Dickens's Hyperrealism
Reed, John R.

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even before the term “realism” was brought into general use in England through the writings of G. H. Lewes, there was a general impression of a new kind of writing and Dickens was seen as one of its predecessors.¹ There are certainly elements of realism in the novels of Austen and Scott, but the one excludes a good deal from her fiction, in particular the lower classes, with some exceptions, and the other tends to include some fanciful items in the very structure of his fiction that disallow a clear realist definition.² I am thinking of the predictions of doom uttered concerning Edgar Ravenswood in Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor*. These could have passed as representations of Scottish superstition at the beginning of the eighteenth century if they did not function as part of the novel’s design by being fulfilled. Similarly, there is much in Dickens’s fiction that certainly appears to be realistic. John Forster records that Dickens himself valued realism above all else in his fiction, but does not elaborate on what that realism meant to Dickens. One need only cite the many urban scenes that vividly evoke the real presence of the city from *Sketches by Boz* on. But I would like to argue that Dickens is actually creating a kind of hyperreality, to borrow a term from Umberto Eco. There is always a touch of exaggeration of the real (and sometimes more than a touch) in Dickens’s novels. Donald Hawes puts it this way: “Enter a Dickens novel and you enter a highly charged, multitudinous world, in which realism and imagination are interfused as never before or since” (9). Some critics, such as J. P. Stern, have taken Dickens’s abundant and obvious
delight in the multitudinousness of the world as an indication that his works fall into the realist camp (1–5), but the very exuberance with which Dickens approaches the world transforms it into something difficult to define as realistic.

Like many other Dickens scholars, I see Dickens as an heir of Romanticism, with an emphasis on the importance of the imagination over simple reason, something in the way that imagination is valued above Facts in *Hard Times*. His inclination is to project the emotions of his characters into the world around them, what Meyer Abrams described in the metaphor of the lamp in *The Mirror and the Lamp*. The tradition of poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, who openly described that action of what would come to be known as the Pathetic Fallacy, was continued with a vengeance by such Victorian poets as Tennyson and Browning in poems like “Mariana” and “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.” But novelists carried on the tradition as well, Dickens notable among them, and this attention to subjective states to some degree separates such writers from what was to become known as realism.

My approach to realism has mainly to do with narrative method, though I hope I have not ignored the importance of character depiction and other aspects of storytelling. But I do not feel obliged to discuss approaches that follow from the tradition of social realism, which has a tendency to confuse content with method. I am not here concerned with how Dickens depicted social institutions such as marriage, or to speculate on whether or not queer theory can be applied to his creation of Sally Brass in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. I prefer to work in the formalist tradition, which has recently been surveyed in its contemporary manifestations by Dario Villanueva in *Theories of Literary Realism*. At times I depend upon the concept of intentionality, a modern version of which Villanueva attributes to Husserl and phenomenology, but I hope that I have provided enough evidence from Dickens’s own writings to indicate that he was aware of his own intentions and sought to impose them on his readers, whether they realized this or not. For a framing of what realism means in literature, I am content with Lilian Furst’s presentation in *All Is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction*.

On the contrary, realist fiction actively encourages a pretended continuity in the coexistence of the internal realm as an extension of the external. With a canny concealment of any cracks, fictional referents are presented as prolongations of referents known outside the fictions. Although the two frames of reference overlap and share, they do not meet. The internal is adjacent and parallel to the external. So the text projects a new referent, constructing its own reality while simultaneously describing it. This internal reality draws on
a selection of attributes from the actual world, physically and socially, that function as “reality keys.” The antecedents are related to the text by a process of fictionalization, whereby both historical and geographical data are annexed into the fictive realm as warranties of realism’s pretended authenticity. (110)

It is just at the seam where the realist attempts to assert authority and authenticity by disguising the role of the author that Dickens operates, shifting his weight in favor of the author, who slyly or openly establishes authority.

One reason that Dickens has been classed with the realists, as I mentioned above, is his concern for social issues. At least from George Lukács, it has been characteristic to associate the realists with their concern for social improvement, such as alleviating the poverty and working conditions of the lower classes. This approach to realism assumes a direct relationship between text and external reality. As the passage from Furst above suggests, this can never be a firm basis for realism, for realism is a mode of communication distinct from what it discusses, as, it may be argued, are all speech acts. A little later on, I shall discuss how this matter complicates Peter Brooks’s treatment of Dickens as a realist. Ioan Williams’s 1974 study of the realist novel seems to want to approach realism from a comprehensive point of view, as the following quotation suggests.

Finally, the texture and scope of mid-Victorian novels settle the question. Their solidity and firmness, their humour and breadth of interest in the abundance and variety of human character, and their unprecedented physical, social, and psychological detail, make the term Realist especially appropriate. (x–xi)

But when he finally comes to discuss Dickens, he focuses more on his treatment of character than on the structure and methodology of his novels. One problem is that Williams defines realism in his own particular way. He sees it as manifesting an organic view of human experience which saw imagination and reason as “faculties innate in man, allied to unreflecting consciousness, by which he apprehended total Reality as an undivided whole and himself as one of its parts” (xii). Because he sees Dickens as “the first Victorian writer to conceive and attempt the creation of a vision of contemporary life as organically unified, and to face the technical and structural problems which were involved in this,” he must include Dickens among the realists (116).

Williams associates the realist novel with the social novel, so Dickens’s depiction of working class life and his clear purpose of effecting social change also links him to realism. And yet, there is much in Williams’s argu-
ment that hints at another way of reading Dickens and perhaps other Victorian novelists as well. For example, Williams sees the realist novel as part of the Romantic tradition. “Nineteenth century Realist fiction in England is a form of Romantic art, but it differs from Romantic art itself in throwing emphasis on the importance of reproducing the external conditions of life and the material laws” (xii). With regard to Dickens himself, Williams offers a curious view of a general critical attitude in the 70s. “From the modern standpoint, Dickens seems to have escaped from the limitations of Victorian Realism and penetrated to a deeper level of reality” (139). He cites Dickens's interest in abnormal states of consciousness. But while he admits that Dickens was “original and idiosyncratic,” he also insists that he was “typical” (139), yet further on he admits that Dickens “was committed to melodramatic and sensational treatment of character, presenting internal processes by external factors” (141). This tension and almost contradiction returns in the ending of his chapter specifically on Dickens.

It is Dickens's great achievement that dramatic or narrative separateness and conflict can be used in this way, to imply a dimension of life which lies beyond the apparent reality in which his hero-narrator addresses the reader. The nature of this achievement is unique, but the essential principle is common to all Realist fiction—the energy which runs through all men, though distorted by vice, by social circumstances, or by ignorance and weakness, carries meaning and moulds experience itself. (155)

If Dickens's achievement is unique, perhaps it should not so easily be lumped in the category of realism. There is much that is helpful in Williams's discussion of realism, but the contradiction between content and style evident in his treatment of the subject needs to be faced. Hence, I have used the term hyperreality to describe Dickens's self-consciously exaggerated rendering of the world around him. When Eco used the term in Travels in Hyperreality, he referred to imitations that were so grotesque that they became mockeries of what they were imitating. In the essay in the collection entitled “Travels in Hyperreality,” he takes on such notable American landmarks as Hearst's Castle, Disney World, Forest Lawn, and other such institutions. My alteration of the term is honorific and refers to Dickens's ability to convey a sense of the everyday world while at the same time almost magically transforming it. I don't mean the kind of magic associated with magical realism, but something much more insidious that is rooted in style, not content.

A recent excellent critic runs into similar problems with content and method when including Dickens among the realists. In Realist Vision, Peter Brooks admits at the beginning of his chapter on Hard Times: “I am
of course not sure that it is right to talk about Dickens in the context of realism at all, since so much of Dickens appears as the avoidance or suppression of realism” (40). Brooks’s remark reflects the increased sophistication of criticism on Dickens since the 70s, and the outright resistance of some scholars to include Dickens among the realists. But Brooks nonetheless does include him. Remarkably, the text he chooses is *Hard Times*, a novel that, in defending the imagination against a Utilitarian outlook on life, makes abundant use of exaggeration and nonrealist techniques, perhaps most notably in its blatant and highly structured pattern of metaphors. One can understand Brooks’s initial doubt about classifying Dickens among the realists, since his perception of *Hard Times* is that it refuses the usual realist task of cataloguing the industrial workplace. In the end, he concludes of the novel that “it is not so much that this novel represents Coketown as that it stands as a counteraction against Coketown, an alternative to it. The novel versus the life of machinery” (52). Perhaps the main reason Brooks did include *Hard Times* in his book is that its subject matter fits so well into one vision of literary realism—the attempt to improve social conditions, especially among the working classes. As I have already suggested, my emphasis is entirely different. Of course Dickens was interested in social improvements, but when it came to his writing, he was also extremely conscious of his craft. And it is on this craft that my emphasis lies.

Not quite so recent, but fully aware of the dilemma of realist classification, Harry E. Shaw feels it necessary to call attention to modern disparagements of realism; he refers to a critical tendency to see realism as a bad alternative to more acceptable modes of narration, and he feels obliged to offer his own definition, which also describes his methodology.

Nineteenth-century realist fiction can be seen as an attempt to balance procedure and substance, in the concrete modes by which it invites the reader to come to terms with realities, imagined and real. In my own definition of realism I attempt a similar balancing act, by arguing that realism insists that certain mental procedures are needed to make sense of those substantial aspects of the world it selects as significant. A dialectic between substance and procedure is also implicit in my claim that historicist realism involves a movement between positions in and above a given historical moment. (xii)

Shaw has moved away from the materialist basis of earlier critics’ approaches to realism, and tends toward a more psychological focus. But he is fully aware of the various ways in which modern criticism has defined and interpreted realism, and his first chapter is a handy survey of some notable positions on the subject.
J. Jeffrey Franklin goes further than Shaw in suggesting that Victorian realists were not interested in mirroring nature, but concerned with the true as distinguished from the real (25). He likens them to postmodern writers, for “they perform a revised version of society into existence by both thematically representing and formally enacting a reality that is similar to but ‘truer’ than social reality” (30). Franklin emphasizes the important role of play, both as a subject and as a textual manner in the writers he examines. He touches only briefly upon Dickens, but concludes his study with an interesting suggestion as far as genre studies are concerned.

Even so, perhaps it is time to expand and redefine the concept of realism to encompass not only Charles Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend and Victor Hugo’s The Hunchback of Notre Dame, for example, but also James Joyce’s Ulysses and Toni Morrison’s Beloved. (204)

This solution seems to me to make realism such a diluted term that it can be applied to all sorts of literature. The inclusion of such an obviously Modernist work as Ulysses highlights the problem. I would rather employ a different term, and hyperreality seems a good one, to call attention to the theatricality of Dickens’s approach. But he is doing more than just borrowing techniques from the stage; he is placing himself in the position of producer and stage manager as well. Most critics will admit that Dickens borrowed a good deal from the theater and that he enjoyed a certain amount of melodrama in his novels. In a recent collection, John Glavin puts it this way:

Pretty much everyone agrees Dickens’s fiction is spectacular. I’m going to literalize that claim to say that in an era of Spectacular Theatre Dickens wrote a comparably Spectacular Fiction, where Spectacular, on both stage and page, meant something like realism eradicated. (Cambridge Companion 190)

My approach to Dickens and realism involves a balancing act rather different from Shaw’s. I have in mind Roland Barthes’s useful distinction between readerly and writerly texts. In the former, the reader is granted a good deal of interpretive freedom, in the latter, the author seeks to maintain authority. I shall argue that Dickens was fully aware of these positions, though he might not have been able to offer critical interpretations of them. What Dickens tried to do from rather early in his career was to give his audience the impression that they were reading readerly texts, while, in fact, he was writing writerly texts. In the later part of his career he took to pointing out either overtly or through such things as plot devices or metaphorical patterns, his domination of his own stories. Several of the late novels actually
have to be reread to be fully grasped, with *Our Mutual Friend* perhaps being the outstanding example.

However, by way of illustration, I would like to juxtapose a passage from *Dombey and Son* in the middle of Dickens's career, with one from his contemporary Mrs. Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*, a novel that fits two narrative descriptions, for it is, I believe a good example of realism in the more limited genre of the domestic novel. The first is a description of Carker the manager's home. Dickens has already given an objective description of the neat and convenient nature of the exterior and to some degree the interior of the bachelor's house at the beginning of chapter 33. Then he proceeds:

And yet, amidst this opulence of comfort, there is something in the general air that is not well. Is it that the carpets and the cushions are too soft and noiseless, so that those who move or repose among them seem to act by stealth? Is it that the prints and pictures do not commemorate great thoughts or deeds, or render nature in the poetry of landscape, hall, or hut, but are of one voluptuous cast—mere shows of form and colour—and no more? Is it that the books have all their gold outside, and that the titles of the greater part qualify them to be companions of the prints and titles of the pictures? Is it that the completeness and the beauty of the place is here and there belied by an affectation of humility, in some unimportant and inexpensive regard, which is as false as the face of the too truly painted portrait hanging yonder, or its original at breakfast in his easy chair below it? Or is it that, with the daily breath of that original and master of all here, there issues forth some subtle portion of himself, which gives a vague expression of himself to everything about him! (471–72)

Unlike the objective narrator of realism, Dickens's narrator emphasizes his presence by way of a series of rhetorical questions, which, while implicating the reader in the interpretation of the catalogue, nonetheless prevents him from taking charge of that interpretation himself. His description is not intended to mirror the world. The first paragraph did that to some degree. He is here offering an imaginatively altered “real” world by attributing moral values to it through such loaded words as “stealth,” “voluptuous,” and “false.” Moreover, this passage explicitly states the notion behind Dickens's repeated method throughout his work, by suggesting that Carker's character permeates the area and objects around him, just as Dickens cloaks his narratives in specific moral fabrics, largely the projections of the characters’ traits, or of the narrator's own moods. In many cases these projections are connected by repetitions of one kind or another, often of patterns of imagery. In short, Dickens's narrator not only dominates the “picture” he is presenting, but also
weaves it into the larger structure of the narrative as a whole. In later works this technique becomes more subtle, but here he is letting the audience see the magician’s sleight of hand.

The passage from *Sylvia’s Lovers* is typical of Gaskell and of realism.

Foster’s shop was the shop of Monkshaven. It was kept by two Quaker brothers, who were now old men; and their father had kept it before them; probably his father before that. People remembered it as an old-fashioned dwelling-house, with a sort of supplementary shop with unglazed windows projecting from the lower story. These openings had long been filled with panes of glass that at the present day would be accounted very small, but which seventy years ago were much admired for their size. I can best make you understand the appearance of the place by bidding you think of the long openings in a butcher’s shop, and then to fill them up in your imagination with panes about eight inches by six, in a heavy wooden frame. There was one of these windows on each side the door-place, which was kept partially closed through the day by a low gate about a yard high. Half the shop was appropriated to grocery; the other half to drapery, and a little mercery. (22)

There is no attempt to characterize the owners of the shop by its contents. Although the narrator intrudes herself, it is only to help the reader picture the limited nature of the shop’s window by a comparison with windows of her own day. The shop is inserted into an historical frame. Certainly at this point in the novel there is no need for us to know that the proprietors are Quakers, so this information has the superfluous feel so characteristic of realist description. The narrator might speculate (probably the grandfather of the current owners owned the shop too), but offers no moral assessments. We are given a scene to evaluate and the narrator does not coerce us, as Dickens’s narrator does, by emphasizing Carker’s preference for the voluptuous—something stressed throughout the text by various means, including the association of Carker with cats.

The preceding comments discuss recent critical attitudes regarding literary realism in general and Dickens in particular. But Dickens has been something of a problem from his own day. George H. Ford pointed out some time ago that as early as 1852, David Masson contrasted Dickens and Thackeray, putting the former in the category of ideal novelists and the latter in that of real novelist; to Masson, Dickens was poetic, though he did not necessarily mean this as a high compliment (Ford 116). For George Henry Lewes, Dickens did not live up to the standards of realism, which Lewes equated with the faithful representation of everyday existence, because his writings were hallucinatory (Ford 149ff). Some clue to Dickens’s attitude can
be found in his diatribe against Mr. Barlow, the stern teacher in the children’s book *Sandford and Merton*, in “Mr. Barlow” in *The Uncommercial Traveller*. Dickens dislikes the humorless Mr. Barlow because he represents a heavily didactical approach to fiction. As a child, Dickens felt he was an imposition, wholly unlike the story telling that he preferred. Dickens writes: “The incompatibility of Mr. Barlow with all other portions of my young life but himself, the adamantine inadaptability of the man to my favorite fancies and amusements is the thing for which I hate him most. What right had he to bore his way into my Arabian Nights?” (339). This says it all. Dickens wanted some of the magic of the *Arabian Nights* wedded to the commonplaceness of the world around him, the romantic side of everyday things, as he put it himself. The program of realism accurately to reflect the world as it is might have appeared is too like the Utilitarian outlook excoriated in *Hard Times* (where the *Arabian Nights* is used effectively as a critical weapon) for Dickens to be sympathetic.

Dickens seems to have been misunderstood even by those who thoroughly enjoyed his novels. John Forster observed that what mattered to Dickens was that he gave a true impression of the world as it is, an attitude that can be confused with the realist endeavor (Ford 132). But he often commented on the truth as a moral truth. Hence, while he sought to render the material world in a factual manner, he also sought to enhance it for the improvement of his readers. His famous comment in the introduction to *Bleak House* that he wished to convey the romantic side of everyday life sums up this attitude.

One useful way of looking at Dickens’s fiction was proposed some while ago by Edward Eigner in *The Metaphysical Novel in England and America: Dickens, Bulwer, Hawthorne, Melville* (1978). Eigner borrows the term “metaphysical novel” from Bulwer. In Bulwer in particular such novels were a “mixture of allegory and the matter-of-fact” (5). It was necessary to depict the material world as it was in order to subject it to a grand intellectual or moral design. “They had to present the experiential world view as compellingly as possible before they could even generate the energy to contradict it with the opposite epistemic method” (181). These novels were characterized by premeditation; they had a scheme to which all else was subordinate. Thus, unlike the realist novel, character development was not important; characters served the overall design of the narrative. Eigner notes that “the metaphysical novelist does not proceed from ignorance, as the realist does, but from preconceived vision or truth” (64). Character development is the signature of nineteenth-century realist fiction; it is a main avenue for the pursuit of truth. But Eigner points out that “the metaphysical novelists recognized the idealized or simplified character as an injunction from German romantic aesthetics, but also as the heritage of the major forms of narrative...
which had come down to them: epic, romance, and satire” (71). The narrator of the metaphysical novel also tended to be intrusive in a way that most realists avoided. This forwardness of the narrator “offered an advantage to the metaphysical novelist, for if the reader could be forced to observe the creative process itself, not simply be permitted to watch the creation, he might become a participant in the vision rather than merely a spectator” (64–65). As I shall suggest in what follows, Dickens always wanted his readers to appreciate the craft with which he constructed his narratives, as his prefaces indicate.

I shall not be discussing all of Dickens’s fiction. I shall, for example, have nothing to say about the historical novels *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. My discussions shall be concerned more with Dickens’s narrative method than with his subject matter or his moral objectives, both of which were certainly important to him.