

Doing the Novel in Different Voices: Reflections on a Dickensian Twitter Experiment

Emma Curry

Introduction

What would Charles Dickens have made of the Internet? Encouraged by the global celebration of his bicentenary in 2012, this question has recurred in a range of cultural contexts, as a source of thoughtful and often humorous speculation. Tom Gauld's cartoon, 'If Charles Dickens Were Alive Today' (Fig. 1), published in the *Guardian* during the bicentennial year, was a particularly prominent example of this trend, lightly satirizing the widespread cultural enthusiasm for imagining Dickens into all kinds of contemporary media. Rather than gleefully immersing himself in our slew of modern, fast-paced communicative tools, the Dickens of Gauld's cartoon finds himself drawn instead to the slower, more familiar rhythms of good 'old-fashioned' novel-writing.

Despite the cartoon's gently mocking tone, however, our sense that Dickens might relish 'a list of "modern" things' to do in the first place is



Fig. 1: Tom Gauld, 'If Charles Dickens Were Alive Today', *Guardian*, 26 November 2012. ©Tom Gauld. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

one that Dickens himself encouraged during his own lifetime. His ‘passion for technology’ and his care for his legacy and popular appeal indicate that such crossovers with modern forms of media are a natural succession.¹ As Jay Clayton argues in *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace*, it was not only Dickens’s genius which made him so popular during his lifetime, but his “technocultural” creativity’ — his innovative use of a range of new distributive technologies, from journal publications to monthly numbers to the newly established electrical telegraph. As a result Dickens was able to reach every reader of English on the globe, and ‘to saturate every communications market, to rig every *household* so that it could receive his *words*’ (Clayton, p. 200, emphasis in original).

This enthusiasm for disseminating narrative and forging communicative networks means that the communal, democratized space of the Internet becomes an ideal platform for Dickens’s work in the present day. Through its shared space, the Internet can foster the kind of ‘cultural inclusivity’ to which, as Juliet John has argued, Dickens was so passionately committed during his lifetime, by creating and connecting together communities of readers around the globe.² In recent years there have been several Dickensian projects which have exploited this connective quality: most notably the Dickens 2012 celebrations, in which the main website functioned as ‘campaign headquarters’ for the various events and initiatives.³ The Internet also provides the opportunity for new kinds of reading experiences, such as the British Council’s ‘Global Dickens Read-a-thon’, in which twenty-four readings took place in twenty-four countries over twenty-four hours; or recent online reading projects that have recreated the original serial publication of Dickens’s novels: *A Tale of Two Cities* (hosted by the University of Leicester), *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (University of Buckingham), and *Our Mutual Friend* (Birkbeck, University of London).⁴

It was in collaboration with this final project, and in considering the ways in which digital platforms might open up Dickens’s novels to new kinds of communal, interactive encounters, that the idea for ‘Our Mutual Friend Tweets’ was born. If reading Dickens can be a social experience,

¹ Jay Clayton, *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 3.

² Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ Zack Lagadinos and others, *Creating the Backbone for the Dickens 2012 Bicentenary: An Interactive Qualifying Project Report* (Worcester, MA: Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 2008), p. 7.

⁴ ‘Dickens commemorated in 24 countries over 24 hours with global read-a-thon’, *British Council*, 7 February 2012 <<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/news/2012/january/readathon>>; *A Tale of Two Cities* Reading Blog (2012) <<https://dickensataleoftwocities.wordpress.com/page/15/>>; The Drood Inquiry (2014) <<http://www.droodinquiry.com/>>; Dickens *Our Mutual Friend* Reading Project (2014–15) <<https://dickensourmutualfriend.wordpress.com/>> [all accessed 14 October 2015].

then how might the technologies of social media provide us with a new means of communally reflecting upon his work? How might Dickens's interest in the relationships and stratifications of nineteenth-century society translate into these contemporary technological social spaces? Could there be a connection between Dickens's 'externalized aesthetics' and the declarative idiom of social media platforms?⁵ Could the transposition of Dickens's writing into a digital medium alter the ways in which we conceptualize his style? And how might engaging with Dickens's work in creative and dramatic terms transform our sense of what it means to 'read' a novel?

In this article I will consider how the 'Our Mutual Friend Tweets' project has explored these questions, and, through its commitment to creative collaboration, has developed a fresh approach to reading Dickens's final completed novel. By allocating its participants characters from *Our Mutual Friend* (*OMF*) to role play on the popular microblogging website Twitter, the project has, I hope to suggest, facilitated a kind of crowd-sourced close reading (close tweeting, perhaps), by creating a shared creative space in which readers can collate, discuss, and imaginatively respond to a multiplicity of perspectives on the novel's plot, structure, and characterization. As the project has progressed, it has come to occupy a curious middle ground between re-enacting and adapting Dickens's novel, with elements of critical and creative readings of the text combining to form a new and unruly rendering, which delights in the details of Dickens's work while joyfully immersing itself in the distinctive grammar of Twitter. In this article, I'll explore just a few of the many ways that this community of readers and performers has reread and rethought Dickens's novel. Over the course of the article I will also draw on some recent approaches to reading, performance, narrative, and digital media that particularly resonate with the project's aims, although such a process has also revealed the sheer breadth of fascinating avenues still to be explored in relation to this project. I am also indebted to the wit and creativity of the project's tweeters, who have inspired these reflections through the sheer imaginative richness of their contributions. Before turning to the brilliance of the tweets themselves, then, I'd like to preface the discussion by briefly considering the ways in which Dickens, and particularly *Our Mutual Friend*, might be uniquely suited to modelling this medium of textual engagement.

Performing Dickens

In *After Dickens*, his seminal call to creative arms for readers and adapters of Dickens's writing, John Glavin makes the case for all actions of

⁵ Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

reading being a form of ‘restoration’.⁶ Glavin points out that access to any form of ‘original’ text is, by its very nature, impossible, because all reading contains within it a form of lag: no matter when we read, we will ‘all come to Dickens only *after Dickens*’ (p. 2, emphasis in original). Rather than seeing this process as remedial, or as one of loss, however, Glavin frames such moments of ‘aftering’ as a rich imaginative opportunity, suggesting that such a process creates relationships between critical and creative disciplines, in situating reading ‘as a close cousin to adapting’ and ‘updat[ing] both of them as versions of performance’ (p. 2). This analysis of the reading process is particularly striking for the Twitter project, as it frames reading as both active and, crucially, collaborative. Placing reading in the same imaginative space as adapting and performing also naturally creates a notion of community. Reading is a responsive and generative process, which consistently fragments and draws in more participants, who are themselves both audience and reader. For Dickens, who already culturally represents ‘a shared social property’,⁷ such a method of participative, performative reading seems in some sense a natural response to the text: a means of engaging with and involving oneself in a communal cultural product. But such a framing can also be found within the texts themselves: Dickens’s imaginative landscape is filled with characters who are immersed in the textual and performative quality of their lives. They communicate explicatively and protuberantly, attempt to manage and enact their own narrative, and encounter difficulties in moments of misreading, miscommunicating, or misperforming.⁸

These relationships between reading, narrative, and performance are also particularly strongly realized in *Our Mutual Friend*, a novel which is deeply preoccupied with staging and troubling the boundaries between public and private, past and present, and alive and dead selves. Many of the novel’s characters present a particular persona for the behoof of an audience, whether it is Eugene Wrayburn treading and retreading his aggressively nonchalant night walks, which baffle Mortimer Lightwood and incense Bradley Headstone, or Mr Boffin staging and scripting his own descent into miserliness, an action which is in itself a creative adaptation of

⁶ John Glavin, *After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 2.

⁷ Joanna Robinson, ‘Digitalizing Dickens: Adapting Dickens for the Bicentenary’, *Dickens Quarterly*, 31 (2014), 42–61 (p. 47).

⁸ In *Great Expectations*, for example, Pip writes upon Magwitch’s return of his misery at having mistaken the kind of narrative that he is in: ‘it was not until I began to think, that I began fully to know how wrecked I was, and how the ship in which I had sailed was gone to pieces.’ See Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by David Trotter (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 323.

the reading that Silas Wegg has performed for him.⁹ John Harmon, Julius Handford, and John Rokesmith similarly operate as various constructed personas that respond to the interpretation of different public or private scenarios.

It is the novel's interest in exploring and interrogating this sense of artifice and self-curation, and in blurring the boundaries between different kinds of voices and different kinds of social appearances, that bring it most strikingly into relation with recent work on the theatrical nature of social media platforms. As Zizi Papacharissi writes, the creative space of Twitter particularly facilitates narrative, as it 'affords a platform for condensed yet potentially rich and variably public or private performances of the self'.¹⁰ The continued presence of an audience for these performances also emphasizes Twitter's narrativizing aspect: in 2009 only 10 per cent of accounts were 'locked' (invisible to the general community), and since then this proportion has declined even further.¹¹ What is more, the space invites a range of narrative methods: as Papacharissi points out, 'in the deliberately improvised performances of a digital orality, interplay between spontaneity and preparation enables individuals to blend print and oral practices of storytelling in presenting themselves' (p. 2002). By drawing on both planned and improvisational narrative techniques, Twitter allows its users to stage aspects of their lives, but in an immediate, interactive form that invites audience engagement. Just as Mr Boffin is inspired to new imaginatively insolent improvisations by Bella Wilfer's horrified reaction to him (*OMF*, p. 583), in the Twittersphere users are readers and interpreters as well as performers. Indeed, Twitter's 'favourite' and 'retweet' facilities (allowing users to bookmark or reiterate an utterance they are particularly engaged with), in addition to its 'reply' and 'quote' functions, mean that the platform provides a space for the kind of reading practices that John Glavin frames in *After Dickens*, in which users adapt, perform, and reperform the written material that they come into contact with, by repeating, replying to, or revising what they read as an integral part of their own 'performance'.

In addition to creating this theatrical space, modern social media technologies are also deeply interested in the kinds of relationships between individuals that Dickens's imagination is similarly so stimulated by: as James Mussell has written recently of Facebook, the platform 'markets mutuality, exploiting the connections between people to both acquire

⁹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. by Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 1997), pp. 533, 572. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰ Zizi Papacharissi, 'Without You, I'm Nothing: Performances of the Self on Twitter', *International Journal of Communication*, 6 (2012), 1989–2006 (p. 1989).

¹¹ Robert J. Moore, 'Twitter Data Analysis: An Investor's Perspective', *TechCrunch*, 5 October 2009 <<http://techcrunch.com/2009/10/05/twitter-data-analysis-an-investors-perspective-2/>> [accessed 14 October 2015].

content and the means of organizing it'.¹² Dickens famously muses on the curious connective energies of social spaces in *Bleak House* (1852–53):

What connexion can there be between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom [. . .]? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world who from opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!¹³

One answer that *Bleak House* proffers to this question is that such relationships are constituted by narrative; that is to say, Dickens's distinctive narrative gaze, which ranges over these various and distant social spaces and, crucially, listens to and collects together the voices that dwell within them, forging a story by joining these pieces as diverse but crucial constituents of a broader whole. Having been provided with a communal platform, these voices can then respond to and interact with one another, reflexively reshaping the narrative as they go. In conceiving the 'Our Mutual Friend Tweets' project, then, I hoped to use the global, multivocal capacity of the Twitter platform as a means of restaging this wide-ranging narrative gaze, in order to bring together as many voices (and as many readers) as Dickens's novel inspires. The result, as I hope to demonstrate in the following section, has been a digital performance of *Our Mutual Friend* that is distinctively modern and novel, and yet remains at its heart a fundamentally, inimitably Dickensian storytelling experience.

Voicing *Our Mutual Friend*

In the first stage of the project, I assigned the characters and set up the various Twitter accounts. There was such a burst of enthusiasm in response to my call for participants that the initial prime personas, Rokesmith, Bella, Wegg, and so on, were all snapped up very quickly, presenting the question: just how many characters from the novel could I manage to include? Soon I turned to assigning members of the novel's 'Social Chorus' — the Veneerings, the Podsnaps, the Lammlers — but found that there was still demand for characters. Next I turned to the very minor, walk-on parts: Tom Tootle from the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters; 'Gruff and Glum', the wooden-legged individual from Bella and John's wedding; the French gentleman (who has the misfortune to encounter the full force of Podsnappery

¹² James Mussell, "'Scarers in Print": Media Literacy from *Our Mutual Friend* to Friend Me on Facebook', *Gamma*, 21 (2013), 163–78 (p. 174).

¹³ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 235.

at Georgiana's party); and even Eugene Wrayburn's father (or, as Eugene terms him, 'M. R. F.'). But with demand for characters still high, I then ran into animals (Edward the donkey) and inanimate objects from Mr Venus's shop: namely, his skeleton (another French gentleman), his alligator (behind whom Mr Boffin conceals himself from Wegg), and even Wegg's leg (the amputated one, naturally).

While there was great whimsy and fun in selecting these less evident, but still memorable, voices from the novel, the sense of their need for inclusion was also deeply rooted within the text itself. Indeed, it is Silas Wegg himself who frames his amputated leg as a separate, animate entity, in the memorable scene in Mr Venus's shop in which he asks how the leg has 'been going on' (*OMF*, p. 84). Edward the donkey, who transports Wegg on his first visit to Boffin's Bower, is similarly presented (at least to Wegg's mind) as being able to communicate quite distinctively with his owner.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the flickering, 'boney' candlelight of Mr Venus's shop, many items seem to come to life (*OMF*, p. 90). This fluidity of energy can be found throughout Dickens's writing: forces of animacy frequently fluctuate between bodies and objects; they alight upon and innervate different kinds of matter.¹⁵ Extending these moments of vitality by imaginatively supplying them with an inner life (and tweeting facilities) means taking the creative energy of Dickens's original material a step further.

Having assembled these fifty-one participants, at the beginning of the project I also set out a few guidelines relating to the different kinds of tweets that I was hoping to see each month. The premise was to follow the timeline of the monthly serial reading project, with characters recording on the first day of each month — or as near as possible — what had happened to them in that particular instalment, while also creatively speculating on what their character might have been occupied with during the rest of the month, or during the instalments in which they played no role. As H. Porter Abbott points out, all narratives 'by their nature are riddled with gaps', meaning that reading becomes, creatively, 'a fine tissue of insertions [. . .] that we make as we move from point to point'.¹⁶ Dickens's narrative gaps are particularly inspiring, however, as there is such a rich canvas

¹⁴ Indeed, the two seem to have an almost supernatural shared understanding: their departure from the narrative is framed by Dickens's narrator thus: '[Wegg's] late driver with a wave of the carrot, said "Supper, Eddard!" and he, the hind hoofs, the truck, and Edward, all seemed to fly into the air together, in a kind of apotheosis' (*OMF*, p. 62).

¹⁵ For two of the best-known pieces of scholarship on the relationship between animate and inanimate in Dickens's writing, see Dorothy Van Ghent, 'The Dickens World: A View from Todgers's', *Sewanee Review*, 58 (1950), 419–38; and John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (London: Faber, 1973).

¹⁶ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 90.

of possibility elsewhere in his writing. George Orwell famously remarks upon the ‘unnecessary detail’ of Dickens’s work, but such a lack of limits means that filling in the blanks becomes incredibly creatively rewarding.¹⁷ Consider the relatively standard, plot-based interaction between Rogue Riderhood (@OMF_Rogue) and Gaffer Hexam (@OMF_Gaffer) in the novel’s first chapter:

Where is that sneaking old wulture @OMF_Gaffer hiding at now? Get rid of me again will you? (@OMF_Rogue, 1 May 2014)

.@OMF_Rogue Don’t you ‘pardner’ me, you thieving rogue. Come near me again, I’ll take a pick at your head with the boat-hook. #omftweets (@OMF_Gaffer, 1 May 2014)

Here the exchange played out on Twitter in terms very similar to Dickens’s own, drawing upon word choices and character dynamics that had been established in the text. However, when it came to imagining what Eugene Wrayburn (@OMF_Eugene) and Mortimer Lightwood (@OMF_Mortimer) might be up to on a sunny May Saturday in London, the conversation was thus:

Perfect day for a scull on the Thames, but rather want to put all that grisly business behind us. What shall we do instead @OMF_Eugene? (@OMF_Mortimer, 3 May 2014)

.@OMF_Mortimer, I confess myself not entirely adverse to the river: but if your finer nature quails at it, perhaps a dip in Highgate Ponds? (@OMF_Eugene, 3 May 2014)

.@OMF_Mortimer: #masculinebonding #brosbeforehos (@OMF_Eugene, 3 May 2014)

In this case, the interaction is almost entirely imagined, and yet nevertheless remains firmly rooted in the nuances of Dickens’s original text. Eve Sedgwick and Holly Furneaux have both memorably written on the queer energy of Eugene and Mortimer’s relationship in *Our Mutual Friend*.¹⁸ By dwelling upon imagining their life together, the Twitter project has provided a creative space in which to further explore this particular reading of the novel. The creative use of hashtags by Eugene here also draws upon

¹⁷ George Orwell, ‘Charles Dickens’, in *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, intr. by Jeremy Paxman (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 49–114 (p. 100).

¹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

modern popular culture and links Dickens's depiction of a close and affectionate male relationship in the nineteenth century with contemporary framings of masculinity and male 'bonding'.

Blurring the temporal boundaries between Dickens's time and our own is an action which many of the project's participants have indulged in through their particular tweeting idiom. When the project began, I left the question of voice open to each individual's creative decision, and the characters have variously drawn on the possibilities of both Dickens's period and our own modern, meme-filled technological landscape. Bella Wilfer (@OMF_Bella), for example, imagines herself into the period of the novel's publication (1864–65), browsing fashion magazines, attending photography exhibitions, and reading contemporary novels:

Wonder if I would find works of #Trollope amusing? 'Orley Farm' is being advertised, and I'm a fan of Millais, at least.
#soverybored (@OMF_Bella, 11 June 2014)

Such a style of tweeting (and indeed reading) is a more historically focused approach, which carefully reconstructs the contextual framework of Dickens's novel around Bella's characteristic tone. On the other hand, Sloppy (@OMF_Sloppy) and Charley Hexam (@OMF_Charley) immerse themselves in the distinctive language of contemporary online culture, creating some humorous moments of neo-Victorian mash-up:

i wonder if we could make some bramble jam with the mangle.
(Betty Higden (@OMF_Betty), 2 May 2014)

@OMF_Betty messy bisness that — but whot can not a mangle do! #haa #bramblejam #everydayimmangling (@OMF_Sloppy, 2 May 2014)

@OMF_Gaffer Don't be fooled by the brains that I got, I'm still, I'm still Charley from the block. . . (@OMF_Charley, 3 June 2014)

Such a process conversely reimagines the implications of Dickens's characterization into the present day. One of the strengths of the project has been the way in which these various reading styles can be brought together, to forge a version of the novel that values and integrates a variety of different critical approaches to Dickens's work.

One of the particularly distinctive qualities of Betty Higden's and Sloppy's tweets is that they both adopt their own idiosyncratic dialogue, a point that also pushes us as readers to consider Dickens's own distinctive and innovative experiments with language. As Papacharissi points out, such linguistic liveliness is embedded into Twitter's native idiom: in

studying contemporary users' output, she finds that 'playfulness' is often 'associated with the reordering of syntactical and grammatical conventions'. Papacharissi suggests that such practices are 'invited by the architecture of the platform and partially enabled though the expressive and connective tendencies of the self in late, networked modernity' (p. 2001). Just as Sloppy continually expresses his merriment with the repeated use of '#haa', so too does Bradley Headstone (@OMF_Bradley) similarly depart from standard grammatical form when his emotions are heightened. His response to his first meeting with Eugene Wrayburn, for example, was as follows on Twitter:

It would be quite respectable for my respectable right hand
clutching my respectable hair-guard of my respectable watch
round and round. . .

. . . round @OMF_Eugene's thoroughly
UNrespectable throat and strangle him with it!
AAAARRRRRRGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
(@OMF_Bradley, both 1 November 2014)

Throughout the narrative of *Our Mutual Friend*, Bradley struggles to 'keep down' his emotions, which consistently and frighteningly play out across his face and through his bodily functions, such as the 'great spirt of blood' which 'burst[s]' from his nose in one particularly passionate moment (*OMF*, p. 625). In the modern technological landscape, social media outlets provide a platform for a similar, materialized form of emotional 'venting', which allow Bradley to express his 'inner' feelings, as in the novel, through tangible, performative means.

As a flipside to Twitter's potential as a conduit for dramatic interiority, its socialized, connective space also provides Dickens's characters with a range of rich comic possibilities, which once again stem from Dickens's own distinctive sense of humour. Betty Higden (@OMF_Betty), drawing on her tendency to misread others' intentions towards her in the novel, amusingly framed herself as a Luddite in respect to technological innovation:

hello! I am on

twitter now! (@OMF_Betty, both 29 April 2014)

In contrast, the self-proclaimed 'honest man' Rogue Riderhood sought to take full advantage of the Internet's business opportunities:

@DickensOMF Your account may be infected by a wirus!
Please send me your password so's I can verify your security.
(@OMF_Rogue, 8 May 2014)

@OMF_Rogue Nice try, you plain-dealing willain (Dickens OMF (@DickensOMF), 8 May 2014)

@DickensOMF Bah! T'wasn't me but an associate wot got into my account as sent that, and I'll soon settle him! (@OMF_Rogue, 8 May 2014)

Such moments of comic invention spool away from Dickens's text, and yet are heavily rooted in his style of characterization, and in the porous potential of his writing to translate across time or technological gulfs. Throughout the course of the project, the inclusion of so many different creative minds and voices has served to open up and expand the details of Dickens's narrative, pushing the comic and emotional nuances of even fleeting character appearances to their full imaginative potential, and inviting us to dwell upon such moments of Dickens-inspired whimsy.

Storifying *Our Mutual Friend*

In assembling so many comically vociferous voices, it became clear within a few days of the project beginning that, despite endowing Dickens's characters with such creative freedom, the narrative was missing his organizing influence. Furthermore, the sheer number of characters and tweets was becoming impossible to keep track of: for the first instalment alone there were over one hundred and fifty tweets from over forty different characters. It was at that point that I decided to integrate the use of a second online platform, Storify, into the project's progression. Storify allows a user to collect together a range of tweets related to a particular topic or event, to order them, and to assemble them into a narrative, while incorporating text and images as supplementary narration. Thus, each month I collected the tweets related to the monthly instalment, and added in elements of brief narration in order to roughly tie the tweets to the main events of Dickens's story.¹⁹ This role was separate from my involvement in the project as a tweeting character: when I assembled the Storify rendering of each monthly part, I took on the kind of 'omniscient' narratorial voice that is a key element of many of Dickens's novels.²⁰ In taking on this new, 'quasi-narrator' role, I became doubly conscious of the editorial and creative choices that I was making: my narration attempted to take on a cod-Dickensian tone, whose

¹⁹ These collections of tweets can be found at <<https://storify.com/emmalcurry>> [accessed 14 October 2015].

²⁰ This style most notably occurs in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), in which the narrative style shifts from first-person to 'omniscient' voice at the end of the third chapter. See Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Elizabeth M. Brennan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 33.

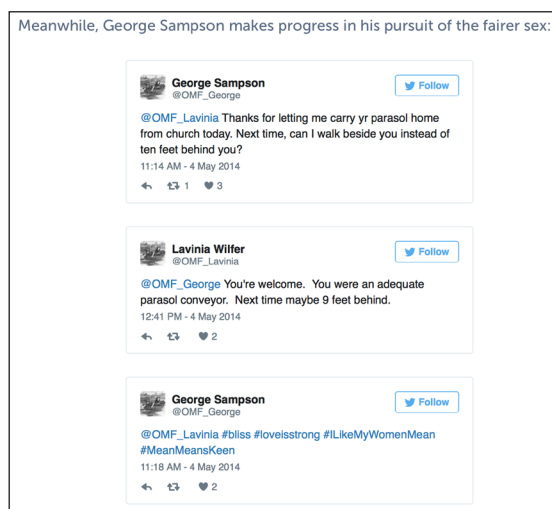


Fig. 2: An extract from the Storify, 'Our Mutual Friend Tweets: Part Three', July 2014 <<https://storify.com/emmalcurry/our-mutual-friend-tweets-part-three>> [accessed 14 October 2015].

mock seriousness was a counterpoint to the ephemerality of the Twitter medium (see Fig. 2 for an example).

My assembly of the Storify narrative was not intended to impose a limit on contributions, but to create a more easily digestible record of the project, one which would be helpful for readers unfamiliar with the mechanisms of Twitter. However, by 'organizing' the tweets in this way, and by attempting to link them back to Dickens's original framework, the action has felt at times rather uncomfortably similar to Dickens's own somewhat heavy-handed editorial role on *Household Words*. During his time spent working on this journal, Dickens positioned himself as 'conductor' of proceedings, and consistently encouraged his contributors towards a more 'Dickensian' style of writing in order to create a coherent journalistic voice.²¹ Despite the addition of my 'omniscient' narrator to proceedings, however, the Twitter rendition of *Our Mutual Friend* has still remained free to move away from Dickens's original narrative framework. One of the most interesting ways in which the Storify instalments have differed from Dickens's text is the change in length and emphasis of certain events, depending on the amount of tweets that they have attracted. For example, in the second instalment, the creative vivacity of events in Mr Venus's shop — and the proliferation

²¹ For more detail on Dickens's role as 'conductor' of *Household Words*, see Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's 'Household Words': The Social Life of Goods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 21–22.

of tweets that they attracted — meant that the earlier, more emotionally charged scenes between the Hexam family (a much longer chapter in the novel, and arguably more significant to the plot) were almost overshadowed in the Storify rendering of the text.²² And yet, as Nicola Bown has pointed out, perhaps this emphasis on Mr Venus’s shop *is* true to Dickens’s original narrative after all: in her post on the Birkbeck *Our Mutual Friend* blog, Bown argues convincingly for the significance of the taxidermy episode in terms of the broader thematic structure of Dickens’s story. Rather than just ‘a convenient way to fill a few pages’ for Dickens, having ‘over-written’ the second part, Bown highlights the episode’s relationship to the textual preoccupation with animation and death, and the ways in which all kinds of matter can fluctuate between the two.²³ In drawing out the creative energy of this episode, the Storify collection of tweets helps to supplement and reinforce this reading of the novel, emphasizing the whimsical details but, crucially, teasing out the thematic significance of the chapter by directing the group’s collective attention towards it.

Indeed, such a method of shifting or reframing the narrative focus is one that many of the novel’s secondary characters have enacted through their Twitter performances. Alex Woloch has written influentially on the curious ‘*over*-significance of minor characters’ in Dickens’s writing: in *The One vs. the Many*, Woloch argues that our sense as readers that Dickens’s characters are almost *too* exaggerated or *too* noticeable for the novelistic form is due to Dickens’s committedly ‘radical stylistics of characterisation’.²⁴ In drawing out these minor voices and giving them a platform, the Twitter project serves to emphasize this ‘radical’ element, by demonstrating just how much life and detail Dickens allots to his secondary characters, elevating their significance beyond comic sideshows or plot mechanisms. Lady Tippins (@OMF_Tippins), for example, highlights the subjectivity of narrative by consistently framing herself on Twitter as the hero of her personal story, which is comically at odds with Dickens’s ‘true’ focus:

Poor @OMF_Twemlow glowering at @OMF_Eugene in mad, jealous rage: impending quarrel for my favour? #fight #lovers #Cupidon @DickensOMF (@OMF_Tippins, 2 July 2015)

²² For the full Storify collection of part 2, see <<https://storify.com/emmalcurry/our-mutual-friend-tweets-part-two>> [accessed 14 October 2015].

²³ Nicola Bown, ‘Month 2 (June 1864): “There’s Animation!”: Dickens and Taxidermy’, <<https://dickensourmutualfriend.wordpress.com/2014/05/29/month-2-june-1864-theres-animation-dickens-and-taxidermy/>> [accessed 14 October 2015].

²⁴ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 125, emphasis in original.

Her misreading of the other characters' behaviour here, and her assumption that their actions are all related to her, provides a comically alternative approach to the scene in question, but also, crucially, extends her inner life beyond Dickens's rather cruel rendering of her 'scratching poultry' voice (*OMF*, p. 23). Such moments also allow us as readers to dwell on the progressive or potentially radical elements of the text that a plot- or protagonist-focused reading might overlook. In narrative terms, Pleasant Riderhood cannot be labelled as anything more than 'minor', and yet Dickens tucks a beautifully rendered, thoughtful passage on Pleasant's rich imaginative life into the beginning of the chapter which prefaces the reveal of John Harmon's true fate:

And maybe sometimes of a summer evening, when she stood with folded arms at her shopdoor, looking from the reeking street to the sky where the sun was setting, she may have had some vaporous visions of far-off islands in the southern seas or elsewhere (not being geographically particular), where it would be good to roam with a congenial partner among groves of bread-fruit, waiting for ships to be wafted from the hollow ports of civilization.²⁵

Pleasant was able to emphasize this moment of indulged female fantasy on Twitter by representing it in visual as well as linguistic terms (*Fig. 3*). One of the project's strengths has been to follow the blueprint of many neo-Victorian works 'that give a voice to the silenced and marginalized in Victorian culture', but what is also clear from such serendipitous moments is that these voices are also lurking within the original texts, waiting to be attended to.²⁶

In giving the characters such freedom to comment upon their own narrative, the project has also indulged in some fascinating and unruly moments of narrative metalepsis. Abbott outlines the concept by designating the different narratorial spheres as 'the storyworld', 'the world of narration', and, finally, 'the world of production'. Narrative metalepsis is a moment when 'the border between any two of these worlds is violated: for instance, when someone from one world enters the other' (Abbott, p. 170). One of the critical boons of having such noisy, engaged characters is that they have frequently drawn attention to their presence or absence within the monthly narrative. Mr Veneering (@OMF_Veneering), for instance, is

²⁵ *OMF*, p. 346. I am grateful to Holly Furneaux for drawing my attention to this particularly rich and resonant moment in the text.

²⁶ Christy Rieger, 'The Legacy of Medical Sensationalism in *The Crimson Petal and the White* and *The Dress Lodger*', *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*, ed. by Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 153–64 (p. 160).



Fig. 3: Pleasant Riderhood (@OMF_Pleasant), 3 January 2015.

particularly vociferous in addressing Dickens himself when he has not been given a part in an instalment:

@OMF_Veneering has no time to fret that Mr. Dickens ignores him (again). @OMF_Veneering is otherwise occupied. @OMF_Veneering In the house. (@OMF_Veneering, 3 January 2015)

Indeed, even John Rokesmith (@OMF_Rokesmith), the novel's protagonist, has found himself omitted from the monthly instalments at certain points over the course of the project:

Rushes in, panting
 Sorry I'm late, but I'm ready to tweet my adventures.
 . . . what do you mean I'm not in it this month?
 CHARLEEEEEEEY!!! (@OMF_Rokesmith, 1 June 2015)

This emphasis on the temporality of serial publication further draws out the mechanics of Dickens's narrative structure, mirroring and highlighting the pauses within the initial instalments, while directing readers' attention to moments of omission. Additionally, in liberating the characters to comment publicly upon their own position within the narrative, the boundaries between the 'worlds' of narration, to borrow Abbott's phrase, are creatively opened up. Indeed, the public platform of Twitter further encourages such boundaries to be reimagined, by allowing modern readers to enter the world of the story:

@OMF_Bella Hey boofer lady. I feel your angst about that dead dude and all. Want to go take a ride in my brougham?
 #victorianchatup (Ian Higgins (@DrIanHiggins), 1 May 2014)

@VictorianScot [*sic*] Pray tell — are you rich, well-favoured, and charismatic (or possibly just sinister)?
 #victorianladyresponds (@OMF_Bella, 1 May 2014)

@OMF_Bella Lady — I'm solvent, not living under a fake name, and I have a pulse. What's your sister's number? #picky
 #surpluswomen #oldmaid (@DrIanHiggins, 1 May 2014)

Such moments of audience engagement have helped to extend the community of readers and performers that the project has assembled, since participants imaginatively respond to each other's work and inspire each other to even greater creative (and comic) feats.

In his seminal work on the detailed imaginative universe which Dickens creates throughout his writing career, J. Hillis Miller writes that *Our Mutual Friend*, in particular, is a novel concerned with 'present[ing] a fully elaborated definition of what it means to be interlaced with the world'.²⁷ In bringing this Twitter community of individuals together, then, this project has in many ways enacted and further extended this 'interlacing', joining communities and readings of the novel together, and disseminating engagement with Dickens's final novel across continents and across

²⁷J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 280.

time zones. What is more, these creative reworkings and reframings of the narrative structure have further opened up the mechanics of Dickens's story-making process. In describing his method of writing the novel, Dickens positions himself in his postscript to the novel as a 'story-weaver at his loom', constantly considering 'the relations of its inner threads to the whole pattern' (*OMF*, p. 832). In 'Storifying' our own rendering of *Our Mutual Friend*, and thus reperforming our own version of this narratorial and editorial labour, both the 'threads' and the 'pattern' of Dickens's narrative have come into sharper relief.

Future directions: teaching tweeting?

This project began by positioning itself at the junction of several disciplines, and sought to explore how combining reading and performance with digital media might provide a fresh means of engaging with Dickens's novel. The outcome, as I hope to have demonstrated, has been an incredibly rich and detailed collective reading of *Our Mutual Friend*. Bringing together differently focused attentions, the Twitter experiment has remained consistently alive to the text's nuances, curiosities, and radicalities. In simultaneously attending to the novel from such a variety of perspectives, it has reworked much-loved passages, but it has also highlighted 'hidden' or overlooked areas within the novel which would merit further critical work. While the ephemerality of the Twitter medium may initially have seemed at odds with the length and complexity of a Victorian novel, the project has in fact demonstrated the endlessly transposable quality of Dickens's writing. The detailed, wide-ranging nature of his particularly distinctive narrative style, and its suitability for adaptation, continue to enliven literary scholarship to the present day, but Dickens's adaptability has also invigorated the Twitter project's creative impetus. The performative element of the tweeting has enabled the participants to open up and extend their readings of the text outside the confines of the page, using the flexibility and hybridity of the online medium to bring Dickens's characters into conversation with both a nineteenth- and twenty-first-century broader social sphere. Thus, while this article began by positing Dickens's interest in technology as a key element of his overlap with our modern cultural landscape, the 'Our Mutual Friend Tweets' project has also discovered that, at its heart, it is Dickens's language and his characters that most powerfully continue to sustain and energize communities of readers across the globe.

In line with the serial reading of the novel, the project is now drawing to a close, but I would like to conclude these reflections by dwelling on a possible future direction for this kind of activity: namely, its pedagogical potential. There has been much discussion in literature of recent years across the disciplines on what role 'creativity' should play within the study

of fiction in higher education. Mary Poovey's article on the development of creative criticism and performative writing provocatively closes with the question 'what if all my students started adapting *Jane Eyre* instead of writing critical essays about it?'. Elaine Showalter opens her guide to *Teaching Literature* with the hope 'to see an erosion of the boundaries between literary criticism and creative writing'.²⁸ As Peter Wilson writes, Poovey's question 'not only embodies but seems to reinforce a dichotomy that has a long tradition in the pedagogy and assessment of literary study in higher education', a tradition which implies that, in Wilson's words, 'the "proper" response to literature, at least in educational settings, is an objective piece of critical writing and not some so-called "creative" work.'²⁹ To make matters worse, as James Mussell has recently pointed out, academic activity on social media is, in a similar vein, 'still often considered as supplementary to "real" scholarly work'.³⁰

However, using Twitter as a platform for a performative approach to the novel offers a particularly rich and productive teaching tool. As I hope to have shown, such a collaborative, crowdsourced method of reading and writing has played a crucial role in building rapport across academic and non-academic communities, and across time zones. Such an activity, modelled on a smaller scale in a pedagogical setting, could be an effective means of encouraging students (and scholars more broadly) to work together to enrich and develop each other's work, while also unsettling the traditional spatial boundaries of the academic classroom. Similar schemes have been met positively in other settings: Rosie Miles writes on the Higher Education Academy website, for example, of the success of a forum-based role play debate related to *Bleak House*. The collaborative output that results from this activity is, to use Miles's phrase, often 'full of a dynamism which results from the whole being greater than the sum of its parts'.³¹ Making use of digital tools is a crucial part of this creative learning process: as D. R. Garrison and Terry Anderson argue in their study of technology-enabled learning, as teachers 'we need to start by asking what e-learning will allow us to do that we could not do before'.³²

²⁸ Mary Poovey, 'Creative Criticism: Adaptation, Performative Writing, and the Problem of Objectivity', *Narrative*, 8 (2000), 109–33 (p. 127); Elaine Showalter, *Teaching Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. viii.

²⁹ Peter Wilson, 'Creative Writing and Critical Response in the University Literature Class', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 48 (2011), 439–46 (p. 439).

³⁰ James Mussell, 'Social Media', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17 (2012), p. 347.

³¹ Rosie Miles, 'Text. Play. Space: Creative Online Activities in English Studies', *HEA English Subject Centre*, October 2007 <<http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/technology/textplayspace.php>> [accessed 14 October 2015].

³² D. R. Garrison and Terry Anderson, *E-Learning in the 21st Century: A Framework for Research and Practice* (London: Routledge/Falmer, 2003), p. 6, quoted in Miles.

The whimsical potential of Twitter is also a crucial element of this project that should not be played down, either pedagogically or critically speaking. While modelling this approach as a teaching tool would be an effective means of maintaining a positive learning environment, such an enjoyable style of activity also has benefits for criticism, in pushing us to remain consistently alive to the humorous and entertaining nature of Dickens's original texts.³³ As demonstrated by the cartoon with which I began this article, the comic energy we associate with Dickens continues to inspire and engage readers in our own time. What's more, as the final frame of Tom Gauld's cartoon emphasizes, it is Dickens's lifelong pleasure in the telling and dissemination of stories that brings him most powerfully and palpably into conversation with the cultural landscape of the present day. In continuing to develop these modern, technology-enabled methods of reading and engaging with Dickens's texts, then, we can continue to explore the creative and critical joys of these 'old' stories in a new and exciting way.

³³ I am grateful to Beatrice Bazell for this observation.