁴⁰

Although Dickens criticised the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood for its wish to copy its subjects with 'utmost fidelity',⁴¹ he appears to have been more offended by Millais's representations of ugliness: Christ is 'a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-headed boy'; the Virgin Mary is 'so horrible in her ugliness, that [...] she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England'; and 'the carpenters might be undressed in any hospital where dirty drunkards, in a high state of varicose veins, are received'.⁴² His opposition was not pitched against Millais's wish to be truthful, then, but rather his way of forgetting, with his keen attention to naturalistic detail, art's duty to enrich, beautify, and educate: 'The regulation of social matters, as separated from the Fine Arts', he satirically concludes, 'has been undertaken by the Pre-Henry the Seventh Brotherhood'.⁴³ Millais had missed the opportunity to explore the ways in which interpretation and identification work in forms that are often more dynamic than veridical representation.

In a letter to John Forster prior to the establishment of *Household Words*, Dickens famously reported that he saw his new journal as behaving like 'a certain SHADOW, which may go into any place, by sunlight, moonlight, starlight, firelight, candlelight, and be in all homes, and all nooks and corners, and be supposed to be cognisant of everything, and go everywhere, without the least difficulty [...] a kind of semi-omniscience, omnipresent, intangible creature'.⁴⁴ 'Certain SHADOW' emphasises the

noun in a way that draws our attention away from the more interesting and abstruse use of 'certain' – a word which can mean an object identified as known yet unnamed, on the one hand, or absolutely sure, on the other. There is a lack of commitment to reliable meaning in the word 'SHADOW' too as the signified is defined, conflictingly, as both omnipresent and *semi-omniscient*, an invitation, we might argue, to doubt the prospect of complete and absolute knowledge. Dickens preferred instead to go astray, to have his stories take ghost walks and to make his characters dream, intuit, and half-remember. In Mr Crisparkle's search of the Cloisterham Weir, knowledge is embodied in the discovery of clues to a murder mystery; the scene in which this occurs violates any sense of realism by having Crisparkle feel the Weir to be haunted; he also has strange intuitions that evidence will be found at the scene; and his discovery of the jewellery is simply an impossible coincidence. The conceit of murder allows the novel to embody, as well as to demonstrate, how interpretation involves looking for traces of what exists in, and counter to, what is directly given to us in terms of perception.

Take the scene in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44) where the roguish Montague Tigg is murdered by Jonas Chuzzlewit. The episode sheds light on three major subjects: ordinary life incidental to the murder plot (thus supporting Altick's point); how narrative (like a murder story) is constructed; and, most complexly, how murder works self-reflexively in the margins of the very interpretive structures it is subjected to. To begin with the first and most simple of these points, when Chuzzlewit travels to the place he will kill Montague, the narrative prefigures a point Dickens would later make about the Chopped Up Murdered Man sleeping soundly in his bed, unaware of what is to come:

Did no men passing through the dim streets shrink without knowing why, when he came stealing up behind them? As he glided on, had no child in its sleep an indistinct perception of a guilty shadow falling on its bed, that

troubled its innocent rest? Did no dog howl, and strive to break its rattling chain, that it might tear him; no burrowing rat, scenting the work he had in hand, essay to gnaw a passage after him, that it might hold a greedy revel at the feast of his providing? [...] The fishes slumbered in the cold, bright, glistening streams and rivers, perhaps; and the birds roosted on the branches of the trees; and in their stalls and pastures beasts were quiet; and human creatures slept.⁴⁵

The scene is conspicuous for the lack of reaction to the imminent, illuminating melodrama passing through it. Falling asleep himself, Jonas dreams of a 'great crowd' filling a street, and looks forward to what Galton would create in his composite portraits:

[He] stood aside in a porch, fearfully surveying the multitude; in which there were many faces that he knew, and many that he did not know, but dreamed he did; when all at once a struggling head rose up among the rest—livid and deadly, but the same as he had known it—and denounced him as having appointed that direful day to happen.⁴⁶

Just as the ghost of an individual's peculiarity in Galton's photographs embodies how murder allows moments to stand out in history, so this livid and deathly imagination of the victim's head draws attention to the one 'direful day' as an appointed, marked, and recognised point in time. Finally, once Jonas has killed Montague in a wood, he is plagued, as Bill Sikes was, by his fearful and guilty conscience:

He had had a terror and dread of the wood when he was in it [...]. Dread and fear were upon him, to an extent he had never counted on, and could not manage in the least degree. He was so horribly afraid of that infernal room at home. This made him, in a gloomy murderous, mad way, not only fearful *for* himself, but *of* himself; [...] he became in a manner his own ghost and phantom, and was at once the haunting spirit and the haunted man.⁴⁷

Irrationally, he thinks, on reaching his home:

What if the murdered man were there before him!
He cast a fearful glance all round. But there was nothing there.
[...] Looking in the glass, [he] imagined that his deed was broadly written in his face, and lying down and burying himself once more beneath the blankets, heard his own heart beating Murder, Murder, Murder, in the bed; what words can paint tremendous truths like these!⁴⁸

Tremendous truths fall outside the borders of representation, just as Jonas's guilt lands outside any realist enterprise in the novel. His guilt becomes a haunting in the sense that it reminds us how murder is distinguished as a ghostly trace, unobscured by the layering processes of time and history. Jonas's conscience is, in fact, a self-conscious fictionalisation – a moment where the narrative refers to its own artifice. While most of the guilty imaginings are filtered through the murderer's troubled fancy, the conceit of his heart beating 'Murder, Murder, Murder' is unqualified by anything that would allow it to sit comfortably within a realist account. In the year before this passage was written, Poe had published 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843), a story Dickens was likely to have read, given his admiration for its author and the fact that he had met Poe during his first trip to America in 1842.⁴⁹ In a way that seems obvious, Dickens's representation of Jonas's guilty heart could belong to one of Poe's gothic fantasies; it certainly shares Poe's gothic literary heritage. Hence, while the murder of Tigg provides a glimpse into the ordinariness of a specific moment prior to the killing, and highlights, simultaneously, how homicide is a spectral trace that permits a historical moment to be distinguished, it works on the margins of that constructive process itself. Developed through forensic reconstruction, Dickens's narrative style violates the realist method enough to provide the distance it needs to question what works and fails as interpretation, identification, and reconstruction.

To conclude with the example with which I began, in 'Night Walks', Dickens describes a walk past Bethlehem Hospital that he took after he had crossed Waterloo Bridge and remembered the man in the carpetbag; by this point he has also visited an abandoned theatre and Newgate Prison; the lunatic asylum is the natural next stop, therefore, in his morbid night pilgrimage:

I had a night-fancy in my head which could be best pursued within sight of its walls and dome. And the fancy was this: Are not the sane and the insane equal at night as the sane lie a dreaming? Are not all of us outside this hospital, who dream, more or less in the condition of those inside it, every night of our lives? [...] Do we not nightly jumble events and personages, and times and places, as these do daily? [...] Said an afflicted man to me, when I was last in a hospital like this, 'Sir, I can frequently fly.' I was half ashamed to reflect that so could I by night. [...] I wonder that the great master who knew everything, when he called Sleep the death of each day's life, did not call Dreams the insanity of each day's sanity. (pp. 153-54)

The central message here is that it is impossible to know where truth and irrationality begin, end, and overlap. Just as each day's sanity has its insanity, so the ordinariness of each day has its extraordinariness and nowhere is this more obvious, I argue, than in murder. Homicide is the exaggeration, the drama, and the scandal of historical perspective; it sheds light both on the quotidian and on the past. But this is not simply a matter of opening a door and allowing us to peep inside; it is a means of questioning, in the act of imagining, *how* we perceive. Indeed, as the story of a perception which was both penetrative and hopeless, the story of the Waterloo Bridge Murder suited Dickens's imaginary realism as a symbol of how interpretation is always limited by its own creative nature. Dickens's 'concern with crime was [...] more persistent and more serious than most men's';⁵⁰ not only, as Philip Collins implies, in virtue of its importance as a sociological issue, but because it was a means of exploring the strategies we have – specialist, fictional, and every-day – for pursuing acts of identification.

Notes

¹ Unsigned, "Supposed Murder: Another Account," *The Times* (10 October 1857): 9.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Unsigned, "The Waterloo-Bridge Murder," *The Times* (27 October 1857): 11.

⁶ Ibid.

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- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ "Supposed Murder": 9.
- ⁹ Charles Dickens, "Night Walks" (1860), in *Dickens's Journalism, vol. 4: 'The Uncommercial Traveller' and Other Papers, 1859-70*, ed. by Michael Slater and John Drew (London: J. M. Dent, 2000): 151.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 150.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 151.
- ¹² John Bowen, *Other Dickens: Pickwick to Chuzzlewit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 5.
- ¹³ Quoted in Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (1962; London: Macmillan, 1965): 1.
- ¹⁴ Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell (1870; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982): 1, 12.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 13.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 12-13.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 144-45.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 145.
- ¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (1852-53; London: Dent, 1994): 85.
- ²⁰ Ronald R. Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 125.
- ²¹ Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883): 4.
- ²² See Thomas, *Detective Fiction*: 123.
- ²³ Galton, *Inquiries*: 14.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 9, 15.
- ²⁵ Alexa Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture* (London and New York, NY: I.B. Taurus, 2013): 68.
- ²⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Daguerreotype," *Alexander's Weekly Magazine* (1840), quoted in Thomas, *Detective Fiction*: 111-12.
- ²⁷ Thomas, *Detective Fiction*, 123.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 123, 126.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 67.
- ³⁰ Galton, *Inquiries*: 3.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid., 13.
- ³³ Ibid., 10.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 1.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Pierre Macherey, *Pour Une Théorie De La Production Littéraire*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall as *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966; London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2006): 89. Italics in original.
- ³⁷ Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999): 147-48.
- ³⁸ Macherey, *Literary Production*: 56.
- ³⁹ Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (New York NY: W. W. Norton, 1970): 13.
- ⁴⁰ Charles Dickens, "Old Lamps for New Ones," *Household Words* 1 (1850): 265.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 266.
- ⁴² Ibid., 266-67.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 267.
- ⁴⁴ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols (1872-74; London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), vol. 2: 78-79.
- ⁴⁵ Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. by Michael Slater (1843-44; London: Dent, 1994): 678.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 679.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 681-82, 684.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 685.
- ⁴⁹ Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (London and New Haven, CT; Yale University Press, 2009): 184.
- ⁵⁰ Collins, *Dickens and Crime*: 1.

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