Dickens’s Hyperrealism

Reed, John R.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Reed, John R.
Dickens’s Hyperrealism.
The Ohio State University Press, 2010.
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CHAPTER 6

The Riches of Redundancy

Our Mutual Friend

*Our Mutual Friend* has not pleased many otherwise satisfied readers of Dickens’s fiction. For his contemporaries and such acute assessors of fiction as Henry James, the novel seemed to lack structure, among other faults. More recently, critics have discovered ways in which Dickens can be seen experimenting in this novel, especially with a tightness of structure that, to a large extent, keeps itself hidden. What I wish to argue here is that Dickens was in full command of his narrative, so much so that he wanted both to assist his readers in interpreting it correctly and to retain control of the mode of that interpretation, impulses that go against the ambitions of realism. Dickens was a man devoted to orderliness and careful exertion to a determined end. These inclinations, it seems to me, are extended to his fiction as well, more so as he grows older. I also wish to argue that in establishing an incredibly elaborate structure for his novel, he was extending his quarrel with what has come to be known as realism. Calling attention to its own language and using highly formal structure were taboos of realism. Dickens glories in his command of language, especially metaphor, and creates a formal structure that intentionally challenges plausibility. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens employs his characteristic technique of offering a surplus of informa-
tion in order to guarantee the transmission of meaning, what in information theory was early dubbed “redundancy.” In his early fiction, Dickens was rather obvious about this overload of data—the backing up of one pattern of references by another related pattern. But by the time he wrote *Our Mutual Friend*, his technique, though still perceivable, was subtler, hence my choice of this novel to study redundancy because it weaves imagery, allusion, and narrative detail into a mode of transmission that calls attention to itself and by doing so restricts what the information it transmits can mean. Insofar as it does this, it is directly opposed to the practices of realist fiction. In his early fiction, Dickens was serializing narratives of which he did not know the conclusions and his use of imagery was thus not as controlled as it became later. For this reason, the early novels are in some ways closer to realist technique than the later, though with a powerful admixture of fairy-tale qualities. There are many more examples of the gratuitous details that constitute Roland Barthes’s “reality effect,” undigested material that emphasizes the unexpectedness of everyday reality. In the later, well-planned novels, Dickens permitted very little that did not contribute to his design; the superfluity of information both in narrated detail and in the supporting imagery and allusiveness, despite immediate appearances, acts against this “reality effect,” by narrowing the meaning of the narrative as a whole and confining it as strictly as possible to Dickens’s own intended meaning. Like his own characters Jenny Wren and Mr. Venus, he wants to make use of every scrap. Even the serial mode of publication came to serve these ends as the segments became more tightly related to one another, as book and chapter titles often indicate; see, for example, the allusive book titles of *Our Mutual Friend* itself. Yet if the technique in the late fiction was subtler, so were Dickens’s signals to his readership on how to read his texts. The opening of the novel is Dickens’s primer on the reading of signs, aptly titled “On the Look-out.”

The first chapter opens with a description of Gaffer and Lizzie Hexam in a boat on the Thames and begins with a series of exclusions. Gaffer has “no net, no hook, or line, and he could not be a fisherman”; other items not present are listed and the trades of waterman and lighterman are eliminated as possible occupations. In fact, “there is no clue to what [Gaffer] looked for, but he looked for something, with a most intent and searching gaze.” The passage alerts us to the fact that we too will need “clues” to solve the mystery of this boat and its occupants, who are obviously “doing something they often did, and were seeking what they often sought” (1). The scene is filled with the need to interpret. Lizzie must read Gaffer’s face to direct the boat she is rowing, just as Gaffer reads the water for signs of what he is seeking. But while Gaffer’s gaze is utilitarian, Lizzie’s is affected by emotion and fancy. A slant of light upon “a rotten stain [at the bottom of the boat] which bore
some resemblance to the outline of a muffled human form, coloured it as though with diluted blood. This caught the girl’s eye, and she shivered” (2).

This is one of the narrator’s many clues to his readers in this short opening chapter; it emphasizes Lizzie’s figural imagination. But another clue is the narrator’s own figure. Gaffer is likened to “a roused bird of prey” (3), an image confirmed by Rogue Riderhood, who says to Gaffer, “you’re like the wulturs, pardner, and scent ‘em out” (4). Though the mystery of what Gaffer scents out and what Lizzie cannot bear to sit close to is undisclosed, a transparent clue appears at the very close of the chapter, when we learn that a neophyte might fancy “that the ripples passing over it [what Gaffer has in tow] were dreadfully like faint changes of expression on a sightless face; but Gaffer was no neophyte and had no fancies” (5).

In this first chapter, then, the narrator gives us a lesson in reading signs and establishes the basis for some of the central themes of the narrative—preying and scavenging, the transformative powers of water, and the contrast of fancy with pragmatic thought, all of these interwoven with one another from the start. Another theme is begun, but left unpursued in the description of Gaffer’s boat being “[a]llied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered . . .” (1). But if the narrator has given us a lesson in reading signs, he has not openly solved the mystery of the chapter. Who are Gaffer, Lizzie, and Rogue? What is their business? What does Gaffer have in tow? If we have learned our lesson and read the clues, we should know.

Chapter 2 abandons the river for a very different setting where the subject and theme of dust is prominent in the tale of old John Harmon, a narrative that interests the company gathered at the Veneerings’ home. In telling the story of the Harmons, Mortimer Lightwood remarks that old Harmon’s daughter “intimated that she was secretly engaged to that popular character whom the novelists and versifiers call Another,” and a bit later declares that “[w]e must now return, as the novelists say, and as we all wish they wouldn’t, to the man from Somewhere” (14). As central story teller in chapter 2, Lightwood alludes directly and critically, even condescendingly, to conventions of fiction; appropriately, his own narrative is incomplete and ends abruptly until a message suddenly delivered to him provides closure to the story of the man from Somewhere. His listeners speculate, one notion being that there was a codicil in the dust, but all the auditors are wrong. Lightwood exclaims, “[t]he story is completer and rather more exciting than I supposed. Man’s drowned!” (17).

Chapters 1 and 2 could not be much more different from one another—the one set in the ooze and damp of the river with ghastly circumstances developing, the other set among the well-to-do and cultivated classes
enjoying a stogy dinner, with the luxury of speculating on the life stories of strangers concerned with dust and money. Chapter 1 is narrated by an alert narrator; chapter 2 is about narration. But dust and water come together at the end of chapter 2 in the supposed drowning death of John Harmon, Jr. When dust and water mingle, the result is mud and ooze, and as the narrative progresses we discover how significant mud is in the meaning of the story, if we have learned to read the clues the way Dickens has taught us to do. But for us to read these clues correctly, we must have a surplus of them. Our Mutual Friend offers an ideal example of how Dickens utilizes redundancy not merely to reinforce narrative meaning, but to assert his control of how that meaning will be received, and also to indicate the limitations of the realist program. Patterns of imagery, recurrent motifs, and repetitions of themes are common in many types of fiction, but Dickens subsumes all of these and the narrative design of the novel itself to a mode of transmission that makes each of these devices reinforce the others, thereby more severely circumscribing the meaning of the information it conveys even as it becomes denser. Redundancy can be seen as a mode of interpretation something like the concept of the implied author, where an idealized governing force of the narrative is posited for much of the narrative’s design. Redundancy can be seen as such a governing force imbedded in the novel’s language itself, but requiring both by its intricacy and its self-advertizing a specific mode of information reception. In some ways, it is a mode of meaning that is the opposite of Bakhtin’s heteroglossia.

Redundancy means different things in different contexts, though ordinarily it suggests superfluousness. The Victorians, for example, discussed the problem of redundant women, a large surplus of single women for whom there were insufficient mates. Different fields of research today use the concept of redundancy in a rigorous manner. In linguistics and semiotics it has to do with that which is supposedly unnecessary though helpful for the communication of information (though often such redundancy is difficult to determine). W. C. Watt notes that “the kinds of information that are ‘redundant’ (superfluous, predictable) vary greatly depending on what task is at hand”; his example is the recognition of letters of the alphabet (16).

Suppose some performative differences, in so far as they depend on utilizing different portions of one’s overall knowledge of the letters, might be reflected directly in the letters’ analysis in a particularly simple way: information used in some tasks but not in others could be included in the letters’ analysis, at some level, as “redundant.” (17)

What is redundant depends upon what task is required; for example, recognizing, uttering, or writing a letter of the alphabet.
Although such concepts of redundancy are obviously related to that which I am using here, my derivation is more directly from information theory. Here is Jeremy Campbell’s explanation.

In nearly all forms of communication, more messages are sent than are strictly necessary to convey the information intended by the sender. Such additional messages diminish the unexpectedness, the surprise effect, of the information itself, making it more predictable. This extra ration of predictability is called redundancy, and it is one of the most important concepts in information theory. Redundancy is essentially a constraint. It limits the value of $W$ in the entropy equation $S = k \log W$, reducing the number of ways in which the various parts of a system can be arranged. (68)

Language is an example where redundancy is contained within rules. In order to communicate in language there must be shared conventions such as grammar, spelling, and so forth. Attempts to compress language, deleting what appears to be redundant, destroy the built-in safeguards against error found in all languages. Redundancy in this sense facilitates the communication of messages. Campbell continues, “[t]here is yet another aspect of redundancy which is of great interest. This is the role it plays in enabling systems, both biological organisms and artificial intelligence machines, to become complex. . . . The more complex the system the more likely it is that one of its parts will malfunction. Redundancy is a means of keeping the system running in the presence of malfunction” (73). Campbell concludes that “while redundancy constrains, it also may lead to great complexity within the constraints” (74).

Redundancy might apply in any number of situations. Campbell cites Susumu Ohno, a geneticist who speculated that evolution provided “‘useless information’ in the DNA of organisms. This came in the form of repetition, which is the simplest form of redundancy . . .” (149). But this “useless information” can prove to be very useful indeed, as Jennifer Ackerman indicates in her account of heredity.

But lately scientists have taken a closer look at the wilderness of junk DNA and found that certain stretches are fecund voids, like Leonardo’s darks, full of sequences that may be ungenelike but are nevertheless vital to life, exerting exquisite control over the genes embedded in them. (24)

Any code, any message, could contain within it a useless or a useful redundancy, but the implications of biology, linguistics, information theory, and other areas of study suggest that wherever redundancy exists, it contributes to the delivery of a message. Lily E. Kay provides an interesting account
of how the concept of redundancy crossed the borders from linguistics to genetics and back again by way of a conference of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston, August, 1962 (304ff). The codes of genetics and linguistics might be different, but the concept of redundancy as a principle of communication need not be.

I am not suggesting that Dickens understood this notion, but simply that he intuitively comprehended the way in which a message can be delivered by a combination of constraint and increasing complexity through narrative language. *Bleak House* provides a midcareer sample. That novel is famous for the repetitions of its opening paragraphs, tolling the words ‘mud’ and ‘fog’ over and over. But that is an obvious example of repetition, a transparent descriptive redundancy. A less prominent pattern also begins with the first chapter and continues throughout the novel until it swells to major significance in the death of Lady Dedlock. Chapter 1 ends with this memorable sentence: “If all the injustice [Chancery] has committed, and all the misery it has caused, could only be locked up with it, and the whole burnt away in a great funeral pyre,—why so much the better for other parties than the parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce” (7). And so much the better for all of English society, the passage and the chapter suggest. The end of a chapter is a good place to locate an important theme, and Dickens does that here by introducing the funeral/burial motif. But it is not only the world of Chancery that would be better off in its grave. The world of fashion represented in chapter 2 by the Dedlock household at Chesney Wold seems already to have passed the boundary between the quick and the dead at least metaphorically, but literally as well. Chesney Wold seems inclined in that direction. The little church in the park is moldy, “and there is a general smell and taste of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves” (9). When Esther first visits the locale, she notices that the church “smelt as earthy as the grave” (249). It is at this moment that Esther first sees Lady Dedlock, who will later learn that Esther is her own daughter returned from the grave. Tom Lloyd has commented on some of the connections between Lady Dedlock and Esther, including the irony that the mother must “bury” her newly discovered daughter in secrecy again, but also that the handkerchief that Esther uses to cover Jenny’s dead baby in a respectful funeral rite, is later taken by Lady Dedlock in her ultimately fatal flight. So the handkerchief becomes a signifier in the funerary connection between Esther and Lady Dedlock. Jo, too, makes a connection between Esther and the woman who wanted him to show her the “berryin’ ground” (430). These, and many other similar references, create by their repetition a redundant network alluding to funerals and burials, including the elaborate inquest sequence following the death of Nemo, that peaks in the scene in which Esther discovers her mother dead at the gates of the loath-
some burying ground where her one-time lover and the father of Esther is buried. By the end of the novel, we realize that these redundancies have pointed the way to the conclusion, with Lady Dedlock in her grave.

It is known for certain that the handsome Lady Dedlock lies in the mausoleum in the park, where the trees arch darkly overhead, and the owl is heard at night making the woods ring; but whence she was brought home, to be laid among the echoes of that solitary place, or how she died, is all mystery. Some of her old friends, principally to be found among the peachy-cheeked charmers with the skeleton throats, did once occasionally say, as they toyed in a ghastly manner with large fans—like charmers reduced to flirting with grim Death, after losing all their other beaux—did once occasionally say, when the World assembled together, that they wondered the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company. But the dead-and-gone Dedlocks take it very calmly, and have never been known to object. (872)

This scene of the nearly dead judging the dead is reinforced by the implication that the entire Dedlock way of life is passing away, supplanted implicitly by the inhabitants of new Bleak House, a place of joy and healing. Sir Leicester is the manifestation of this impending change.

Closed in by night with broad screens, and illumined only in that part, the light of the drawing-room seems gradually contracting and dwindling until it shall be no more. A little more, in truth, and it will be all extinguished for Sir Leicester; and the damp door in the mausoleum which shuts so tight, and looks so obdurate, will have opened and received him. (874)

The anonymous narrator concludes that “passion and pride . . . have died away from the place in Lincolnshire . . .” (876). And so the penultimate chapter ends, but in the final chapter, narrated by Esther, the turf has not yet been planted on Richard Carstone's grave when his son is born, symbolizing a new era of new hopes when even Esther's lost looks can come to life again.

This brief taste of Dickens's method of providing a superfluity of information on a theme he wishes to convey is one manifestation of what is more densely enacted in Our Mutual Friend. Literal and metaphorical funerary and burial activity abound in Bleak House, but the mesh of references to water, dust, and mud is far more complex in Our Mutual Friend. We have already seen how the themes of water, dust, surface, and depth are developed in the first two chapters of this novel, but we have scarcely, as it were, touched the surface. The whole second chapter depends upon the concept
of the Veneerings as representative of superficiality, as their name suggests. But set against this reprehensible surfaceness is the desire to penetrate surfaces, and we get a glimpse of this immediately at the beginning of chapter 3, when Mortimer interrogates Charley Hexam, who has written and delivered the note about John Harmon’s death. This interrogation takes place in the Veneering library with its “bran-new books, in bran-new bindings . . .” (18). Young Charley “glanced at the backs of the books, with an awakened curiosity that went below the binding,” notes the narrator, then adds, “[n]o one who can read, ever looks at a book, even unopened on a shelf, like one who cannot,” a telling connection of the surface/depth theme with that of interpreting signs and that of narration.

Charley takes Mortimer to Gaffer, who is vain about not being able to read, yet being “scholar enough” to identify all of the posters on the walls of his room, which refer to corpses he has recovered (22). This mesh of themes is drawn together more forcefully, though the reader does not know it at this point, when the man from Somewhere shows up at Gaffer’s door seeking directions to the corpse, which he thinks he might be able to identify. Before chapter 3 ends, we meet another interpreter of signs in Lizzie Hexam, who can read the flames in the fireplace. Unlike Gaffer’s ability to note the meaning of outside signs through his memory of what they stand for, Lizzie projects her own depths unto the unmeaning “signs” of the flames. Hence, all three Hexams are readers, but they span a very wide range of that activity; Lizzie’s “reading” comes closest of the three to the related practice of narrating.

Having stated his themes and interwoven them in the opening three chapters, the narrator is now able to begin the more leisurely development of his story, and so the next two chapters introduce new key players in the novel, first the Wilfers and then Wegg and the Boffins. But gradually one or another theme is reintroduced. Boffin hires Wegg to read to him, though what is being read now becomes relatively inconsequential. However, what is important is that, whether or not he is a good reader, Wegg is an untrustworthy narrator. He has made up his account of the family in the corner house near which he has his stand. He is only one breeder of fictions, though, as the novel demonstrates. Chapter 10, for example, shows how Twemlow recognizes that “the Veneering guests become infected with the Veneering fiction,” without realizing that he is infected too (115).

The first few chapters of Our Mutual Friend put Dickens’s machinery in place. These are the cocoons of the redundancy to be spun out later. But having got this material before the reader, he relaxes into the “realistic” body of narrative. Still, the themes of the opening appear in trace amounts throughout, often linked to one of the other motives. Dickens was intent on
keeping control of his own narrative and so, along with guiding his readers’ interpretations, he includes examples of the misinterpretation of signs. Mr. Podsnap thinks that he knows what all signs mean, though the narrator checks his confidence abruptly when the foreign gentleman misunderstands Podsnap’s boasting of the signs of prosperity in London, taking him to be referring to the horse dung so common on the London streets. This passage may seem gratuitous except that dung in the streets may reasonably be connected to the activities of a prosperous city. No business and wealth, no horses and their waste. But dung is also collected by scavengers and deposited in mounds that can also produce wealth, as they did for John Harmon, Sr. If Podsnap is thus negatively connected to the elder Harmon, he is also connected to the younger Harmon, for it is Podsnap who bids Veneering, “who has prospered exceedingly on the Harmon Murder,” to retell the story. As Mr. Veneering plunges into the case, his wife dives into the same waters for a wealthy Ship-Broker as audience and brings him up, “safe and sound, by the hair” (134). This is a gruesomely comic reversal of what has supposedly happened to John Harmon, who is supposed not to have been brought up safe and sound.

This multipurpose imagery, what Garrett Stewart in a discussion of *Oliver Twist* calls “metaphoric overkill,” (*The Cambridge Companion* 157) appears far too often for me to cite all cases in *Our Mutual Friend*. But Robert Alter admirably shows how what appears to be an isolated description of a foggy London reveals itself as thematically embedded, for the city drowning in fog with St. Paul’s Cathedral the last to go, “carries forward the images of death by drowning” (136). Clearly Dickens’s frequent and prominent references back to his initial themes are meant to keep the reader in training, but also to demonstrate his own command of the narrative. We are told of the “depths and shallows of Podsnappery” (255) and of the “winds and waves” of Fledgeby’s stormy childhood (268). Betty Higden says she will be able to avoid the workhouse if there is “water enough to cover us” in England (327). Bradley Headstone’s thoughts are “tributary” to one purpose (551). In the passage about Headstone, Dickens even provides a proleptic glimpse of the scene where Headstone will attack Wrayburn, so that, in rereading, his audience would recognize a sign missed in the initial reading.

These references to water are timid by comparison with more forceful passages in which water is connected with passionate, selfish, and even savage qualities. This connection is first made overtly at the very end of Book One in the chapter entitled “A Dismal Swamp,” in which we learn of all of those who are trying to get money out of Boffin, who are described as “the Alligators of the Dismal Swamp, and are always lying by to drag the Golden Dustman under” (213). The chapter ends with a reference to Wegg
as a “fish of the shark tribe in the Bower waters” who also resembles “some extinct bird,” plotting to get his portion out of Boffin (213). This association is intensified when Boffin visits Venus’s shop and has to hide behind a stuffed alligator upon Wegg’s unexpected appearance to discuss the nefarious “friendly move” with Venus. The narrator remarks that Wegg’s wicked behavior is nothing new. “The yard or two of smile on the part of the alligator might have been invested with the meaning, ‘All about this was quite familiar knowledge down in the depths of the slime, ages ago’” (383). Wegg is connected to the slime in another way, for he resembles Gaffer as a bird of prey. He “fluttered over his prey,” Boffin, even when he was powerless, but now, when he believes he has Boffin in his power, he prepares to “drop down upon” him (579, 584ff.).

Wegg’s craving for Boffin’s wealth is a hollow desire for gratification. A fiercer desire discloses itself in Bradley Headstone. He has advanced himself from humble origins of which he is both sullenly proud and ashamed. He employs a constant self-suppression in order to get on with his career as a schoolmaster. “Yet there was enough of what was animal, and of what was fiery (though smouldering), still visible in him, to suggest that if young Bradley Headstone, when a pauper lad, had chanced to be told off for the sea, he would not have been the last man in a ship’s crew” (218). John Harmon recognizes something suppressed in Headstone. “The Secretary thought, as he glanced at the schoolmaster’s face, that he had opened a channel here indeed, and that it was an unexpectedly dark and deep and stormy one, and difficult to sound” (388). But if Harmon cannot sound it, Headstone himself can, as he demonstrates to Lizzie, when he reveals his passion for her.

“No man knows till the time comes what depths are within him. To some men it never comes; let them rest and be thankful! To me, you brought it; on me, you forced it; and the bottom of this raging sea,” striking himself upon the breast, “has been heaved up ever since.” (396)

The narrator can take a larger view of Headstone’s individual case, and he does so in the same scene where he refers to Headstone’s origins. “But even among school-buildings, school-teachers, and school-pupils, all according to pattern and all engendered in the light of the latest Gospel according to Monotony, the older pattern into which so many fortunes have been shaped for good and evil, comes out” (218). The narrator is referring to Miss Pecher, who has an unrequited passion for Headstone, but the passage applies equally to Headstone. The “older pattern” is what the alligator knows was commonplace in the slime ages ago. The slime and mire and mud are what humanity sinks to at its worst; it is what those who aspire to the best
wish to rise out of. But there may be parodic versions of that ascent. Just as Headstone has risen above his origins, Charley Hexam wants to raise himself in the world and tells Lizzie “that after I have climbed up out of the mire, you shall not pull me down” (401, 403). Later, suspecting Headstone of criminal behavior, he disassociates himself from his former schoolmaster, saying “he will not be dragged down by others” (712–13). The playful “hunting” scenes that Wrayburn puts Headstone through on an almost nightly basis, making him “like an ill-timed wild animal,” becomes a real hunting down of Wrayburn by Headstone (546). Ooze, slime, mud, and mire are the primordial savage conditions out of which the human race has presumably crept.

If the river bottom and the oozy river itself scavenged by birds of prey represent human vileness, it is a world supposedly best avoided and forgotten. And so, John Harmon, who has descended briefly into it, decides that John Harmon shall not come back to life; instead he buries “John Harmon many additional fathoms deep” (378). Like Headstone, Harmon as Rokesmith is determined to keep himself down, but in his case self-repression involves a consideration for others rather than a need for self-discipline.

All of the water references return near the end of the book as Wrayburn, having pursued Lizzie up the river, is attacked by Headstone then rescued by Lizzie.13 Whereas Gaffer pulled the dead from the water to plunder them, Lizzie pulls Wrayburn from the water to save his life. All that she learned about her father’s trade now serves to reverse it. The narrator cannot help reminding us of our reading lesson in the first chapter of the book, and notes that “An untrained sight would never have seen by the moonlight what she saw at the length of a few strokes astern” (700). It is still necessary to interpret signs correctly, to act rightly, just as Riderhood must decipher the meaning of Headstone’s clothing (to implicate him in the murder) and then teach a lesson of his own in Headstone’s own classroom. Rogue asks Headstone’s students to name the waters on the earth, which they dutifully accomplish, but when he asks them what is caught in seas, rivers, lakes, and ponds, he has to correct the answers fish and weeds, and state that “It’s suits o’ clothes,” for he has fished up the clothes that Headstone wore during the attack on Wrayburn (795). He is not now fishing up corpses, but empty suits of clothes, yet the parallel with the opening scenes of the novel is clear. In fact, Headstone is as good as a dead man already, as the erasure of his name from the blackboard portends, and he and Riderhood will soon end up together “lying under the ooze and scum” of the lock, back in the primordially savage world of which one was an obvious, the other a covert denizen (802).

As Wrayburn lies half-dead he fades in and out of consciousness, and the narrator remarks, “This frequent rising of a drowning man from the deep, to sink again, was dreadful to the beholders” (740). It is “the wreck
of him that lay cast ashore there now . . .” (753). Having visited the riverside only through Lightwood’s legal interest there, Wrayburn is attracted to Lizzie, who represents the positive element that can arise from the apparent unattractiveness of that world. It is she more than Charley who rises out of the mire and who lifts Wrayburn with her. And if he is a wrecked ship at this stage, he will survive to lead a better life married to Lizzie, who is, as Twemlow insists against the Voice of Society, a lady. If Lizzie is thus redemptive for Wrayburn, Harmon is similarly redemptive for Bella. Bella dreams of a rich husband coming to her in a ship and of setting off into the world as a wealthy woman (318ff), but later, after she has married Rokesmith, she says to her father that there was no John in all of the ships she had earlier imagined (670). In fact, there was. For John Harmon had returned in a ship from abroad specifically to investigate the circumstances that would have bound him to Bella as she was, not as she has become. Moreover, the result of their marriage is that a baby is on a ship coming to them, a baby that is safely brought home (688, 755), as John almost was not. The whole theme of water constitutes an extensive redundancy, but what seems superfluous is actually an elaborate network uniting various characters’ histories, and various other themes. Water references, whether factual or metaphorical tell the complicated story of journeys on a perilous medium where some sink to the vile bottom and others land safely.

Lest we miss the larger meaning of the water motif, the narrator occasionally steps in to make it explicit. When Betty Higden is in flight from the workhouse she follows the Thames.

In those pleasant little towns on Thames, you may hear the fall of the water over the weirs, or even, in still weather, the rustle of the rushes; and from the bridge you may see the young river, dimpled like a young child, playfully gliding away among the trees, unpolluted by the defilements that lie in wait for it on its course, and as yet out of hearing of the deep summons of the sea. It were too much to pretend that Betty Higden made out such thoughts; no; but she heard the tender river whispering to many like herself, ‘Come to me, come to me! When the cruel shame and terror you have so long fled from, most beset you, come to me! I am the Relieving Officer appointed by eternal ordinance to do my work; I am not held in estimation according as I shirk it. My breast is softer than the pauper-nurse’s; death in my arms is peacefuller than among the pauper-wards. Come to me!’ (504–5)

Here is the opposite setting to the Dismal Swamp and the ancient slime. It is human innocence and human destiny. Betty Higden will soon die, but not in the river. Nor will Wrayburn die in the river. But the train carrying Mr.
Milvey to marry Wrayburn and Lizzie seems to suggest otherwise and certainly puts the water theme in a larger perspective as it roars across the river:

spurning the watery turnings and doublings with ineffable contempt, and going straight to its end, as Father Time goes to his. To whom it is no matter what living waters run high or low, reflect the heavenly lights and dark-nesses, produce their little growth of weeds and flowers, turn here, turn there, are noisy or still, are troubled or at rest, for their course has one sure termination, though their sources and devices are many. (751)

A few lines later we are “near the solemn river, stealing away by night, as all things steal away, by night and by day, so quietly yielding to the attraction of the loadstone rock of Eternity . . .” (751). This reference too suggests the imminent death of Wrayburn and is overtly so connected by the narrative, but the death to come is Headstone’s instead. However, no matter how immediately applicable, these passages reveal the cosmic moral background against which Dickens plays out his water music. These passages also constitute instructions for the proper deciphering of the redundant information concerning water, but also indicate that water references are interlocked with other images, themes, and narrative gestures.

If there is water, there is also dust. Dust is most obviously connected to the accumulation of wealth by unsavory means. But the dust mounds in the story also represent the past as either opportunity or burden for the living. The Boffins benefit from old Harmon’s will and acquire the mounds along with the estate. John Harmon rejects the imposition of the past upon him and frees himself from its dusty entrapment. But the mounds themselves and dust in general also suggest mystery, and occlusion. When Lightwood makes the off-hand remark to Boffin that “everything wears to rags,” Boffin replies “there’s some things that I never found among the dust” (91). Boffin is called the Golden Dustman because for him the dust has meant great wealth, but he can put it in perspective and has come to the Temple “as a spot where lawyer’s dust is contracted for . . .” (91). What is not found in the dust is unselfishness and love. And just as the motif of recovery is associated with water, that of unburying and recovering is also associated with the dust, most particularly in the plotting of Wegg and Venus. That the accumulation of dust signifies a pernicious activity becomes evident when the narrator uses metaphors to castigate the authorities who have made the poor laws what they are.

My lords and gentlemen and honourable boards, when you in the course of your dust-shovelling and cinder-raking have piled up a mountain of preten-
tious failure, you must off with your honourable coats for the removal of it, and fall to the work with the power of all the queen's horses and all the queen's men, or it will come rushing down and bury us alive. (503)

Those concluding words cannot help but remind us, as does Lightwood’s remark that everything wears to rags, of the most famous quotation about dust—”dust thou art.” Lest we forget that dimension, the narrator occasionally reminds us of it; thus, near the beginning of chapter 15, we find a paragraph beginning: “A grey dusty withered evening in London city has not a hopeful aspect. The closed warehouses and offices have an air of death about them, and the national dread of colour has an air of mourning” (393). The removal of the dust mounds, from this perspective, is a removal of all that is allied with the unattractiveness of death and the influence of the dead upon the living, including the will of a dead parent, but also of social conventions upon individuals.

The ooze, scum, mud, and slime associated with the corpses in the Thames, but also with Gaffer’s own death and those of Headstone and Riderhood, call attention to the serious theme of mixing water and dust, or hidden forces and the unsavory accumulation of “wealth.” Gaffer is driven by greed in his marginally legal trade; John Harmon Sr. is miserly in his assembling of the mounds. When these two metaphorical patterns come together, they suggest the ancient slime in which the predatory alligators and birds of prey live. But there is a lighter side to this pattern as well. It takes its climactic form with Silas Wegg, who has sought to acquire wealth through blackmailing Boffin about ownership of the dust mounds. John Harmon denounces Wegg as a “mudworm” at the moment of his unmasking (788). Like the other predators, this one too has failed. His fate is not as dramatic as Gaffer’s, Headstone’s, or Riderhood’s, but it is related. Sloppy picks Wegg up and carries him into the street where he pitches him into a “scavenger’s cart” where he makes “a prodigious splash” (790). It might not be the pit of a lock on the Thames, but it is ooze of a very disagreeable nature. Scavengers in the streets carried on a more reputable trade related to Gaffer’s occupation. What were called dust carts collected animal and sometimes human waste as well. Wegg’s removal from the narrative is prepared for long before when Jenny Wren tells her prodigal father, “I’d give the dustman five shillings to carry you off in the dust cart” (532), and in the foreign gentleman’s misunderstanding about the “signs” on the London streets. The resolution to the problem of mud is hinted at in the scene of John and Bella’s wedding, which takes place at Greenwich Church. Their air of happiness as they move off to the ceremony “wafted up from the earth and drew up after them a gruff and glum old pensioner” with two wooden legs and no object in life but tobacco.
“Stranded was Gruff and Glum in a harbour of everlasting mud, when all in an instant Bella floated him, and away he went” (664). It is love and the prospect of domestic contentment that frees us from the selfishness and hopelessness of mud and slime.

I have argued thus far that Dickens has his narrator provide us with an excess of information about water in particular but also dust and mud to convey the central meaning of his complex narrative. I want now to argue that he employs this redundancy in order to maintain his own control of the narrative and to make as certain as possible that his text will not be misread. We have already seen how Lightwood becomes a self-conscious narrator in the second chapter of the novel when he tells the story of the man from Somewhere. In chapter 16 of Book Two Lady Tippins recalls that it was during a dinner at the Veneerings that Lightwood first told the story of the man from Somewhere. Mortimer, again calling attention to the artificiality of narration, responds: “Yes, Lady Tippins. . . . as they say on the stage, Even so!” (411). We now learn that there is a sequel to that story, though Lightwood is reluctant to tell it until Wrayburn impatiently urges him to do so, declaring it insignificant and quoting a children’s “narrative” to illustrate his point.

“I’ll tell you a story
Of Jack a Manory,
And now my story’s begun;
I’ll tell you another
Of Jack and his brother,
And now my story is done.” (412)

Wrayburn’s poem suggests the inconsequentiality and lack of serious content in narratives, but Dickens’s purpose here as elsewhere is to refute that claim. In fact, the sequel Lightwood has to tell is monumentally important to the narrative of Our Mutual Friend, for it involves an account of Riderhood’s charges against Gaffer and his subsequent retraction of them, and climaxes with the information that Lizzie has vanished.

Lightwood can successfully minimize the importance of narrative in his first appearance as narrator; it is less easy to do so when his narrative involves his close friend Wrayburn, who is deeply concerned about Lizzie’s disappearance, which sets him into action with very serious consequences. Lightwood’s progress as a narrator suggests that any story might be far more important than we suppose. Who, as the party at the Veneerings entertained themselves with the story of a stranger, knew how intimately that story would intertwine with their own? But if the stories of strangers may prove
surprisingly significant, false stories can be equally powerful. Riderhood’s lying narrative about Gaffer must be expunged. The very subject of reading and interpretation must be examined. It can be elementary. Betty Higden explains that “Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices” (198). Reading, if it is only the conveying of information from the newspaper, requires some degree of interpretation. It is still the reception and translation of signs.

Of course, the central figures, when it comes to the theme of reading in this novel are Boffin and Wegg, the latter, as we have seen, concentrating almost parodically several of the serious themes of the novel. Boffin declares to Rokesmith, “I ain’t a scholar in much, Rokesmith, but I’m a pretty fair scholar in dust,” echoing Gaffer’s boast that he is scholar enough to “read” the posters on his wall (185). In short, both men can “read” the signs of their trades. But Boffin is something more. Like Charley Hexam, he seeks to acquire the information stored in books and hires Wegg to assist him in this venture; Wegg himself, though literate, is not the scholar he pretends to be. Boffin wants to enjoy the fruits of literature, but soon finds himself in “severe literary difficulties” (178). The first mention of his “literary” difficulties actually pertains to his inability to keep his records straight. It is for this that he hires Rokesmith as secretary, though he realizes that employing Rokesmith will evoke jealousy in “a literary man—with a wooden leg . . .” (182). But there is another sense in which Boffin has literary difficulties. “What to believe, in the course of his reading, was Mr. Boffin’s chief literary difficulty indeed . . .” (176). The written records he has listened to may provide historical truth, or simply be made-up tales. Without sufficient verification from many sources—another kind of redundancy—it is impossible to tell if a historical narrative is “true.” But Boffin soon manifests yet another connection with literature. He shifts his reading from history to biography, and specifically the biographies of misers.19 Seeming to accept these narratives as true accounts, he seeks out as many as he can in an attempt to validate the lifestyles of these men through a superfluous collection of information. We later learn that this is simply a ruse, but the ruse involves the transmitting of false signs for Wegg and Venus (and also Bella) to read—a kind of negative redundancy embedded in the larger narrative as a whole. Meanwhile, as he is sending these false signals, a “kind of illegibility” masks his own face (472). The once transparently readable Boffin has become a problem of interpretation. He is, in fact, creating a false narrative as potent as Riderhood’s, though ultimately with a benign motive. For all that, it is still a lie. When is a lying narrative justified? When it leads to a happy ending? All fiction is, by definition, lying narrative, and Dickens made his living by it, so he had every reason to defend his own practice.
Boffin is not the only individual who is a text. In his passionate scene of declaration to and refusal by Lizzie, Headstone identifies “the text” that most deeply concerns him as “Mr. Eugene Wrayburn” (399). It is Wrayburn himself who delivers the riff on reading, by which the narrator makes this significant theme directly apparent. Wrayburn has just commented on Lightwood’s “reading” of his weak character.

(Bye-the-bye, that very word, Reading, in its critical use, always charms me. An actress’s Reading of a chambermaid, a dancer’s Reading of a hornpipe, a singer’s Reading of a song, a marine painter’s Reading of the sea, the kettle-drum’s Reading of an instrumental passage, are phrases ever youthful and delightful.) (542)

If we hadn't figured it out before, this passage should help us to realize that reading is interpretation—the conversion of signs into expression, or the conversion of one set of signs into another, to be read in their turn by an audience of one sort or another. But what constitutes the appropriate material for an appropriate audience is often in doubt. In chapter 1 of Book Two entitled “Of an Educational Character,” the narrator deplores the inappropriate narratives used in the first school Charley Hexam attends. Young women old in vices read the highly moralistic Adventures of Little Margery, and young dredgers and hulking mudlarks read the experiences of Thomas Twopence. The members of this audience require far other texts than these. The narrator opens the chapter with a significant statement about what constitutes education.

The school at which young Charley Hexam had first learned from a book—the streets being, for pupils of his degree, the great preparatory Establishment in which very much that is never unlearned is learned without and before book—was a miserable loft in an unsavoury yard. (214)

You don't have to go to school to become a scholar of death posters or of dust. But you do have to “read” the signs around you and decode them accurately if you intend to survive. This, of course, is the message of the novel’s opening chapter.

Sometimes, however, it is necessary to read our own story before we try to interpret those of others. Hence, central to the narrative as a whole is a scene often regarded as clumsy by critics of this novel, in which John Harmon must tell himself his own story. Having left Pleasant Riderhood’s shop, Harmon finds himself walking in circles in the unfamiliar neighborhood and complains to himself: “This is like what I have read in narratives
of escape from prison,’ he said, ‘where the little track of the fugitives in the night always seems to take the shape of the great round world on which they wander; as if it were a secret law’” (364). Soon, however, Harmon sets about his own narration, which is about an escape not from prison but from death by drowning. This act of narrating to himself, might seem redundant, since one would suppose no one knows more about oneself than oneself. But such an assumption can be mistaken, as Bella’s case demonstrates. Harmon must reexamine his experience and read the signs anew from a changed perspective, something the narrator is constantly urging upon his readers. Thus Harmon’s narration is a model within the larger narrative of how to process data so that it becomes information containing meaning upon which to act. And act he does. At the end of this chapter Harmon declares his devotion for Bella and she rejects it, determining him to keep John Harmon down and let him remain dead. But, though readers are not privy to the fact, Harmon/Rokesmith has set a “secret law” in motion which will change the story of Bella’s life. She has disliked being written into a role through the will of old John Harmon, but has focused on marriage for wealth as the object of her existence. Her fantasies about ships bringing in a rich husband and carrying out Bella married to one are her projection of her life story. But these projections are wrong and she marries the “poor” Rokesmith instead. After the revelation of Rokesmith’s true identity, Mrs. Boffin concludes: “and here you are, and the horses is in, and the story is done, and God bless you, my beauty, and God bless us all” (774). But Bella is not content with this narrative and asks, “But is the story done?” and goes on to declare that she does not believe in Boffin’s miserliness, but that he took on such a role to force her into recognizing her better self, an account closer to the truth (774).

Harmon has told himself his life story and thereby empowered himself to rewrite Bella’s so that they both conclude with a happy ending. Boffin’s role playing was intended to misinform Wegg and thereby lead him to overreach himself, but it has had the additional benefit of teaching Bella her true self. She has been rescued by Harmon in a far subtler way than Lizzie rescues Wrayburn, but there is an interesting connection between the two cases. At one point Jenny interrogates Lizzie about her feelings for Wrayburn, and, in her familiar manner, she finds her own love story in “the hollow down by the flare” in the fireplace (348). Like Harmon, she tells herself her own story, but as she tells it, it is a hopeless projection into the future, for this love story involves a lady not a waterman’s daughter as the devoted companion to Wrayburn. Still, Lizzie, unknown to herself, has read the signs aright. She will end not only as Mrs. Wrayburn, but as Twemlow asserts, a lady as well.

To a great extent Our Mutual Friend is about being able to tell ourselves
our own life stories by correctly interpreting the signs. The novel is filled with characters who tell false tales for selfish ends—Wegg is a notable example, but the Lammles and Fledgeby are instances as well. Lightwood, Wrayburn, and Twemlow see no life stories for themselves, each being dominated, as John Harmon refuses to be, by a patriarchal directive. A realistic novel would be content to produce its narrative and perhaps allow the mirroring and contrasting of character types—a mode of redundancy too. But Dickens has embedded his redundancy not only in characterization and plotting, but in his very style, so that literal descriptions and figurative passages blend to convey an ever-increasing stream of data building to an inescapable message, though that message can only be read when all the signs the narrator has sent have been received. It seems to me that Dickens, though he could not use the language of information theory, intuitively understood the nature of his endeavor and how it differed from what was coming to be defined as realism. Part of his reason for resisting the conventions of realism, was his desire to retain control of his own narrative. As George Levine and others have suggested, to be true to itself realism had to have the appearance of not being tightly structured, since real life itself was perceived, in the realist worldview, not to be so structured (11). But Dickens, while he embraced the detailed recording of the material world in the manner of the realists, was not comfortable with the mode of realism. He wanted a world more intense than real life and yet potentially more under control, hence his famous remark to Wilkie Collins that a novelist resembles providence. Dickens’s late fiction can be likened to the late operas of Richard Wagner. Other musicians had used musical motifs to reinforce a “meaning” in their music, but Wagner so developed the concept of the musical motif that it became a language in its own right, and his operas were correctly “readable” only by those who had mastered the recurrent, varying, and interlocking motifs into a highly over-determined design. Wagner’s operas benefit from the concept of redundancy in music as Our Mutual Friend does, I believe, in fiction.

That Dickens knew full well how his use of redundancy with its proliferation of signs worked, his Postscript to the novel indicates. Some readers and commentators, he says, suppose that he was trying to conceal the fact that Rokesmith was Harmon, whereas that is what he was encouraging his readers to discover; it is, he writes, “in the interests of art, to hint to an audience that an artist (of whatever denomination) may perhaps be trusted to know what he is about in his vocation, if they will concede him a little patience. . . . To keep for a long time unsuspected, yet always working itself out, another purpose originating in that leading incident, and turning it to a pleasant and useful account at last, was the most interesting and the most difficult part of my design” (821). This difficulty is increased because one
cannot expect that serial readers “will, until they have it before them com-
plete, perceive the relations of its finer threads to the whole pattern which is
always before the eyes of the story-weaver at his loom” (821). What I have
tried to do in this chapter is to look at Dickens’s often-examined narrative
from a somewhat novel perspective in order that those finer threads might
be more clearly discerned.