

***Pickwick's Interpolated Tales and the Examination of Suicide:***

**The Science of an Ending**

**Andrew Mangham**

The following pages have been written from time to time, almost as the periodical occasion arose. Having been written for the most part in the society of a very dear young friend who is now no more, they are connected in the author's mind at once with the happiest period of his life, and with its saddest and most severe affliction.<sup>1</sup>

Literary scholarship has acknowledged the profound impact that Robert Seymour's suicide had on the design of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37). According to one commentator, writing in the early twentieth century, 'Seymour's death relieved [Dickens] rather of something like a clog. [...] At any rate, how it happened we do not and cannot know; that it happened we know and ought to be truly thankful for'.<sup>2</sup> Although these comments lack the sensitivity of most subsequent writings on Dickens, they do encapsulate a generalized feeling that Seymour's death was a relief for the young author. Seymour was, it is assumed, a clot in the rhythmic circulations of Dickens's genius and his untimely removal from the *Pickwick* project was the impetus that took *The Pickwick Papers*, its author, and the Victorian novel more broadly, in exciting new directions. Seymour, we know, had originally envisaged the book as a series of sporting adventures entitled *The Nimrod Club*, an idea that Dickens later admitted to have considered 'not novel' and 'already much used' (761). It cannot be denied that Seymour originally had something much less ambitious in mind. However, Dickens's 1847 preface to the cheap edition of the novel also reveals that Seymour had actually deferred to many of the author's alternative suggestions, including his wish to have 'a freer range of English scenes and people' (761). Furthermore, the 1837 preface, quoted at the top of this article, indicates that Dickens viewed Seymour's death to be an

affliction rather than a blessing. We may of course doubt the veracity of any statement made in the very public format of a preface (at a time when Seymour's friends and family were still grieving), but I think we ought to be more wary of the view that the illustrator's death removed a troublesome 'clog' when there is nothing to support the opinion in any of Dickens's extant writings. What if we were to consider instead the possibility that, rather than allowing a variable to be *removed* from the *Pickwick* project, Seymour's suicide actually *added* to its shape and texture? As Dickens conceded, the death of *Pickwick's* illustrator was an event that became entangled with the ad hoc production of his first novel. Others have noted how the practice of writing 'almost as the periodical occasion arose' allowed Boz to be particularly sensitive and responsive to his readers' reactions to his work and concurrent events in his life and culture.<sup>3</sup> The death of Robert Seymour was no exception. Combined with other well-publicized cases of self destruction, the illustrator's death had a defining impact on Dickens's most formative work. In addition to the various moments of 'accident and design' that determined the pace and structure of this extraordinary novel,<sup>4</sup> the complex, philosophical questions that arose from the spectacle of suicide inspired the young Dickens to invent the style that came to define him.

But before we explore these issues in more detail with reference to *The Pickwick Papers*, it is necessary that we deal with another comment made by that unsigned critic who had referred to Seymour as a 'clog'. He or she claims that 'we do not and cannot know how Seymour died', which is apparently supported by the fact that he died alone with nobody witnessing the event. Yet this does not necessarily mean that the details of the illustrator's suicide are unknown and essentially unknowable. Certainly, by 1836,

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practitioners of the emerging field of medical jurisprudence believed themselves to be fully capable of knowing how an individual died in the absence of eye-witness accounts; they had developed powerful methods of investigation and deduction, not all of which relied upon a specialized understanding of human anatomy.<sup>5</sup> In the year following Seymour's death, for instance, A.T. Thomson published, in *The Lancet*, a series of groundbreaking lectures which he had delivered at the University of London.

With reference to 'bodies found dead', he observed that

Every collateral circumstance must be taken into account: the situation and attitude of the body; the position of the instrument with which the wound is supposed to have been inflicted; the direction of the wound, and the part of the body in which it is situated. [...] If weapons be found near a dead body with certain wounds inflicted upon it, we must ascertain whether the wounds could have resulted from the use of those instruments.<sup>6</sup>

In accordance with these opinions, policemen, medical gentlemen, and the newspapers took full account of all the collateral circumstances at the scene of Robert Seymour's death. One newspaper, *John Bull*, reported:

Mr. John Mason, of Aston-place, [...] was passing Park-place West, Liverpool-road, when he was called by a gentleman named Cave, who exclaimed, 'For God's sake come in; here is a dreadful sight!' Witness accordingly went into the residence of the deceased, [...] and passing through the house into the back garden, discovered the deceased stretched on the ground, weltering in blood, which proceeded from a dreadful wound in the chest. The unfortunate gentleman was apparently quite dead. A fowling-piece was lying near his person, which had recently discharged. Mr. Burrows, a surgeon, attended in a very short time, and declared life extinct.<sup>7</sup>

The way in which the discovery of Seymour's body is dealt with here is a textbook example of what Thomson identifies as examining the collateral evidence. In seemingly objective and precise detail, the exact positions of the body, the weapon, and the wound are observed and then recorded. The method through which the narrative follows Mason

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into Seymour's garden, phenomenologically unfolding the scene as it was experienced by the witness, places a clear emphasis on the prospect as a *spectacle* that may be processed clinically and accurately: it is a 'dreadful sight' rather than a 'dreadful circumstance'.

All signs in the Seymour case pointed towards suicide. The key piece of evidence was a suicide note in which the illustrator seemed keen to absolve all others of any direct or indirect involvement in his death. *Bell's Life in London*, the first home of many of Dickens's sketches, printed the letter, addressed to Seymour's wife, in full:

Best and dearest of wives – for best of wives you have been to me – blame I charge you not any one, it is my own weakness and infirmity, I don't think anyone has been a malicious enemy to me; I have never done a crime my country's laws punish with death. Yet I die, my life it ends; I hope my Creator will grant me peace, which I have prayed so for [*sic*] in vain whilst living.<sup>8</sup>

This piece of evidence was proof enough for the coroner's jury to return the verdict of 'temporary derangement',<sup>9</sup> which was common in cases of suspected suicide.

The 'cut and dried' nature of the Seymour case was facilitated by the efficiency of its investigation. All forms of evidence, including anatomical marks, the condition of the crime scene, and the state of the deceased's mental health, were recorded accurately, systematically and clinically, and they all led towards the same conclusion. In his lectures Thomson recorded a case in which the body and the weapon were *not* dealt with in a similar, detached fashion but were tampered with by those who discovered them. This resulted in the case being unresolved:

In such a case as I have related [...], if the body and the gun had not been moved by those who found the body, it might have been ascertained whether the death was accidental or not. [...] A coroner's inquest was held,

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but so unsatisfactory was the evidence obtained, that doubts remain to this day, whether [the] death was accidental or an act of suicide.<sup>10</sup>

In this instance, investigators lost key parts of the evidence because they overlooked their importance; they had also contaminated the scene by touching the body and effectively involving themselves in a situation that, like John Mason, they should have stood apart from and merely observed. Forensic examination is a powerful skill, concludes Thomson, but only if it is employed in a fashion that is entirely detached yet fully aware of the minor details.

We may observe here an intersection between the methods of medical jurisprudence and the realism of Dickens's first novel. Lawrence Rothfield demonstrates in *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1992) that 'medical discourse [became] a set of "archaeological" (rather than purely logical) conditions' that the realist novel became uniquely capable of appropriating.<sup>11</sup> In *Pickwick's* somewhat methodical narrative style and obvious partiality to fine detail, I think we perceive a telling intersection between the novel and forensic anatomy. Unlike the later *Bleak House* (1852-53), for instance, where the narrative voice steamrolls into the story at the point where Jo the crossing sweeper dies ('Dead! Dead your Majesty!'), the voice of Boz, as careful editor of *The Pickwick Papers*, remains dutifully uninvolved. What is more, the 750-odd pages of text testify to the fact that this is a novel that prefers to dwell on every particular. I will return to this point later.

Meanwhile, it is necessary that we explore how much Dickens already knew about medicine. At the time of writing *Pickwick*, or soon thereafter, he became closely acquainted with one of the key figures in the development forensic research: Dr John

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Elliotson. Elliotson is best remembered for his involvement in mesmeric practice, which is likely to be the reason the two men became acquainted; yet, in the 1820s and 30s, Elliotson was also a well-regarded pioneer of anatomical medicine. In addition to establishing both the College Hospital at the University of London and the Phrenological Society, he gave, in 1821, one of the first ever courses of lectures on medical jurisprudence.<sup>12</sup> How much Dickens and Elliotson discussed their respective ideas and career developments is unclear; none of the surviving letters from this period contain anything more specific than a cordial invitation to dinner. At the time of his death, notwithstanding, Dickens owned a number of medical monographs and textbooks, including Elliotson's *Human Physiology* (1840) and Samuel Cooper's *Dictionary of Practical Surgery* (1838).<sup>13</sup> The latter, notes John Stonehouse, was heavily annotated by Dickens.<sup>14</sup>

Although such biographical and bibliographical evidence provides a tantalizing indication of the author's reading patterns and interests, it is not an infallible guide to the specific nature and extent of Dickens's medical knowledge. Anyone who has collected a substantial amount of books will know that a personal library changes in size and content as years go by. The books that Dickens owned at the time of his death in 1870 are unlikely, then, to be a reliable indication of what he possessed in the 1830s. Bibliophiles will also be aware that possessing a book does not amount to having read it and one often reads books that do not form part of one's own collection. Indeed, Dickens's library is as interesting for its omissions as it is for its holdings. In 1839 he was visited by George Henry Lewes at his home in Doughty Street. According to Peter Ackroyd, Lewes was 'appalled to find in the young writer's library just a standard set of

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books and presentation copies' and became convinced that the author of *Pickwick* 'remained completely outside philosophy, science, and the higher literature'.<sup>15</sup> Dickens's ownership of books on medicine is like his relationship with medical figures: an interesting clue to his general understanding of medical theory but no fail-safe indication that he engaged with any specific issues. K.J. Fielding and Shu Fang Lai argued in 1999 that 'Dickens was not particularly well informed about the latest advances in science, and it is ludicrous to suppose that he was or could have been'.<sup>16</sup> Although there is good reason for questioning the validity of the evidence provided by the letters and the catalogue of Dickens's books, there is nothing 'ludicrous' about turning our attention to the *novels* for evidence of the author's engagements with science, which is one of the motivations driving my reading of *The Pickwick Papers*.

In this work it is the characterization of Samuel Pickwick himself that appears to engage most ostensibly with the theme of science. As J. Hillis Miller observed in his classic study of Dickens's realism, the protagonist is an amateur scientist:

When Dickens 'thought of Mr. Pickwick,' he thought of someone who was to have the motivations of a *scientist*. [...] Pickwick, 'his telescope in his great-coat pocket, and his notebook in his waistcoat, ready for the reception of any discoveries worthy of being noted down' [... is] stimulated by his desire to investigate and report objectively on all the variety of the world.<sup>17</sup>

Here, then, is a man, like A.T. Thomson, who has an eye for detail and a knack for recording it. In a book entitled *Medical Logic* (1852), the German surgeon F. Oesterlen described the sort of man who is 'capable of reflection and possessing an intellect in any degree active'. Not necessarily an expert in medicine, he has much in common with Mr Pickwick:

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He will not only seek by the aid of perception and observation, to interpret the phenomena or objects in question, but his observation will pass involuntarily, and in accordance with innate laws of necessity, into a more profound contemplation of them. He reflects upon them, and compares what he observes here with what he has observed elsewhere, noticing their similarity, or their distinguishing features. He strives unconsciously to digest and master, as it were mentally, what he has observed, by seeking for the conditions of its development, for its casual connection and laws.<sup>18</sup>

On stepping into a cab, at the beginning of the novel, Pickwick asks the driver the age of his horse and quickly writes down the answer when it transpires to be forty-two (21). Although only an amateur scientist, and a bumbling one as later sequences of the text illustrate, he has achieved, by the start of his perambulations, some notoriety with his ‘Speculations on the Source of Hampstead Ponds, with some Observations on the Theory of Tittlebats’ (15). In the first monthly part that appeared after the death of Seymour, we discover Mr Pickwick ‘contemplating nature’ over the balustrades of Rochester Bridge. What he observes is worth citing at length in order to exhibit its profound attention to detail:

On the left of the spectator lay the ruined wall, broken in many places, and in some, overhanging the narrow beach below in rude and heavy masses. Huge knots of seaweed hung upon the jagged and pointed stones, trembling in every breath of wind; and the green ivy clung mournfully round the dark and ruined battlements. Behind it rose the ancient castle, its towers roofless, and its massive walls crumbling away, but telling us proudly of its old might and strength, as when, seven hundred years ago, it rang with the clash of arms, or resounded with the noise of feasting and revelry. On either side, the banks of the Medway, covered with cornfields and pastures, with here and there a windmill, or a distant church, stretched away as far as the eye could see, presenting a rich and varied landscape, rendered more beautiful by the changing shadows which passed swiftly across it as the thin and half-formed clouds skimmed away in the light of the morning sun. The river, reflecting the clear blue of the sky, glistened and sparkled as it flowed noiselessly on; and the oars of the fishermen dipped into the water with a clear and liquid sound, as their heavy but picturesque boats glided slowly down the stream. (70)

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Many of the objects observed by Pickwick, the trembling seaweed, the mournful ivy, and the ruined castle, highlight the fragility and impermanence of life, which may have been a reaction to the death of *Pickwick's* illustrator. In any case, it is significant how the style of the text begins to coincide with the objectives of its main character. Fascinated by details, Pickwick is the means through which the narrative becomes, in this scene, richly descriptive. It is as though Pickwick, like the man who described the discovery of Seymour's corpse, makes 'himself a kind of camera eye'<sup>19</sup> and projects his findings directly onto the pages of the text. And, in accordance with the advice of experts in medical jurisprudence, nothing remains unacknowledged or unaccounted for. Standing on the vantage point of Rochester Bridge, Pickwick is able to see an extraordinary range of varied detail while remaining fully detached from the panorama.

Such modes of observation are, according to Thomson, uniquely powerful. Not only did they capture and represent reality, but they also served the ends of justice.<sup>20</sup> The expert in medical jurisprudence inevitably found himself doubly loaded with the need to advance his field's epistemological complexity on the one hand, and the need to maintain and restore moral order on the other. Thomson noted:

[The medical examiner's] knowledge should be extensive, and be at his command, that, like a torch, it may throw such a light upon his path, in the obscurity of the labyrinths in which the question may be involved, as shall enable him at once to lead the court to a correct decision; not overshadowed by the clouds and mists of hypothesis, but standing forth in the imposing and bold relief of unveiled truth.<sup>21</sup>

Here we may perceive the two motivations that energized medical jurisprudence. Truth standing forth in imposing and bold relief is the aim of all empiricist research yet, in the

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discipline followed by men like Thomson, truth also needed to assist the grave decisions of the criminal justice system.

In ‘The Stroller’s Tale’, one of nine interpolated stories that break out, like a rash, on the larger narrative of *The Pickwick Papers*, the act of looking and perceiving truth must also function as a means of maintaining control and moral order. In this tale, a profligate pantomime artist is repaid for mistreating his wife and child every time the former looks at him. While he languishes on his deathbed he says:

I beat her, Jem; I beat her yesterday, and many times before. I have starved her, and the boy too; and now I am weak and helpless, Jem, she’ll murder me for it; I know she will. If you’d seen her cry, as I have, you’d know it too. Keep her off. [...] There’s something in her eyes wakes such a dreadful fear in my heart, that drives me mad. All last night, her large staring eyes and pale face were close to mine; whenever I turned, they turned; and whenever I started up from my sleep, she was at the bed-side looking at me. (51-52)

The story prefigures later sequences in *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) where Sikes is haunted by visions of Nancy’s eyes after he has killed her. In both narratives, as in the work of medical jurists, the gaze is something that heralds retribution for wrongs committed. Sensational though ‘The Stroller’s Tale’ is, its details are not out of sequence with the more prosaic aspects of *The Pickwick Papers* and the opinions of contemporaneous medical experts. The novel’s transitions from Pickwick’s pedestrian adventures to the highly melodramatic inset tales are, as Dickens scholars have traditionally noted, awkward and problematic: Fielding called the latter ‘lamentable interpolated stories’<sup>22</sup> while John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson believed that the arrangement of the two writing styles was ‘loose’ and had ‘no other apparent purpose than to exhibit Boz’s versatility’.<sup>23</sup> Yet, as Robert L. Patten has noted, there do appear to be ‘reasons for

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believing that the interpolated tales are more than casually related to *Pickwick's* main narrative. All the tales have some thematic relationship to the central plot, and [...] in a different dimension and mode, recapitulate the novel's principal action'.<sup>24</sup> This is certainly true of 'The Stroller's Tale', a story that carries the theme of observation from the main narrative into the gothic melodrama surrounding a man's shameful death. This shift has the effect of making the observation theme more consistent with the *real* stories of suicide that inspired Boz and of supporting jurisprudence's claim that observation was central to society's fundamental need of restitution.

Such opinions may explain why observation and deduction are central activities in most of *Pickwick's* interpolated tales, all of which are heavily laden, like parables, with moral meaning. The tales are also littered with details like those observed by Mr Pickwick over Rochester Bridge. For instance, the narrator of 'The Stroller's Tale', Jem Hutley, describes how he finds the pantomime artist when he is requested to attend the man's last moments:

He was lying on an old bedstead, which turned up during the day. The tattered remains of a checked curtain were drawn round the bed's head, to exclude the wind, which however made its way into the comfortless room through the numerous chinks in the door, and blew it to and fro every instant. There was a low cinder fire in a rusty unfixed grate; and an old three-cornered stained table, with some medicine-bottles, a broken glass and a few other domestic articles, was drawn out before it. A little child was sleeping on a temporary bed which had been made for it on the floor, and the woman sat on a chair by its side. There were a couple of shelves, with a few plates and cups and saucers: and a pair of stage shoes and a couple of foils hung beneath them. With the exception of the little heaps of rags and bundles which had been carelessly thrown into the corners of the room, these were the only things in the apartment. (51)

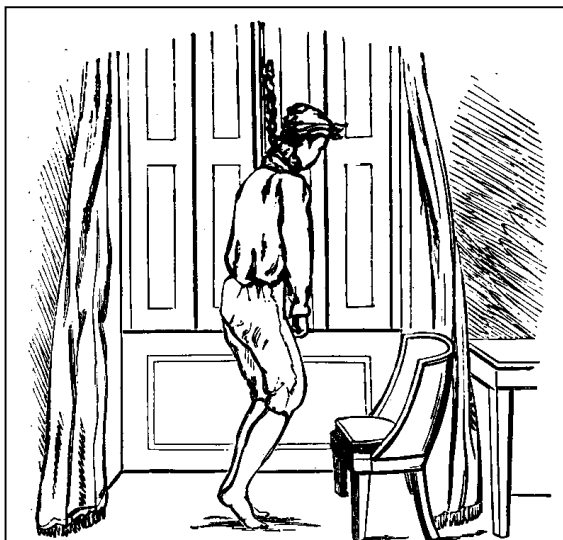
The mode in which the scene is described (through the observations of Jem) echoes the Pickwickian, 'camera eye' qualities of the Rochester Bridge episode. In both there is a

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profound attention to detail that, in ‘The Stroller’s Tale’, seems unusually naturalistic in light of the Gothic events taking place. As with the art of William Hogarth a century earlier, there appears, throughout *Pickwick*’s darker moments, a ‘constant proliferation of details. Filling up the pictorial space to the limit, they tend to saturate [the artist’s] images, often making them difficult for the beholder to apprehend, especially at first glance’.<sup>25</sup> Squalid details were central to pictures that Dickens intended to be gritty and sobering. His aim was not to complicate the ‘viewing’ experience, as Hogarth did, but to filter depressing visions through the perceptions of a single, efficient, and dispassionate observer. In ‘The Stroller’s Tale’ this central observer is Jem. His discovery of the dying pantomime actor has an eerie similarity to John Mason’s discovery of Seymour’s body weltering in its blood.<sup>26</sup> In both instances, descriptions of the dead and dying are executed in no abstract fashion but are developed, instead, through the perceptions of an exacting witness. Notice, in the above extract from *Pickwick*, how much detail is provided about the objects that surround the dying man. The narrator appears to have learned from the opinions and methods of forensic examiners who were encouraged to note every minute detail with painstaking diligence. The act of noticing specific particulars seems central to Dickens’s method of dealing out justice, which is not out of key with the feelings of medical practitioners who believed that, in cases of law, it was justice, not the devil, that was in the detail.

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‘The Stroller’s Tale’ was written shortly before Robert Seymour died, which means that Dickens was thinking about the links between death, detail, and truth before the illustrator’s suicide. Indeed, since 1830, and the infamous death of the Parisian Prince de Condé, the subject of auditing collateral details in a case of sudden death had been a frequent preoccupation of jurisprudence



**Fig. 1** ‘Case of the Prince de Condé’ (1865), in Alfred Swaine Taylor, *The Principles and Practice of Medical Jurisprudence*, 2 vols (London: John Churchill, 1894), I, p. 56.

and popular journalism. The corpse of Condé, a seventy-four-year old survivor of the French Revolution, was discovered on the morning of 27 August 1830 hanging from a curtain pole in his bedroom. The case appeared to be a straightforward one of suicide yet there soon followed suggestions that Condé had been assassinated. Unlike Seymour, the prince appeared to leave no suicide note and had expressed, throughout life, an aversion to the act of self-destruction. (Aristocratic, survivor of the Revolutionary Terror, he was not a man likely to die voluntarily.) Most significantly of all, medical men could reach no consensus on whether or not Condé’s remains suggested he had died alone. The case became, according to *The Age*, ‘an object of great conversation’,<sup>27</sup> and elite medical practitioners from both France and England fought to inspect the crime scene, examine the body, and give their opinions on whether or not the prince had killed himself. Unlike hundreds of other cases on record, the anatomical evidence in this investigation was inconclusive. According to the *London Medical Gazette*, renowned

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expert Charles Marc believed that Condé *had* committed suicide; François Dubois and Auguste Gendrin, meanwhile, believed that he may have been murdered.<sup>28</sup> The *Gazette* concluded, one year later, that ‘none of the explanations offered are satisfactory, and the medical jurist has hitherto been baffled in all his attempts to reconcile the circumstances to the idea either of murder or suicide’.<sup>29</sup>

It was because of these disagreements that investigators turned their attentions to the collateral evidence – the objects surrounding Condé. When the body was found, there were no suspicious footprints, weapons, or marks of violence but there *were* indications that the prince had entertained no intention to die. Most importantly, perhaps, investigators found that Condé’s watch had been wound on the night he died and that he had tied a knot in his handkerchief as a reminder of something to be done the following day. The watch and the knot, the *Medical Gazette* claimed, demonstrated that the prince had not viewed his life to be approaching its termination; why would a man who intended to die prepare to continue living?<sup>30</sup> It appeared as though death had taken Condé by surprise, which is a characteristic of murders and accidents, not suicides.

According to many followers of the case, then, the collateral evidence proved that the prince – unlike Seymour – had not intended to kill himself. The fact that his watch was still ticking indicated, most fittingly of all, that his life was earmarked to continue. In the words of Frank Kermode, from *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), the prince’s life was *ticking*, but it had not yet *ticked*: ‘Let us take a very simple example, the ticking of a clock. [...] *Tick* is our word for a physical beginning, *tock* our word for an end.’<sup>31</sup> *Tick* represents the beginning of life and the continuation of it (‘it keeps me

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ticking'), while *tock* represents closure. Taken together, *tick-tock*, albeit short, manifests a closed, teleological narrative with a beginning and an end. In the case of Robert Seymour, evidence (especially the suicide note) illustrated that the narrative of the illustrator's life had *tocked*; Seymour had a sense of *his* ending. As noted, however, there was evidence that Condé believed himself to inhabit the mediatory space between *tick* and *tock*; he had no sense of *his* ending; like his freshly-wound watch, the prince was still ticking. The idea of an uninterrupted and completed narrative structure, the 'fiction' that Kermode understands through the *tick-tock* analogy, was (and still is) central to the investigations of collateral evidence in cases of suspected suicide. If the circumstantial clues prove that the deceased had no plans to wind up his or her existence, then we may surmise that the individual in question did not die in a voluntary fashion. Such, it was agreed by many, was the state of affairs with Condé. He had wound up his watch but he had not wound up his life.

Whatever the cause or reason of Condé's death, the investigation provided further evidence of the significance and power of forensic observation. Medical jurisprudence did not limit its focus, as might reasonably be expected, to clues left upon anatomies, but read everyday objects as though they were hieroglyphic clues to the innermost secrets of human intention. Criminal behaviour, it was believed, left indelible marks upon the scenes where it took place, an idea that humorously reappears in an early scene in *Great Expectations* (1860-61). Stealing from Mrs Joe's pantry, Pip believes that every component of the still life surrounding him betrays his actions:

Every board upon the way, and every crack in every board call[ed] after me, 'Stop thief!' and 'Get up, Mrs Joe!' [...]. The mist was heavier yet when I got out upon the marshes, so that instead of my running at everything,

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everything seemed to run at me. This was very disagreeable to a guilty mind. The gates and dikes and banks came bursting at me through the mist, as if they cried as plainly as could be, 'A boy with Somebody-else's pork pie! Stop him!'<sup>32</sup>

In accordance with what the medical jurists said, details, objects, and the minutiae of everyday life become incriminating. If, as some commentators suggested, Condé was assassinated, then his killer(s) should have felt some apprehensions towards the objects surrounding *them*, especially the ticking watch, because these became, in the investigation of the prince's death, the noisiest indications that he died under very suspicious circumstances.

Dickens was a master of the related art of making inanimate objects come to life. He uses this device to incriminate his guilty characters. In addition to the above from *Great Expectations*, we also have the famous door-knocker in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and the pointing frescoes in *Bleak House*. *The Pickwick Papers* also features a number of significant examples, especially in the interpolated tales. In 'The Story of the Goblins who Stole a Sexton', for instance, Gabriel Grub, a very miserable misanthrope, learns the errors of his uncharitable ways, like Scrooge, from supernatural visitants. He is introduced as follows:

[One night, Christmas eve, Gabriel Grub] was not a little indignant to hear a young urchin roaring out some jolly song about a merry Christmas, in this very sanctuary, which had been called Coffin Lane ever since the days of the old abbey, and the time of the shaven-headed monks. As Gabriel walked on, and the voice drew nearer, he found it proceeded from a small boy, who was hurrying along, to join one of the little parties in the old street, and who, partly to keep himself company, and partly to prepare himself for the occasion, was shouting out the song at the highest pitch of his lungs. So Gabriel waited till the boy came up, and then dodged him into a corner, and rapped him over the head with his lantern five or six times, just to teach him to modulate his voice. As the boy hurried away with his hand to his head,

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singing quite a different sort of tune, Gabriel Grub chuckled very heartily to himself, and entered the churchyard, locking the gate behind him. (381-82)

Narrated to Mr Pickwick by Mr Wardle, there is a meticulous attention to setting, detail, and history in this strange little story. After beating the child, Grub spends the evening cheerily digging graves until he is interrupted by a spectral chuckle:

Gabriel paused in some alarm [...] and looked round. The bottom of the oldest grave about him, was not more still and quiet, than the churchyard in the pale moonlight. The cold hoar frost glistened on the tomb stones and sparkled like rows of gems among the stone carvings of the old church. The snow lay hard and crisp upon the ground, and spread over the thickly-strewn mounds of earth, so white and smooth a cover, that it seemed as if corpses lay there, hidden only by their winding sheets. Not the faintest rustle broke the profound tranquillity of the solemn scene. Sound itself appeared to be frozen up, all was so cold and still. (382)

Again, we see here a careful attention to the details surrounding the action, but there is a key difference to the earlier scene in Coffin Lane. Geographical detail in the latter is used to facilitate deduction: the old abbey ruins tell a real history of shaven-headed monks. In the graveyard scene, however, details facilitate fantasy: tombstones become gems, and grave mounds become barely-covered corpses. It is at this very moment that part of the goblin scenery comes to life:

Seated on an upright tombstone, close to him, was a strange unearthly figure, whom Gabriel felt at once, was no being of this world. [...] The hat was covered with the white frost, and the goblin looked as if he had sat on the same tombstone very comfortably, for two or three hundred years. He was sitting perfectly still; his tongue was put out, as if in derision; and he was grinning at Gabriel Grub with such a grin as only a goblin could call up. (384)

The goblin manifests a paradox that is inherent to all of Dickens's descriptions of the supernatural. He is, at once, not of this world, yet part of its mundane furniture. Like Jacob Marley's use of the door-knocker, he uses a very common object, a tombstone, as a portal between two dimensions and has the appearance of being an ancient part of the

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scenery (notice how the frost settles upon him as it does on the graves). Like the marshes in *Great Expectations*, the graveyard scenery comes to life in order to teach Grub a few home truths.

In the last of the interpolations, ‘The Story of the Bagman’s Uncle’, there is a similar vivification of objects that comprise the scenery. Getting incredibly drunk one evening, the eponymous character finds himself surrounded by ghostly mail coaches coming back to life. On first entering a waste ground featuring ‘old worn-out mail coaches’, the uncle employs the Pickwickian camera eye to survey the scene:

There they stood, all huddled together in the most desolate condition imaginable. The doors had been torn from their hinges and removed, the linings had been stripped off, only a shred hanging here and there by a rusty nail; the lamps were gone, the poles had long since vanished, the iron-work was rusty, the paint worn away; the wind whistled through the chinks in the bare wood-work, and the rain, which had collected on the roofs, fell drop by drop into the insides with a hollow and melancholy sound. They were the decaying skeletons of departed mails, and in that lonely place, at that time of night, they looked chill and dismal.

My uncle rested his head upon his hands, and thought of the busy bustling people who had rattled about, years before, in the old coaches and were now as silent and changed. (648)

The uncle uses modes of observation that are as penetrative as both Mr Pickwick’s and the medical professional’s. Penetrating every nook of the scene, the gaze allows history to rerun in a way that is similar to how the study of objects surrounding the dead Condé facilitated the reconstruction of *his* last moments. Observe, also, the links between mail coaches and corpses; the former become the ‘decaying skeletons’ of the departed, ‘chill and dismal’ like the ‘silent and changed’ natures of those who once rode inside them. For Dickens, the mail coaches, now disused, are like the mouldering remains of the dead: ghastly relicts of lives now extinct.

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When the bagman's uncle falls into a slumber, he is awoken by a clock striking two, and the resurrection of the mailcoach corpses:

In one instant [...] the whole of this deserted and quiet spot had become a scene of most extraordinary life and animation. The mail coach doors were on their hinges, the lining was replaced, the ironwork was as good as new, the paint was restored, the lamps were alight; cushions and greatcoats were on every coach-box, porters were thrusting parcels into every boot, guards were stowing away letter-bags, hostlers were dashing pails of water against the renovated wheels; numbers of men were pushing about, fixing poles into every coach; passengers arrived, portmanteaus were handed up, horses were put to; in short, it was perfectly clear that every mail there, was to be off directly. Gentlemen, my uncle opened his eyes so wide at all this, that, to the very last moment of his life, he used to wonder how it fell out that he had ever been able to shut 'em again. (649)

Once again, the presence and function of the spectator is centralised. There is an attention to detail that is filtered through the astonished eyes of the bagman's uncle. Even before the mail coaches come back to life, he notices every minor feature and speculates about what these tell him about their histories. This act of reconstructing the coaches' past by observing their present *dead* state is then conjured into a scene where the equipages *literally* come back to life; like the work of those investigating the death of Condé, the uncle's study of the dead allows his objects of analysis to take new life; observation becomes a grim form of ventriloquism.

This metaphor will help us evaluate a seeming point of departure between the work of medical jurists and the more casual observers in *The Pickwick Papers*. Ventriloquists are able to make inanimate objects come to life, but never in a way that is independent of their involvement. In *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41), Little Nell and her grandfather encounter two men of the 'class of itinerant showmen—exhibitors of the freaks of Punch' in a graveyard. They notice,

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perched cross-legged upon a tombstone behind them, [...] a figure of that hero himself [...]. His body was dangling in a most uncomfortable position, all loose and limp and shapeless, while his long peaked cap, unequally balanced against his exceedingly slight legs, threatened every instant to bring him toppling down.<sup>33</sup>

Without the involvement of the ventriloquist showman, Punch is dead; limp and lifeless, lying on a tombstone, he lacks any of the vital qualities that usually have him ‘beaming’ and ‘imperturbable [in] character’.<sup>34</sup> In order to make this dead object come to life, the showman must involve, literally insert, himself into it. And might we say the same of many of the supernatural observations made in *Pickwick*? The lifeless Punch seems to be a marked contrast to the goblin who is full of life, energy, and chuckles as he sits on *his* tombstone observing the sexton who, in turn, observes him. Yet Gabriel Grub is quite drunk when he witnesses the goblin. Despite the fact that he does disappear (as though stolen by the spectral visitors), it is most likely that Grub *imagines* his goblins. The only difference between Grub and the showman in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is that the latter uses his hand to invest Punch with life whereas the former uses his inebriated mind’s eye to animate the scenery around him.

So it is with the bagman’s uncle. He has a fantastic adventure inside one of the resurrected mail coaches, rescues a beautiful woman from two wicked men, and falls in love with the damsel. The next morning he awakes to discover that the coaches are, once again, ‘a mere shell’ (659) but remains convinced that the vehicles really ventured forth:

He always said what a curious thing it was that he should have found out, by such a mere accident as clambering over the palings, that the ghosts of mail-coaches and horses, guards, coachmen, and passengers, were in the habit of making journeys regularly every night. (659)

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Of course, in *Pickwick*, as elsewhere, Dickens's farce relies on the difference between the naivety of his characters and the sagacity of his readers; the latter understand that the uncle dreams his adventure. Yet, 'The Story of the Bagman's Uncle', for all its extravagance, uses a hyperbolic method of recycling medical imagery as a form of questioning the veracity of scientific 'findings'. In accordance with what medical men wrote about cases like the Prince de Condé's, the story suggests that human behaviour leaves indelible traces on the objects that stage it, a sort of collateral white noise that, if studied assiduously, will allow the observer to reconstruct, resurrect, and restage people's actions. Yet, in both the Gabriel Grub story and 'The Story of the Bagman's Uncle', it is clear how the thoughts and actions of the observer become forms of residual energy themselves – variables that seep into observations – infecting, deforming, and possibly giving birth to these grotesque spectacles.

This unhealthy method of logic, 'dogmatic thinking' as it is termed by modern philosophers of science,<sup>35</sup> is best illustrated in the earlier Pickwickian story of another bagman, Tom Smart. Like the bagman's uncle, Smart witnesses a supernatural event (or what appears to be a supernatural event) after drinking a lot of alcohol in an inn. Before falling asleep, he surveys the objects around him:

What struck Tom's fancy most, was a strange, grim-looking, high-backed chair, carved in the most fantastic manner, with a flowered damask cushion, and the round knobs at the bottom of the legs carefully tied up in red cloth, as if it had got the gout in its toes. [...] There was something about this particular chair, and yet he couldn't tell what it was, so odd and so unlike any other piece of furniture he had ever seen, that it seemed to fascinate him. He sat down before the fire, and stared at the old chair for half an hour; – Damn the chair, it was such a strange old thing, he couldn't take his eyes off it. (189)

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The fact that the chair is personified prepares the way for the supposedly magical event that follows:

Tom gazed at the chair; and, suddenly as he looked at it, a most extraordinary change seemed to come over it. The carving of the back gradually assumed the lineaments and expression of an old, shrivelled human face; the damask cushion became an antique, flapped waistcoat; the round knobs grew into a couple of feet, encased in red cloth slippers; and the whole chair looked like a very ugly old man, of the previous century, with his arms akimbo. Tom sat up in bed, and rubbed his eyes to dispel the illusion. No. The chair was an ugly old gentleman; and what was more, he was winking at Tom Smart. (190)

Once again, the action of the scene, or – more accurately – its key discovery, is filtered through the observations of one man: ‘Tom gazed’, ‘he looked’, he ‘couldn’t take his eyes off it’. The chair/old man proceeds to tell Smart about his past:

‘I have been a great favourite among the women in my time, Tom,’ said the profligate old debauchee; ‘hundreds of fine women have sat in my lap for hours together. What do you think of that, you dog, eh!’ The old gentleman was proceeding to recount some other exploits of his youth, when he was seized with such a violent fit of creaking that he was unable to proceed. (191)

It is interesting how the chair’s behaviour is written into its ailing and ageing frame. Tom might have guessed that the chair was an old debauchee from its worn, creaky, and gouty constitution. In addition to various fruity revelations, the chair informs Smart that he (the bagman) will marry the inn’s landlady if he exposes evidence that will incriminate his rival in her affections. In a pair of trousers in a press Smart will discover, the chair says, a letter that will prove the rival to be married with six children:

[Tom] walked up to one of the presses. The key was in the lock; he turned it, and opened the door. There was a pair of trousers there. He put his hand into the pocket, and drew forth the identical letter the old gentleman had described! [...] At all events, Tom kicked the very tall man out at the front door half an hour later, and married the widow a month after. (193-96)

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Tom Smart's experiences read like a grotesque dramatization of the Condé investigation. The old chair is like the ticking watch: an object that tells incriminating stories and leads to further investigations. Yet what is most revealing about Smart's conquest over his adulterous rival is the way it is fuelled by four or five tumblers of punch and Tom's own yearnings for the landlady. This is not an uninvolved or an objective investigation but rather one that manages to fulfil Smart's desires by way of drunken and deluded logic. It is an extreme example of erudition that experiences preformed feelings becoming a variable in the individual's patterns of thought and experience. This story, like some of the other interpolations, implies that there is no alternative to dogmatic thought and this, in turn, offers some response to the idealistic calls for objectivity made by men like A.T. Thomson: preformed desires and opinions inevitably colour, change and influence all forms of analysis, including that employed by practitioners of medical jurisprudence.

This exploration of the logic of forensic discovery and its relationship to human desire, the lack of the same, and the imagination, is without parallel in the 1830s. In the interpolated interruptions of *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens highlights that the methods of deduction employed by medical science are, like most forms of observation, vulnerable to disparity and emotional contamination. Like most of his non-specialist contemporaries, the author's main encounter with science would have been channelled through the notions of medical jurisprudence written in newspapers and journals. Cases like the 'suicides' of Seymour and Condé inspired the young author enormously but not in a way that made him unmindful of the problems and imperfections they exemplified.

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- <sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Preface', in *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. by Mark Wormald (1836-37; London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 6-7. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the body of the text.
- <sup>2</sup> Unsigned, 'Dickens', in Ward and Trent, et al, *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, 18 vols (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1907-21), XIII, p. 11.
- <sup>3</sup> See Harland S. Nelson, *Charles Dickens* (New York: Twayne, 1981), pp. 74-76.
- <sup>4</sup> Nicola Bradbury, 'Dickens and the Form of the Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 152-66 (p. 152).
- <sup>5</sup> Medical jurisprudence had existed in some form or other since the mid-eighteenth century. Instrumental in its development as a recognized discipline were George Male's *Epitome of Juridical or Forensic Medicine* (1816), John Gordon Smith's *The Principles of Forensic Medicine* (1821), Theodric Romeyn Beck's *Elements of Medical Jurisprudence* (1823) and a series of lectures given by Dickens's future friend John Elliotson in 1821 on 'State Medicine' (Grainger's Theatre, Southwark).
- <sup>6</sup> A.T. Thomson, 'Lectures on Medical Jurisprudence: Lecture 33', *Lancet*, 28 (1837), pp. 273-78 (p. 273-74).
- <sup>7</sup> Anon., untitled report, *John Bull*, 25 April 1836, p. 131.
- <sup>8</sup> Anon., unsigned article, *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 24 April 1836, p. 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Thomson, 'Lectures', p. 273.
- <sup>11</sup> Lawrence Rothfield, *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. xiii.
- <sup>12</sup> Only the introductory lecture of this series was printed, though with which publisher is unclear. See John Elliotson, 'The Introductory Lecture of a Course Upon State Medicine' (Southwark, 1821).
- <sup>13</sup> Listed in J.H. Stonehouse, *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens from Gads Hill* (London: Piccadilly Fountain Press, 1935), pp. 24 and 42.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 42.
- <sup>15</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (1990; London: Vintage, 1999), p. 312.
- <sup>16</sup> K.J. Fielding and Shu Fang Lai, 'Dickens's Science, Evolution and "The Death of the Sun"', in *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 200-11 (p. 206).
- <sup>17</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge MS: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 6.
- <sup>18</sup> F. Oesterlen, *Medical Logic*, ed. and trans. by G. Whitley (1852; London: Sydenham Society, 1855), p. 15.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
- <sup>20</sup> The issue of linking observation with the maintaining social order so clearly invokes the work of Michel Foucault, especially the ideas he explores in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*

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(London: Penguin, 1991). The Panopticon, that icon of *all* non-restraint modes of control, was intended to induce, Foucault argues, ‘a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’ (p. 201). In Ronald R. Thomas’s work on the links between forensic technologies and detective fiction, it is suggested that ‘the practice of medical science’ became ‘a form of surveillance and discipline’ because crime detection was perceived to be carried out by a ‘master diagnostician, an expert capable of reading the symptoms of criminal pathology in the individual body and the social body as well’ (*The Moonstone, Detective Fiction and Forensic Science*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 65-78 (p. 77)). See also Thomas’s *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), particularly the introduction.

<sup>21</sup> A.T. Thomson, ‘Lectures on Medical Jurisprudence: Lecture 1’, *Lancet*, 27 (1836), pp. 65-70 (p. 68).

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Robert L. Patten, ‘The Art of Pickwick’s Interpolated Tales’, *ELH*, 34:3 (September 1967), pp. 349-66 (p. 349).

<sup>23</sup> John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1957), p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> Patten, ‘The Art of Pickwick’s Interpolated Tales’, p. 365.

<sup>25</sup> Frédéric Ogée and Olivier Meslay, ‘William Hogarth and Modernity’, in *Hogarth*, ed. by Mark Hallett and Christine Riding (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), pp. 23-29 (p. 27). On Hogarth’s influence on Dickens, see Harry Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1994), pp. 39-55.

<sup>26</sup> At the time Dickens wrote ‘The Stroller’s Tale’, Seymour was still alive. He illustrated the picture accompanying the installment and it has been suggested that Dickens’s pernicky requirements were what tipped the fatal balance for Seymour. Peter Ackroyd is correct in expressing doubt over this fact which has no corroborating evidence. See *Dickens*, pp. 192-93.

<sup>27</sup> Anon., untitled article, *The Age*, 1 January 1832, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Anon., ‘Was the Duke of Bourbon Murdered?’, *London Medical Gazette*, 31 December 1831, pp. 485-86.

<sup>29</sup> Anon., ‘Duke of Bourbon’, *London Medical Gazette*, 21 January 1832, pp. 608-09 (p. 608).

<sup>30</sup> ‘Was the Duke of Bourbon Murdered?’, pp. 485-86.

<sup>31</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 44.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Robin Gilmour (1860-61; London: J. M. Dent, 1994), pp. 12-13.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Paul Schlicke (1840-41; London: J. M. Dent, 1995), p. 127.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>35</sup> The idea originates with Immanuel Kant's discussions of objectivity and subjectivity in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1788); it is also discussed in J.S. Mill's *System of Logic* (1843). The term 'dogmatic thinking' was coined much later by Karl Popper in "'Gewohnheit' und 'Gesetzeserlebnis'" (1927) and is explored in more detail in his seminal *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1935; London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

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