Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference
Mitchell, Rebecca N.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Mitchell, Rebecca N.
Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference.
The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24266.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24266

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=859349
By now, most people with even a limited familiarity with Charles Dickens’s life are aware of the time he spent as a boy in a blacking factory while the rest of his family was confined in the Marshalsea; as Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes, when it comes to Dickens’s biography, “All roads, it seems, lead back to Warren’s Blacking.”¹ When John Forster’s biography of Dickens was first published, however, the details of that long-suppressed episode in Dickens’s boyhood were new to most readers, largely because Dickens did not speak about it during his lifetime.² Forster presents that period of Dickens’s life through an autobiographical fragment that Dickens himself had written, much of which had found its way into David Copperfield. Dickens wrote the description of his time spent in the factory from the perspective of a successful author famous for his command of character, yet the fragment is notable for its multiple iterations of uncertainty. Despite his almost painfully accurate memory of the time, and even though he writes about himself, Dickens repeatedly asserts his inability to articulate his own feelings, a tendency attributed variously to repression, to the effects of trauma, or to Dickens’s desire to head off doubters:³ “I am not clear [ . . . ] it is wonderful to me [ . . . ] it is wonderful to me [ . . . ]”; “No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every-day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast”; “That I suffered in secret, and that I suffered exquisitely, no one ever knew but I. How much I suffered, it is, as I have said already, utterly beyond my power to tell.”⁴
The final two phrases are repeated nearly verbatim in *David Copperfield*, but similar phrases permeate his oeuvre and are not limited to the quasi-autobiographical. In *Great Expectations*, Pip admits to his “dear Herbert” that “I cannot tell you how dependent and uncertain I feel, and how exposed to hundreds of chances.” Such uncertainty is at times due to Pip’s inability to assess his own feelings or motivation adequately or accurately: “What purpose I had in view when I was hot on tracing out and proving Estella’s parentage, I cannot say” (408). But more common is the feeling of the inadequacy of words to communicate his intended meaning, a meaning often felt, and felt keenly and felt specifically: “Words cannot tell what a sense I had, at the same time, of the dreadful mystery that he was to me” (338); “I was so humiliated, hurt, spurned, offended, angry, sorry—I cannot hit upon the right name for the smart—God knows what its name was—that tears started to my eyes” (62); “I tell this lightly, but it was no light thing to me. For, I cannot adequately express what pain it gave me to think that Estella should show any favour to a contemptible, clumsy, sulky booby, so very far below the average” (309). These examples, like those from the autobiographical fragment, are not evidence of a young man who does not know himself, but evidence of a man who knows himself and realizes that to make that self known to another via language is, ultimately, an impossibility.

The prolificacy and scope of Charles Dickens’s work often oppugns ideas of limitation. Undercutting critiques of Dickens’s proclivity to a totalizing worldview, though not consciously anticipating them, is the regular refrain in Dickens’s writing that words are ultimately unable to capture a person, event, place, or feeling. In their very repetition, claims of ineffability become blunted, as the repetition itself is indicative of the effort to overcome the limitations of language. Such insistence on the inability of language to describe feeling or experience is not, I wish to suggest, merely a caveat intended to preclude criticism. Nor is it a supremely personal tic born of Dickens’s intense suppression of his own past. This insistence is instead constructive, erecting a foundational boundary that separates people from one another. This limitation inscribes alterity, as it insists that the self must always be a mystery to the other, and the other always a mystery to one’s self. Yet that limit is in constant tension with the nearly compulsive drive to overcome it—a necessary urge to connect—that is evidenced through paradigms that offer the potential, or seem to offer the potential, to usurp the boundaries themselves: familial relationships and the communicative exigency of reading and writing. Those paradigms are at work throughout Dick-
ens’s oeuvre. Here, I consider the relationships depicted within Dickens’s work, outside of their potential influence on the reader’s altruistic response. I limit my focus to *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and *Bleak House*, novels in which Dickens inscribes alterity and the limits of the self by insisting on the limitations of reading and the limitations of the familial bond. Always in the presence of those limitations, the often unbearable weight of the impossibility of connection, is an aspiration toward overcoming. These attempts afford the characters and their stories the hope that is reified through the potential of empathy.

*The Mystery of A Tale of Two Cities*

Early in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the narrator notes a “wonderful fact to reflect upon”: that “every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.” The narrator’s fascination is not shared by all of the novel’s characters. Many, in fact, seem confident that close friends or family members are perfectly transparent. No mystery, and no secret. The noble Miss Pross, for example, is devoted to her brother Solomon, whose character is permanently and decidedly affixed in her mind and heart. Her gross misjudgment of him is used to comic effect throughout the novel, even long before the terms of their relationship are revealed to the reader. Among its earliest incarnations is her protestation that “There never was, nor will be, but one man worthy of Ladybird and that was my brother Solomon, if he hadn’t made a mistake in life” (100). Readers are informed that Solomon was actually “a heartless scoundrel who had stripped her of everything she possessed [. . . ] and had abandoned her in her poverty for evermore, with no touch of compunction” (100). Readers may thus reflect on the fact that Solomon is indeed a profound secret and mystery to his sister, but Miss Pross refuses to acknowledge the same.

Miss Pross’s comic nature helps to hedge the significance of her idealization of Solomon, though Mr. Lorry does regard her fidelity to her profligate brother as a character flaw. Her loyalty is not, however, merely the optimistic devotion of the family member who chooses to see only the best in any of her kin. It is instead an instance of willed blindness, a commitment to one’s own vision of a person, in spite of any evidence to the contrary. She cannot, or does not, recognize Solomon’s existence independent of her own vision of him. She cannot grant him separateness, independence from that vision, and in that refusal she confines
“him”—which is after all only her understanding of his reality—within her understanding of her reality.

That the closeness of the familial bond can impede rather than facilitate the recognition of alterity is apparent in Miss Pross’s relationship with her brother. She is not always so blind to others’ true intentions. Her encounter with another other in the novel functions as a useful counterpoint to her interactions with her brother. Thérèse Defarge represents the ultimate threat to those whom Pross holds dear. In the physical struggle that ends in Defarge’s death, Pross holds English and Defarge speaks French; neither is able to understand the other. In this standoff, despite her determined refusal even to attempt to understand Defarge’s words, Pross nevertheless discerns the Frenchwoman’s intentions accurately, as she intuits Thérèse’s desire to kill Lucie. It is, given the circumstances and Mme. Defarge’s externalization of her emotion in the scene, not a difficult insight to discern. Robert Alter describes this scene as a “battle between pitiless French savagery and staunch English humanity,” a “symmetric” rendering of polar opposites. That struggle—like the struggle defined by the novel’s title—is large in scale, scope, and importance. The entire relationship is predicated if not on a nuanced appreciation of alterity, then on a radicalized notion of opposition. The result is that Pross gets it correct while failing to apperceive Solomon’s true nature. Though her familiarity with him vastly exceeds her familiarity with Madame Defarge, she cannot see the real character of her brother, proved repeatedly to be a cad. Why the willed blindness? That magical pronoun “my,” which should indicate intimacy, instead erects barriers to vision.

Negotiating the spaces between binaries—family versus stranger, mine versus yours—is a task at the heart of the novel. From its opening sequence, the narrative of *A Tale of Two Cities* swings between the best and the worst, heaven and hell. But in addition to the extreme polarities of experience the novel also alternates its focus between the global and the personal, between the expansive vista of London and Revolutionary France and the nearly claustrophobic confines of the Manette household. And to the extent that it is unable to contain the Revolutionary period in its entirety (Dickens’s reliance on Carlyle notwithstanding), the novel contrasts the expansiveness of the Revolution with the concentrated intensity of the family unit. The novel’s extremes are a suitable setting for the plot points that depend on a lack of discernment on the societal, familial, and interpersonal levels, for the novel is as much about confusion and recognition of identity as it is about revolution. The war was caused by extreme class divisions; Marie Antoinette’s “let them eat cake”—reimagined in the novel through Foulon’s telling “the famished
people that they might eat grass” (231)—is the prototypical example of the wholesale blindness of one person to the plight of an entire people. Utterly unable to imagine the hunger of the poor, her solution is both ignorant (which could be ameliorated with education) and solipsistic (which even education cannot undo)—she collapses the poor and their problems into her own indulged and rarefied existence. A similar dynamic is at work in the novel as it details the difficulty, on the most intimate level, of reconciling the other outside of one’s self without collapsing him or them into a mere function of the self.

It thus makes sense that the courtroom drama early in the novel exploits such a blurring between the self and the other—a coup that is repeated at the novel’s end, when Carton takes Darnay’s place at the guillotine. The two men look alike, but each relates differently to their shared appearance. Carton is effective as a lawyer because of his ability to understand the inability of those around him to distinguish between himself and Darnay, a difference that he deeply feels. Surely any novel that depends on mistaken identity or the doppelgänger may make this claim, and there are many. But what distinguishes *A Tale of Two Cities* is its amplification of the polarities of the proximity spectrum: it offers an explication of both the wages of refusing to recognize the other on a global or national scale and the wages of that refusal on a personal scale. The former is accessed through the Revolution, through the French aristocracy’s inability to apprehend the poor of their country, for example, while the latter is accessed even through the minor foibles of secondary characters, as in Miss Pross’s insistence on her brother’s goodness or the luckless lawyer Stryver’s inability to recognize that Lucie may not think him a prize husband.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the family unit is fraught, serving as the bridge to connect the national or institutional with the personal, and inhibiting the apperception of the other regardless of whether one embraces or rejects kinship. Pross’s devotion to her estranged brother inhibits clear vision, but a complete rejection of the familial bond leads to equally problematic results, as demonstrated by Darnay’s attempt to distance himself from his familial legacy. In one light, his demission may be read as a recognition of alterity: Darnay chooses to separate himself from his family’s deeds and thus his rightful inheritance as heir, marking him as “other.” But even within that stance of disavowal, Charles remains unable to understand the implications of this choice for the community left in the countryside of his family seat. His ability to conceive of their experience as it exists independent of his own is feeble. He means well, collecting “but a small installment of taxes, and no rent at all” (242), and he believes he
Chapters 1

acts on behalf of or for the peasant. Darnay clings to his intention: “he had oppressed no man, he had imprisoned no man; he was so far from having harshly exacted payment of his dues, that he had relinquished them of his own will” (251). Yet his renunciation of wealth is seen by the people of France as an utter abdication—an abdication of his duty to die—and his intention, it turns out, holds no weight in the end.

Darnay does not recognize the impotence or limitations of his view until he sees it defamiliarized, and his first salient encounter with a version of reality outside of his own comes not from those people of France but from Stryver, his ostensible friend. After Darnay admits that he knows the Monseigneur’s heir (though not admitting that he is that heir), Stryver replies, “I am sorry for it.” The reason? Says Stryver, “Here is a fellow, who, infected by the most pestilent and blasphemous code of devilry that ever was known, abandoned his property to the vilest scum of the earth that ever did murder by wholesale” (249). This belief, that Darnay has “abandoned all his worldly goods and position to this butcherly mob,” comes as a crushing blow to Darnay, who had thought his actions benign, if not actively beneficent. Yet even Stryver’s view is but one of many; it is the view of the British businessman. The French peasantry that calls for Darnay’s death among the deaths of all the émigrés and aristocracy has its own variation on that reality, wherein no repudiation can counter his bloodline.

Familiality can inhibit the recognition of alterity because of the too-closeness of the bond, but also because family ties may be invoked as a means of assigning similarity to a group of individuals. Darnay’s predicament evinces the resiliency of the familial bond, as his belief that to renounce that bond is effectively to renounce all its concomitant problems is shown to be erroneous. His situation also demonstrates how brittle ties of loyalty can be. When Darnay functions metonymically as an instance of the cursed Evrémonde race, as he does for Mme. Defarge, his death serves as a means to revenge. Radicalizing the notion of family into race, and including Manette, Lucie, and her children among that race and thus destined for destruction, Mme. Defarge demonstrates the flaw of the mob mentality that marked much Revolutionary violence. It also raises questions of class and the delicate balance of recognizing individuality within a regime of wholesale blame. The Defarges’ desire for revenge is motivated by a genuine hurt, as her family was brutalized by the Evrémonde family, and so the Evrémonde family (its present incarnation being immaterial) must pay. Those original crimes committed by the Evrémondes—rape, murder, false imprisonment—were themselves the product of a regime
that reduced entire classes of people to objects. That tactic of wholesale alterity (the poor are inhuman, they lack the rights granted by divine intervention to the aristocracy, and thus may be treated as if they were animals) is replicated by the Defarges’ revolutionary zeal to eradicate the Evrémonde race (all issue of the Evrémondes are fruit of the evil tree, and therefore deserve death).

Among this landscape of ineffective engagement with difference, A Tale of Two Cities does depict examples of a more productive version of alterity, which leads to greater affective connection, if paradoxically through the insistence of alienation. Perhaps it makes sense that within the tangled web of unsatisfying or ineffectual familial bonds, two actors stand emphatically apart through their insistence on difference and refusal of familial bonds. These individuals—Lorry and Carton—share no blood relations with the novel’s other characters, yet through and because of their insistent self-alienation and refusal to be considered family are able to create affective bonds stronger than many of those of the novel’s blood relations.

Lorry, saddled with the charge of relaying often painful information, twice frames that information in the form of hypotheticals, abstracting himself from the interaction, always unable to reconcile himself and his purpose to the affective charge so often caught up with it. In his earliest meeting with Lucie, when he must tell her that her father is still alive, he cannot articulate his mission. Lucie questions, “‘Are you quite a stranger to me, sir?’ ‘Am I not?’ Mr. Lorry opened his hands, and extended them outwards with an argumentative smile” (24). Here, when his body language indicates familiarity with his open, extended hands and smile, his words maintain the ambiguity and estrangement of his position. In these moments of declaration or revelation, Lorry reverts to the conditional or the interrogatory:

As I was saying; if Monsieur Manette had not died; if he had suddenly and silently disappeared; if he had been spirited away; if it had not been difficult to guess to what dreadful place, though no art could trace him; if he had an enemy in some compatriot who could exercise a privilege that I in my own time have known the boldest people afraid to speak of in a whisper, across the water there; for instance, the privilege of filling up blank forms for the consignment of any one to the oblivion of a prison for any length of time; if his wife had implored the king, the queen, the court, the clergy, for any tidings of him, and all quite in vain;—then the history of your father would have been the history of this unfortunate gentleman, the Doctor of Beauvais. (26; emphasis mine)
The repetition of “if” draws attention to the unrelenting nature of Lorry’s abstraction. When feelings may prove too intense for Lorry’s comfort, he often employs such rhetorical flourishes to create distance or blunt the intensity of emotion. In another typical instance, when Manette has taken to cobbling after his daughter’s marriage, Lorry invokes a similar strategy to discuss with Manette the uncomfortable business of his recovery. Wishing to remove himself from the personal interaction, Lorry prefices the remarks, in which he poses a story of a man in Manette’s position to the doctor for his professional opinion, with extensive disclaimers: “I am a mere man of business, and unfit to cope with such intricate and difficult matters. I do not possess the kind of information necessary; I do not possess the kind of intelligence; I want guiding” (208). Only when he has sufficiently distanced himself from the uncomfortable reality at hand is Lorry able to move on to asking the questions that will illuminate Manette’s opinions on his own case. Some critics view Lorry’s insistence on the distinction between matters of business and matters of the heart as an instance of Dickens’s tendency to fragment the conflicting or ambivalent drives of any person into distinct characters; noting Lorry’s “fear of emotional involvement, a comfortableness with matters of the head rather than of the heart,” Barbara Lecker describes the businessman as a “man whose worldly experience has been solely limited to commercial dealings, and he finds himself disarmed by this new demand on untried capacities.”¹⁹

But a reading that confines Lorry wholly to the world of business overlooks the valuable service of his efforts to abstract himself from “matters of the heart.” That abstraction ensures others’ comfort as well as his own, as Lorry also anticipates the pain that direct questions might cause; his detachment facilitates his productive anticipation of his friend’s anxieties. Lorry’s assumption is implied in his framing the interrogation in hypotheticals: Manette is unable to handle direct questioning. Even though this conclusion is not necessarily dictated by the evidence on offer in the text, Lorry insists on it. “Tell me, how does this relapse come about?” he asks, with apparent concern, “Is there danger of another? Could a repetition of it be prevented? How should a repetition of it be treated? How does it come about at all? What can I do for my friend?” (208).

This move toward indirect revelation inserts distance between the members of the familial unit (in which I include Lorry) not only through the form of the interactions but also—and perhaps more evidently—through Lorry’s repeated self-descriptions as being “merely” a machine of business.¹⁰ Through this insistence, Lorry manifests an anxiety that is
latent for the other characters, for in spite of their shared love, the relationships within the Manette/Darnay family are assailed from all sides: the mother is dead, the father’s pain is a mystery that nevertheless determines the family’s movements and moods, the husband’s background and real name are kept hidden from his wife, the brother is alienated from the sister. Often, characters work to repress or overcome those barriers, with little success. An interesting economy in the novel is that those who are most outside of the family, who insist on their alienation, detachment, and lack of ability to engage affectively, are those who act in ways that show extraordinary understanding of the needs and desires of other characters. Lorry is one of these to be sure, and the other is Sydney Carton.

Carton’s embracing of his alienation from others, while tiresome for those around him, nevertheless underpins his position as the novel’s greatest empathic actor. Like Lorry, he often refuses to admit that he is like others, a caring, feeling person and not a machine. And yet it is in contrast to other characters that Carton’s own character becomes most clear, born of his embrace of alterity. Whereas Stryver serves as the foil that exposes Darnay to himself, Carton serves as Stryver’s foil. When Stryver acts like a blind idiot when seeking Lucie’s hand in marriage, Carton is able to see what Stryver cannot: Lucie would not regard the offer in the same generous light that Stryver does. Carton’s uncanny ability to recognize the limitations of others’ imagination is predicated on his understanding that you cannot know someone else. Others, Carton knows, imagine that they do understand the intentions of those around them. His gift is not exactly that he knows what others think, but rather that he can identify when other people assume to know more than they do. The distinction is subtle; hence it becomes important to distinguish Carton’s behavior from others’ in the novel. If Darnay’s attempts to distance himself from his family are ineffectual, Carton’s insistence on utter alterity, the complete distancing of himself from those in his life, may seem overfraught or overdetermined. Yet Carton’s behavior leads to the true beneficence that Darnay’s actions lacked. In Dickens’s telling, the distinction seems to rest on a keener appreciation of difference. It is this skill that renders Carton a “jackal” in the courtroom. He can recognize, and thus capitalize on, the prejudices and predilections of those around him, even if he does not share them. By insisting on the divisions between himself and others, insisting what he is not in relation to Lucie’s family and his own desire that is bound up with that family, Carton nevertheless manages to eke out an empathic extension that exceeds that of most other characters.
What, then, does the novel endorse, if Darnay’s good intentions do not hold up, but the misanthropic, brooding alcoholic becomes heroic because of his profound insistence on not joining a family? If recognition of alterity is required before empathic extension can occur, a landscape devoid of appreciation of the sovereignty of the individual would likely indicate a limitation of empathy, especially altruistic empathy. Indeed, the novel and the Revolution itself are peppered with examples—the revolt of the French poor against the aristocracy provides an ideal landscape for the novel’s events not only because of the drama inherent in the historical events, but also because the sweeping historical movement depended on a complicated relationship between the needs of entire classes and the needs of the individual. In the French sections of the novel, metonymic or synecdochical substitution of individuals for a class or type of person is treated with particular disdain. Yet those who insist on their difference create a space in which they can act in full consideration or on behalf of the other.

The Lessons of Great Expectations

In A Tale of Two Cities, forms of familial bonds frame much of the action of the plot as well as the variations of intersubjectivity depicted. The novel’s most heroic actors are explicitly not members of the central family. These characters, including Lorry and Carton, work to evacuate the presumptions of knowledge engendered by the familial bond. From the first page of Great Expectations, family itself is evacuated of meaning and rendered essentially an invalid construction: mothers are solely mothers “by adoption” and fathers are practically nonexistent. Yet the absence of family ties does not ease the burden of a learned engagement with alterity. One way that Great Expectations demonstrates the necessity for such engagement is, in fact, its emphasis on the process of learning. Learning to read serves as one paradigm of broader knowledge acquisition, as it shapes and determines the ways individuals can access the other. When no familial bond originates relationships, they are instead predicated on impression or expectation; forms of understanding that are dependent on the construction of meaning from the apprehension of the external.

Learning to read is bound up with class and social awareness, but having one skill does not guarantee having the other. A disconnect between book learning and its practical application is an early and per-
sistent theme (and a well-documented one), and the novel insists that reading differs from the acquisition of careful discernment. Matthew Pocket, for example, whose home and family are perpetual disasters of disorder, was “a most delightful lecturer on domestic economy, and his treatises on the management of children and servants were considered the very best text-books on those themes” (271). That distinction is lost on Pip, who too easily merges education and class, seeing Joe’s illiteracy as “a pity,” thinking “when I came into my property and was able to do something for Joe, it would have been much more agreeable if he had been better qualified for a rise in station” (148). Pip’s self-centeredness is marked by premature assumptions that he understands. Unable to see the imprint of himself upon his readings of everyone else, he fails to recognize their independence from his existence: Pip does not pity Joe’s lack of education because of the limitations it means for Joe’s life, but rather because it renders Joe less fit for Pip’s desire.

Distinctions between education, class, and status are made more difficult for Pip because his inculcation into gentlemanhood seems to coincide with the refinement of his education. Yet while his taste for reading increases, his ability to discern or judge based on that reading does not. Nor is he able to identify his passion within the many possibilities that are now open to him. After he leaves Mr. Pocket’s tutelage, he notes, “Notwithstanding my inability to settle to anything,—which I hope arose out of the restless and incomplete tenure on which I held my means,—I had a taste for reading, and read regularly so many hours a day” (312–13). In this way, he is very much like Richard Carstone of Bleak House, whose most intense interactions with the law and its paperwork lend him no fuller comprehension of its mechanisms. These readers assign meaning to words on a page—reading in its most literal sense—but do not derive meaning from the pages in their entirety; they read lines, but cannot read between them.

Variegations in scrutability and education are continually bound up in the plot, making clear to the reader the difficulty of extricating one from the other. For example, upon arriving in London, Magwitch greets Pip with expectations of a performance of gentlemanly attributes, and foremost among them is the role of books in the apartment and in Pip’s life. Pip’s “fine and beautiful” linen and his dandy-making clothes are trumped by his books. Magwitch enthuses over the number of volumes Pip owns, “mounting up, on their shelves, by the hundreds,” but also over their difficulty and inaccessibility, signs that the convict reads as indicators of class. Comprehension is immaterial: “You shall read ’em to me, dear boy! And if they’re in foreign languages wot I don’t
understand, I shall be just as proud as if I did” (320). But Magwitch’s relationship with reading cannot be reduced only to a signifier of social status, and in describing his own education, it becomes clear that reading functions for him as more than a sign of class; it is also an indicator of humanity, allowing for the building of connections between people:

Tramping, begging, thieving, working sometimes when I could, [. . . ] a bit of a poacher, a bit of a laborer, a bit of a wagoner, a bit of a haymaker, a bit of a hawker, a bit of most things that don’t pay and lead to trouble, I got to be a man. A deserting soldier in a Traveller’s Rest, what lay hid up to the chin under a lot of taturs, learnt me to read; and a travelling Giant what signed his name at a penny a time learnt me to write. (347)\(^{14}\)

Learning to read and write appear at the end of Magwitch’s narrative of his evolution, following a variety of odd jobs—a bit of this, a bit of that. This adaptability, learning trades enough to scrape by, is set in opposition to Pip’s scholarly pursuits, which render him essentially inflexible and filled with knowledge that has little practical application. Textual literacy becomes, for Pip, instead of a means to understanding, an impediment to the multiple kinds of reading he must learn to do. He must learn to adapt his book learning to situations where it might better enlighten or enrich his comprehension of events and people outside of books.

Before he learns that lesson in adaptation effectively (and whether he does by the novel’s end is debatable), Pip’s ability to interpret nontextual signs and actions is notoriously limited. Miscommunications arise comically when Mrs. Joe is confined to her bed after she has been attacked. Without speech, she must make her desires known through a slate and Pip must interpret her intended meaning from her murky signifiers: “The administration of mutton instead of medicine, the substitution of Tea for Joe, and the baker for bacon, were among the mildest of my own mistakes” (122).\(^{15}\) These particular substitutions lead to mild mistakes indeed; but substitution also figures in Pip’s greatest mistakes, which arise from substituting himself in place of the other.

Interpretation, or rather misinterpretation, delivers its most devastating consequences in Pip’s continual misreading of those around him, Estella in particular. Pip regularly assesses a person or situation and draws incorrect conclusions: he believes Miss Havisham to be his benefactor despite repeated reminders from Jaggers that the facts do not bear out the conclusion, and he is convinced Biddy (who, as an excellent,
“self-forgetful” reader, is the first to interpret accurately Mrs. Joe’s slate-written symbols) is “grudging” and “envious” of his good fortune. Both mistakes have grave consequences; as is true throughout the writing of Dickens as well as Eliot and Hardy, misreading people is most debilitating when it results from a refusal to accord the other alterity.

Pip seems to know that his interpretation of people depends on his relationship with them; when Estella protests that Pip will forget her soon enough, he rejoins: “Out of my thoughts! You are a part of my existence, part of myself. You have been in every line I have ever read, since I first came here, the rough, common boy whose poor heart you wounded even then” (364). Yet he cannot allow that the influence of his adoration of Estella has a real effect on his ability to discern meaning from the signs—or direct statements—she offers. This is most clear in Estella’s continual assertions that she is not what Pip believes her to be, and his refusal to take in that fact: “‘You must know,’ said Estella, condescending to me as a brilliant and beautiful woman might, ‘that I have no heart—if that has anything to do with my memory,’ I got through some jargon to the effect that I took the liberty of doubting that. That I knew better. That there could be no such beauty without it” (237). Pip insists that he knows Estella better than she knows herself. The terseness of the last two sentences indicates the narrator’s distance. The older Pip, from a better-informed and reformed position, can see the folly of those conclusions, but in Pip’s youth, his schooling did little to counter his predilection to believe in his idealized Estella rather than the living, empirically existent woman who spoke to him. Despite her protestations, Pip can only stubbornly insist on his incorrect reading of her: “When should I awaken the heart within her, that was mute and sleeping now?” (244). Here, Peter Brooks notes, Pip “is claiming natural authority for what is in fact conventional, arbitrary, and dependent on interpretation.”\(^16\) And Pip’s interpretation depends to its detriment on his desire. When Pip says, near the novel’s end, that his life’s been a “blind and a thankless one,” the blindness has been on display throughout the narrative: he refused to see what was in front of his eyes all along.

It is worth a moment to detour from Pip’s centrality to consider how another character may be understood if one considers the recognition of the alterity of the other as a central motivation of empathic extension. Estella’s insight, which Pip characterizes as condescension, can in that light be read as a compassionate attempt to grant Pip independence from her desire. Pip routinely mistakes Estella’s feelings or meaning, but Estella is able to assess Pip’s thoughts and motivations accurately, often attempting a corrective intervention. She does so on more than one
occasion (e.g., when Pip chides her for flirting with Drummle and not him, she asks him with a “fixed and serious” expression, “Do you want me, then, to deceive and entrap you?” [311]). What can account for this insight? One might argue that she demonstrates a Smithian imagination about Pip, understanding his desire by imagining what she might want in his position. But if Estella demonstrates the mechanism of sympathy that Smith described, she also revives the predicate to sympathy that Smith described: she is more acutely aware of one’s ultimate inability to know “what other men feel.”

Estella was raised to function as a proxy for Havisham’s thwarted desires, and her survival depended on her ability to carve out alterity under those circumstances, to individuate herself as a unique person even as she was aware that to do so explicitly would draw censure. Pip, on the other hand, was forced to feel as an other throughout his youth, and sought to overcome any innate sense of alterity rather than to engage it. Though she maintains a self-conscious distance about Miss Havisham’s intentions for herself, Estella appreciates (through that very detachment) that Pip has willingly accepted the role Miss Havisham designed for him. In this way, Estella—much like Biddy—understands that Pip’s feelings for her are different from hers for him. Pip, unable to replicate that movement, dismisses Estella’s comments too easily, reducing them to the work of the coquette, rather than realizing that Estella is anticipating or attempting to mitigate Pip’s desire (a fact that is not undermined even if the cruelty of her comments indicates her own desire).

When Pip asserts that Estella had been in every line he’d ever read, it would have been more accurate to say that his desire had been in every line; he had been in every line. That tendency extends to his interactions with other characters, and is on particular display in two instances when Pip sees himself defamiliarized. In both scenes, Pip reacts with horror to the speech acts or revelations of the two father figures: Joe and Magwitch. But just as Pip (Philip Pirrup) is a version of his birth father (Philip Pirrup), he is also a version of each of these two fathers. Some read his responses to Joe as the shame of Joe’s persistent lowness and inability to adapt or change or learn, thus putting the onus on Joe’s innate inability. In fact, Pip’s response is more likely a transference of his own shame, as can be seen when Miss Havisham makes Pip the gift of money to bind his apprenticeship. In this moment, Pip has been in her company for some time and has become accustomed to her peculiarities and to the peculiarities of Satis House. Through this interaction with Miss Havisham and with Estella, he has altered his notions of propriety, politeness, and station, and concurrently developed a sense
of shame about himself, a sense he lacked prior to his introduction to Satis House. When Joe meets Miss Havisham, it is near the end of Pip’s engagement with the residents of Satis House. Pip, now familiar with Havisham’s ways, is mortified by Joe’s behavior toward the woman, behavior that is undoubtedly motivated by the shock of weirdness to which Pip is now accustomed. During this encounter, Pip is in a position to witness a repetition of his own first performance from the perspective of his relative enlightenment. His horror and shame arise, then, equally from recognizing the mistakes and awkwardness of his own first encounter at Satis House through more knowing eyes. Joe’s mistakes were Pip’s mistakes; Pip’s new viewpoint was then Miss Havisham’s and Estella’s. Pip’s horror is thus a form of self-recognition, and suggests more about his self-conception than about Joe’s poor breeding or ill manners. If Pip hates Joe for his embarrassing behavior, it is a transference of self-hatred.

The same relationship occurs during the scene when Magwitch reveals that he is Pip’s benefactor. Magwitch has sought to make Pip a gentleman through money he has given Pip anonymously; Pip is horrified at the prospect that a low man believes he can, through the gift of money alone, buy status. Pip is shattered because his illusions of being intended for Estella are shattered, but that discovery would lead to disappointment, not disgust and revulsion. His visceral response to Magwitch is more likely the result of Pip’s recognition of his own folly. He can now see, from his vantage of greater experience and exteriorized from the position of belief, how faulty Magwitch’s proposition is, how flawed the idea that any money, earned any way, may purchase station or class. But recognizing that fact in light of Magwitch’s presence illuminates the more piercing, personal truth: that Pip anxiously, readily, and joyfully accepted that same proposition. To then recognize that Magwitch made the same assumption implicates Pip in Magwitch’s image—not because of any obligation to the convict, and not because of any of Magwitch’s actions—but because Pip wanted to believe it to be true as much as Magwitch did. Again, Pip’s recoil is the recoil at his own folly, as reflected in Magwitch.

Pip thus accords a repulsive alterity to those who repulse him and refuses it to those who seduce him. Learning to overcome that tendency leads Pip to more productive relationships, with himself and with others. Through the trope of literacy, *Great Expectations* explicates the role of the individual in recognizing alterity: it is a syntax that can be learned, but such learning requires a pupil willing to extricate himself from the textbook.
**The Invisibility of Text in Bleak House**

Apprehension and appreciation of the other are made difficult by the familial bond, as shown in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Even in the absence of family ties, achieving fluency in such recognition is not easily gained, as shown in *Great Expectations*. Similar distillations are more difficult in *Bleak House*. It was written before *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, and in it the terms of encounters with alterity are not so easily defined by blood or by faculty. In this “document about the interpretation of documents,” reading, writing, parentage, language, and fidelity are inextricable. The role of writing is unquestionably important in the novel, so much so that many suggest that Dickens’s point in *Bleak House* is to represent the distinction between the hard, mechanical world of the law and the potential of individual feeling to ameliorate the harm caused by the law. David Cowles argues that Dickens privileges “deeper human truths” as opposed to the world of facts defined by Chancery; these “inner, human truths,” Cowles argues, “make a character—and presumably the reader—a better person, that is, more sensitive to others’ needs, more loving.” If there is indeed a deeper human truth advocated by the novel, it is—I argue—tied inextricably to the harm arising from the refusal to acknowledge alterity. This limitation is meted out by the novel’s very structure, where Esther, though central to her own narrative and the *fabula*, is never mentioned in the third-person narrative. She is “absent from half the book,” to put it one way—the third-person narration seems not to know Esther at all. If Lady Dedlock’s fate offers a stark cautionary tale, it is because her character reveals what may be lost (what is lost to her, lacking the interference of a Carton or the time to grow allowed to Pip) when an individual is unable to grant a thorough separateness of feeling and experience to those around her. This fate, her fate, is bounded both by words and by her kindred.

As was the case in *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Bleak House*’s minor characters function as reductions of the more difficult and complex relationships at work elsewhere in the novel. Mrs. Jellyby famously serves as one such figure, her telescopic philanthropy showing her willingness to embrace the very different other, the African distanced physically and culturally from her. Her own children’s desperate need of attention, affection, and care, however, goes unheeded. Mrs. Jellyby’s usual state is to be “very busy,” her “whole time” taken up with the African project: “It involves me in correspondence with public bodies and with private individuals anxious for the welfare of their species all over the country. I am happy to say it is advancing.” It is easy to see Jellyby’s characterization as an indictment of such philanthropic endeavors and the self-satisfaction
they inspire, due in large part to the protection against exposure to true pain, poverty, and hunger afforded by distance. But in terms of the novel, the critique of the effects of their mother’s devotion to her cause on Caddy, Peepy, and the other Jellybys is a much heartier indictment than the critique of the abstract notion of telescopic philanthropy itself, or the imperialism that encourages it. A mother who can “see nothing nearer than Africa” (52) is sadly inattentive toward her own children and blind to the results of that neglect. Caddy is regularly covered in the ink of her mother’s enterprise, and must eke out an existence outside of that charity work; and she does, eschewing education or the educated in favor of a dance teacher whose father’s pretensions to aristocracy are as absurd as Mrs. Jellyby’s pretensions to humanitarianism. Mrs. Jellyby can accommodate the radical difference of the masses of African poor rather than the individual other in her own family. As in *A Tale of Two Cities*, where the French aristocracy exhibited a willed blindness to the poor within their own country, Mrs. Jellyby embraces the plight of the *very* different while the needs of those in her own backyard, so to speak, are unnoticed and unmet. Bruce Robbins, in his analysis of Jellyby’s “telescopic philanthropy,” suggests that Esther’s version of philanthropy is the novel’s imperfect alternative to Jellyby’s distanced efforts; by accepting a face-to-face engagement with Jo, Robbins notes, Esther “literally loses her face” to smallpox. In his reading, the enforced distance (what might also be called detachment) of Jardyce or even Skimpole is thus, in some ways, preferable to the direct intervention of Esther.

Proximity is not the only variable for such concern. I am interested more in the individual’s conception of intersubjectivity than with conceptions of social responsibility or philanthropy engendered by perceptions of closeness and duty. Jellyby’s relationship to her African project is interesting because it illuminates her alienation from her own family: she is simultaneously too close to them and too detached from them. Lady Dedlock is consumed with one much closer to home, and her inability to conceive of her husband outside of her overdetermined self-conception leads to results that are even more disastrous than the plights of the Jellyby children. Like Michael Henchard in Hardy’s *Casterbridge*, Lady Dedlock has so defined herself by her own history that she cannot imagine that others would respond to it differently than she does. To be sure, her self-definition is built upon a denial of her past, but the sheer affective charge of that denial ensures that the past is ever part of the present. That it is a site of misery and shame is, for her, an unalterable truth. This truth speaks to Lady Dedlock’s acceptance of shame as a part of her self-conception, but also as a readable, indisputable existent.
Equally indisputable is the misery that this shame ultimately causes her. The novel suggests that her death was unnecessary; her husband forgave her and her daughter sought her, outcomes that were inconceivable to her. Lady Dedlock’s internalized shame and the intense effort she musters to repress it seem to arise from a devotion to the propriety so prized by her husband and her own devotion to the image of dispassionate cultivation that others associate with her character. Curiously, it also results in a meager, ungenerous view of those she loves, as she imagines that they would choose not to forgive her sins, should they be discovered. It is a view that demonstrates her entrapment in her own interiority. She cannot conceive that Sir Leicester, a man who loves her, would be able to forgive her what she cannot forgive herself. She cannot imagine his conception of her being anything other than her self-conception.

Lady Dedlock’s actions are determined by her anticipation of what others will think, the narrative voice adopting her own anticipation: “her shame will be published—may be spreading while she thinks about it” (854). She is not wrong in her expectation. When her past becomes known, the gossipmongers do consume the news from her estate: she is, in town, “for several hours the topic of the age, the feature of the century” (886). Dickens blunts the power of the intense focus by ironically emphasizing its brevity, showing that even major tempests blow over quickly. So while Lady Dedlock anticipates the intensity of the response, she cannot imagine that her shame, like all “features of the century,” will quickly blow over in the minds of others; in her mind, that shame has been hers eternally (“the thunderbolt so long foreseen by her” [854]), and she conceives of her public condemnation as having the same power and same duration as her private condemnation. In this moment, she too lacks the words to communicate her own fear and dread: “The horror that is upon her, is unutterable” (854). This Dickensian insistence on the ineffability of a feeling, that which cannot be communicated and thus cannot be understood, is shown to be the real horror of her situation: the problem is not that the horror itself is so strong, but that in feeling that it cannot be communicated, that no one could understand that horror and thus calm it or neutralize it. The speaker ceases to believe that communication is possible, that amelioration is possible, and that human connection is possible. And in this moment human connection is most desperately needed. To feel the impossibility of communication without making an effort to reach outside of herself, however futile, Lady Dedlock excludes all possibilities of response to her, and condemns herself: “There is no escape but in death. Hunted, she flies” (855).
Lady Dedlock’s flight demonstrates the hopelessness that defines her comprehension of her situation (which is not at all the same as her situation itself). As her life was built upon controlling the information others had about her, she is unable to recognize that the revelation of her unknown past could lead to any reaction other than the one she most fears: she cannot imagine that alterity can itself be predicate to a positive, enriching interpersonal engagement. This tangle is problematic throughout *Bleak House*, not only for the characters but also for readers who expect resolution through unification or integration. Carolyn Dever notes that the scene when Esther is holding her dead mother “should be the most profoundly integrated moment of the novel,” but is instead “among the most disturbing” because of Esther’s discomfort with being at once an “agent of forgiveness” but also at the mercy of the will of her dead mother. Why should this be a moment of integration? Esther is discovering her mother, but also discovering that she is not her mother, a realization that might be painful but is ultimately necessary for Esther’s movement into selfhood. The exclamation that Dever cites, “it frightened me to see her at my feet,” articulates Esther’s sense of ambivalence: in the moment of discovering a connection she so longed for, Esther must also be surprised by the impossibility of that connection.

A great tragedy of *Bleak House* is that through Lady Dedlock’s attempts to control entirely the knowledge that others had about herself—a stance that depends on the belief that she can know entirely what others know—she renders moments of growth and affection impossible. Though some of Lady Dedlock’s anxiety about the reaction to the revelation of her past was founded, for her husband, to whom she mattered most, her past mattered least, an outcome Lady Dedlock could never have imagined. Sir Leicester also recognizes what others think about his wife, but notes that response only in order to register his dissention from those points of view. Characterizing her departure as a mere “misunderstanding” that “deprives” him of his “Lady’s society,” Leicester insists to those in witness that her standing in the household and in his heart stands unabated. His speech on the topic, all the more lucid for its following a period of shock-induced muteness, is—as the narrator notes—“honourable, manly, and true”:

I am on unaltered terms with Lady Dedlock. That I assert no cause whatever of complaint against her. That I have ever had the strongest affection for her, and that I retain it undiminished[. . . ] My lady is too high in position, too handsome, too accomplished, too superior in most respects to the best of those by whom she is surrounded, not to have
her enemies and traducers, I dare say. Let it be known to them, as I make it known to you, that being of sound mind, memory, and understanding, I revoke no disposition I have made in her favour. I abridge nothing I have ever bestowed upon her. I am on unaltered terms with her and I recall—having the full power to do it if I were so disposed, as you see—no act I have done for her advantage and happiness. (895)

His speech is gallant in its elegance, but it is not the first example of Leicester’s attitude toward his wife after he has learned of her past. The first iteration of his response, while still inhibited by the fit that felled him, was a mere three words, written on a slate for Inspector Bucket to see: “Full forgiveness. Find—” (858–59). Here Sir Leicester, of all people, exhibits an ability to know precisely what Lady Dedlock’s fear will be: that she will be shamed and judged and that he will feel the thunderbolt “so unforeseen by him” (854) such that it will destroy his ability to love her. He immediately and correctly identifies this reaction and moves to forestall it, both in Lady Dedlock herself and in those around him who may expect otherwise from him.30

“It is wonderful to me”

Before concluding, I will take a moment to turn to one of Dickens’s works most associated with the production of active sympathy—and most associated with the potential for texts to encourage altruistic action resulting from readerly sympathy—his “Christmas Carol.”

Audrey Jaffe, following Adam Smith, conceives of Dickens’s sympathetic project in terms of the instantiation of spectacle. Describing “A Christmas Carol,” she notes, “As a model of socialization through spectatorship, the narrative posits the visual as a means towards recapturing one’s lost or alienated self—and becoming one’s best self,” a process thoroughly grounded in the reader’s identification with the text: “That identification accounts for the story’s apparently limitless capacity for transformation.”31 Jaffe acknowledges that the transformative power of the story is connected to its ability to commodify its themes and its characters; she writes that the story “constitutes itself as an endlessly sympathetic commodity, its variable surface reflecting an unchanging reality to embody readers’ and spectators’ desires.”32

If the power of the “Carol” is in the spectacle of the misery of the Cratchits, then that complete and easy commodification is what makes
“A Christmas Carol” more of a fairy tale and less of a realist text. The turning of person into spectacle, an act that fundamentally denies the human-ness of that person, is perhaps the last sympathetic act possible. To the extent that such spectacle encourages empathy, it’s a cheapened version, one predicated on the extension of one’s own desire or concern, and ameliorating it (as Scrooge does, as readers might) simply means shutting up the representation, turning the human other (and not the text or its theme) into an object of the self. But something more also happens within the “Carol,” and certainly within Dickens’s longer fiction. Paul Saint-Amour offers a compelling reinterpretation of the affective power of the “Carol,” writing that the real moral crux of the tale occurs through Scrooge’s unwillingness and inability to look upon what might be his own corpse. The encounter awakening Scrooge’s sensibilities is not the consumable spectacle of the Cratchits as being his equal, his fellow travelers in life, but rather the encounter with the instantiation of himself outside of himself: the self defamiliarized, made other. It is a spectacle that Scrooge refuses, in doing so recognizing that as death is one unknowable instantiation of the self, so too is the human other. Via his refusal to remove the veil covering the corpse, Saint-Amour writes, Scrooge says, “Let me not pretend to domesticate my death; Let the future remain both unforeclosed and undisclosed, its face hidden; Let me recognize others, for all that they may be untranslatably alien, and for all that I may owe them a responsibility without limit, as ‘fellow-passengers to the grave.’” It is this engagement, this realization of the things that cannot be commodified and which must remain insistently beyond identification, that defines Scrooge’s movement into action.

In the works considered in this chapter, which are representative of Dickens’s oeuvre, a pattern emerges. The heroic actors surprise. The “wonder” that marked Dickens’s descriptions of his own life when it was most incomprehensible to him is revived in these characters, whose actions seem similarly inexplicable, and in many ways, wonderful. Carton, Lorry, Estella, Sir Leicester, Scrooge: those described by themselves or by the novels as worthless, mere machines, narcissistic, and proud, are nevertheless able to appreciate the fundamental and ultimate difference of the other, an appreciation that allows for action. It is often imperfect action, not always altruistic (the young Estella is a good example, knowing via their face-to-face encounter precisely how to most pain the young Pip), but their movements toward empathic extension suggest that their insistence on alterity is necessary to facilitate movement outside of oneself. These characters’ encounters with the limits of themselves are reflected in Dickens’s writing: the compulsive insistence
on ineffability from a hand capable of producing voluminous words; the closest bonds of family shown to inhibit connection; the terms of reading shown to inhibit understanding; the master character-maker admitting that every man is a mystery to every other. Through such admissions and bindings, these texts replicate the working toward recognition that defines the struggles toward connection described within.