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The Old Story, with a Difference: Pickwick’s Vision
Julian Wolfreys
Looking closely at the work of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and James McNeill Whistler, Rebecca Mitchell reframes conventional considerations of Victorian empathy and argues that the recognition of alterity, and not identification, is the basis of the intersubjectivity depicted in realist texts and paintings. In the nineteenth century, encounters with the other are represented through the disconnection between subjects within the novel or painting’s space; representation of that intersubjective inscrutability is elemental to the realist project.

*Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference* amplifies the fundamental distinction between the characters within a text or image—who are intimately unknowable to each other—and the material texts and images—which are eminently knowable to the reader or viewer. To this end, Mitchell’s exploration of alterity is grounded in the tradition of Emmanuel Levinas, whose work establishes a vocabulary for considering otherness outside of dialectical oppositions, binaries which so often define recent constructions of Victorian subjectivity.

The study turns explicitly from the usual paradigms for encountering Victorian otherness—race, gender, colonized status, or class—to focus instead on the representations of difference where proximity typically precludes the recognition of alterity.

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