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Luc Bouvard, Marie-Amélie Coste, Christine Huguet, Nathalie Vanfasse

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Dickens in the New Millennium

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Foreword

Luc Bouvard, Marie-Amélie Coste, Christine Huguet and Nathalie Vanfasse

- 1 A few thought-provoking and challenging questions provided the starting point for this collection of essays: is Charles Dickens still worth reading in the twenty-first century and if so, why? Shouldn't we be wondering whether he is still read at all, particularly outside schoolrooms and academic spheres? At a time of increasing globalisation, a stance like that of Professor and writer Lafcadio Hearn, who discouraged students from reading Dickens at the University of Tokyo in 1900 because he considered the world described in his books too different from Japanese realities, no longer holds.¹ The Victorian world and its most prominent writers are now known in most parts of the world, albeit superficially. This comforting news nevertheless raises a new set of problems and paradoxes. Dickens is indeed often familiar to people who have never opened any of his books and are aware of him only through film or radio adaptations, musicals and other by-products. Does this Dickens industry serve his work at all or does it draw the public further away from it? The aim of this volume is to consider how Dickens's fiction is understood, interpreted and taught nowadays, and whether it answers twenty-first-century concerns. The essays collected here also examine how today's public views the mid-Victorian period through Dickens's writing.
- 2 The first section of the volume presents creative ways of making a start on Dickens in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Zelma Catalan's and Marianne Camus's essays focus on teaching Dickens, while Maria Cristina Paganoni stresses the relevance of Dickens's work in the information age. Offering a close reading of Bulgarian textbooks, Zelma Catalan challenges the expected notion that attitudes towards the teaching of foreign texts have changed radically since the communist regime collapsed. She shows how Dickens's novels were first used in foreign secondary schools to expose the worst ideological and pedagogical stances of Western capitalist culture and therefore to teach students how to resist them, and secondly, after the collapse of communism—during what Michael Kennedy called 'transition culture'—to focus on the role of imagination within a teaching context. Marianne Camus describes astute strategies aimed at coaxing French students—increasingly reluctant to open what they view, to speak like Henry James, as loose baggy monsters—into reading Dickens's novels and discovering how helpful and valuable these works still are when it comes to improving their self-

knowledge and their understanding of the past and the present. Camus's tips, based on clever and subtle connections between the student's experience and Dickens's world, provide an invaluable stepping-stone to novel narrative approaches. Paganoni's essay too is concerned with narrative stances, emphasising as it does striking resemblances between Dickensian narrative techniques and specific features of today's digital culture, for instance online network games. Her article provides fascinating insights into the way information technology, via multimodality, new conceptions of time and space, and users who are both recipients and co-authors, can lead to innovative ways of presenting Dickens's work to a twenty-first-century audience.

- 3 The visual potentialities of Dickens's work, already alluded to in the first section of this volume and increasingly exploited nowadays, are further developed in the next section devoted to iconic and cinematic Dickens. Laurent Bury draws attention to little-known twentieth-century engravings for *Bleak House* by Mervyn Peake and wonders whether Dickens's novels deserve new illustrations which might unveil new and as yet unheeded interpretations. Chris Louttit's and Mario Martino's analyses of film adaptations of *Oliver Twist* raise stimulating questions on the relations between the novel and its cinematic avatars. Chris Louttit points out that, even in films where David Lean's key 1948 rendering fails to be openly acknowledged, later directors continue to refer us back to it, thus transforming it into some kind of unavoidable intermediary stage between Dickens's work and all later screen versions. Louttit goes on to note that by-products seem to be gradually replacing the works themselves. For instance, the opening scene from Lean's film, which does not feature in the novel, is nonetheless frequently and all the more paradoxically quoted by subsequent filmmakers and film critics as being a quintessential part of Dickens's Urtext. Louttit and Martino analyse a number of free adaptations of *Oliver Twist*, which set the story in twenty-first-century South Africa or in New York, thereby infusing it with new meanings related to today's culture and society. Martino also considers how other forms of screen adaptation, like Carol Reed's 1968 filmic musical *Oliver!* or George Scribner's 1988 Walt Disney cartoon *Oliver & Company*, freely draw from Dickens's novel, further transforming its reading in the process.
- 4 Reading Dickensian texts is precisely the issue which David Paroissien, Dominic Rainsford and Nathalie Jaëck address in the following part of this volume. David Paroissien's essay reminds us of the value Dickens himself attributed to reading, and it uses *Our Mutual Friend* as a perfect example of the way reading feeds and broadens the mind, and has multifarious healing powers. Paroissien aptly emphasises how fulfilling, enriching and even edifying the act of reading is within Dickens's fiction but also for Dickens's readers, but he also hints at the deceit and power relations storytelling can conceal. Dominic Rainsford further explores the reception of Dickens's novels through nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century reactions to so-called Dickensian sentimentality. Rainsford interestingly shows how modern critics of Dickens's sentimentality, epitomised in the depiction of Little Nell, missed the maturity and reflexiveness of his approach to the concept. Dickens may well have been more modern than the modern: Little Nell's over-emotional characterisation, blamed for being excessively idealistic, may not be so different at bottom from more restrained and minimalist but just as intense reactions to similar experiences of death and suffering in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It shows us the unavoidable distortions of our subjective views, our inability to comprehend the real as it really is and our strategies to cope with the unmanageable dimension of human experience. This reflection on the

reception of Dickens's work is continued in Nathalie Jaëck's essay, which raises two interesting generic issues. First, she suggests that in three of Dickens's novels—*Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House*—one finds a double narrating stance going in opposite directions, one constructing the Realist agenda and the other deconstructing it. Secondly, she adapts to her own Dickensian preoccupations a notion which is based on as yet unexploited comments made by early twentieth-century French critics writing for the prestigious *Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF) on nineteenth-century British novelists. These critics rhapsodised about British writers' skill in avoiding the constrictions of realism to develop a new genre not just, or even no longer about adventure, but adventurous in its very form. Jaëck analyses this 'adventure of writing' in a series of perceptive readings of Dickens's novels.

- 5 Scientific Dickens is the topic tackled in the next section of this volume on *Dickens in the New Millennium*. Carole Koepke Brown, Philip Allingham, Wayne Melville and Max Véga-Ritter show the contribution that science and the history of science still bring to the interpretation of Dickens's work today. Carole Koepke Brown revisits *Our Mutual Friend* and sheds new light on the portrait of Jenny Wren by using discoveries and rediscoveries from the history of mental sciences. Her essay skilfully demonstrates how Dickens seems to have turned a well-known medical case of ecstasy tended by the French doctor and pioneer Antoine Despine into a meaningful narrative, thus endowing one of his characters with greater and finer psychological depth. Wayne Melville and Philip Allingham compare nineteenth-century disputes about the sources of cholera epidemics with today's heated scientific debates about the existence and causes of global warming. They highlight Dickens's role in popularising scientific discoveries of his time, fighting vested interests and promoting political action in favour of public health reforms. In so doing, they draw attention to other facets, still topical, of Dickens as a journalist and committed artist, deeply interested and involved in the social issues of his time and in the scientific questions related to them. The theme of medical science in Dickens's writing, already tackled via mental sciences and epidemiology in Brown's essay and in Allingham and Melville's contribution, is further explored by Max Véga-Ritter, who resorts to recent psychoanalytical theory to re-examine ambivalent father figures and the enigma of male identity in Dickens's fiction.
- 6 The next section of *Dickens in the New Millennium* explores another contribution to Dickens's legacy in the form of Dickensian doubles. Joel Brattin shows that beyond the obvious doubling of characters and cities in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the novel entirely relies upon doubles—in its conception, title, chapter titles, cover illustration, structure, imagery, dialogue, themes and even mode of publication. This process, Brattin argues, is indicative of a quintessentially Dickensian vision of the world, at one and the same time realistic and idealistic, and in which doubles are split selves but also express hopeful harmony and balance. Other likenesses contribute to the diversity and vitality of Dickens's legacy, namely neo-Dickensian fiction. André DeCuir not only traces alternative versions of Dickens's *Christmas Carol* back to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (which he sees as a starting point of rewritings which continue in various forms today), he also claims that Brontë's novel elaborates on the darker sides of Dickens's writing—an aspect of his work he conspicuously builds on in his later novels. Clotilde De Stasio and Georges Letissier concentrate on more recent rewritings. De Stasio analyses Matthew Pearl's reappraisal of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in his recent historical thriller *The Last Dickens* (2009) and connects it to recent critical trends and to current debates about the canon and the hierarchy of genres within it. Georges

Letissier analyses neo-Dickensian novels in the perspective of global, not just Western, literature. His essay shows how Dickens's work has been adapted to different cultural and geographical backgrounds, from the New York punk scene in the early eighties to a distant Pacific island at the dawn of the new millennium. Like De Stasio, Letissier points out the connection between such rewritings and changing critical approaches to Dickens's work: deconstructive, gender-oriented or postcolonial. He also raises perceptive questions as to the link such adaptations establish with their model. Are they pale imitations or masterful reworkings of the original? Are they genuinely artistic or merely opportunistic? And do they stand on their own or do they induce readers to refer to the original work?

- 7 In the last section of this volume, Alain Jumeau, Jennifer Gribble and Nancy Metz study a selection of metanarratives Dickens used to decipher the signs of his times. Alain Jumeau examines *Great Expectations* as a pre-postmodern rewriting of *The Odyssey* and shows that Dickens adapted a traditional metanarrative to his vision of a world, which precluded epic heroism and suggested that a return to a stable way of life was no longer thinkable. Jennifer Gribble analyses Dickens's apocalyptic message in *Dombey and Son* as a way of exploring questions no less relevant in today's late capitalist society than they were in the 1850s. Nancy Metz shows how Dickens used nineteenth-century geologists' dominant and opposing schools of thought—gradualism and catastrophism—to express an idiosyncratic and complex view of change in his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*. This vision, in which explosions paradoxically originate from apparent stability and satisfying closure is counteracted by unsettling uncertainty, still resonates with meaning in the twenty-first century.
- 8 In conclusion, besides delineating many new and promising approaches and illustrating the richness and vitality of Dickens's afterlife, the essays in this volume show how relevant but also how rewarding and enriching Dickens's work still is in this new millennium.

NOTES

1. This anecdote is mentioned by Toru Sasaki in an article entitled "Ghosts in a Christmas Carol: a Japanese View" (www.soc.nii.ac.jp/dickens/archive/cb/carol/carol-sasaki.pdf).

AUTHORS

LUC BOUVARD

Luc Bouvard is Lecturer in English Studies and Cinema at the University of Montpellier 3 – Paul-Valéry and specialises in Victorian and film studies. He wrote a Ph. D. about film adaptations of Dickens's novels. The articles he has published so far include: 'Pip's Confessions: from Paper to Film,' 'There are Kisses for us all: le défilé des jeunes hommes' in relation to Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*, 'Kes et Billy Elliot: imitation et dépassement' published in the volume entitled *L'imitation au cinéma, Actes du 8^e Congrès de la SERCiA*, which he co-edited. He is a member of the SERCiA and the SFEVE as well as co-chief editor of the *Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens*

Marie-Amélie Coste is Lecturer in Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles, notably preparing students for the entrance exams to Écoles Normales Supérieures. She holds a Ph.D., entitled 'Being and Appearing in Charles Dickens's Novels', from the University of Paris-Sorbonne. She has published several articles on Dickens, including 'Wearing and Disfiguring in Charles Dickens's Novels' (*Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens*, 2006), 'Eugene Wrayburn or the Unbearable Lightness of Being in Dickens' (*Dickensian*, 2010), 'Literal-minded British and Stereotypical Foreigners in Dickens: the Limits of National Identity and the Definition of the Personal' (*Dickens and Italy*, 2010). She is currently co-editing two special issues entitled *Dickens Matters* and *Dickens His/story* for the *Dickens Quarterly*.

Christine Huguet is a Senior Lecturer at Université Charles-de-Gaulle Lille 3. She is a member of CECILLE, SFEVE, SAES, ESSE, Dickens Fellowship (London Branch) and Dickens Society (in the capacity of Trustee). She has published extensively on Victorian literature. She is the editor of a collection of short stories by, and essays on, George Gissing (*Spellbound, George Gissing, Equilibris*, 2008) and of *Writing Otherness: The Pathways of George Gissing's Imagination* (Equilibris, 2011). She has translated Dickens's *Christmas Carol* (*Un chant de Noël, Le Livre de Poche*, 2009). She is the curator of the Dickens Exhibition (The Inimitable Charles Dickens, 28 May-23 October 2011, Centre Culturel de l'Entente Cordiale, Château d'Hardelot at Condette) and editor of the exhibition catalogue, *The Inimitable Charles Dickens* (Democratic Books, 2011). She is currently co-editing *George Moore: Across Borders* (Rodopi) and *Gissing and the Woman Question: Convention and Dissent*.

Nathalie Vanfasse is a Professor of English literature at the Université de Provence (Aix-Marseille Université). She graduated from the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Paris-Sorbonne. She is a member of the Dickens Fellowship (London and New York Branches) and a Trustee of the Dickens Society. She has published a monograph entitled *Dickens entre normes et déviance* (Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2007) and articles and chapters on Dickens's work and on nineteenth-century travel writing. She has also edited and co-edited volumes on *Social Deviance in England and in France circa 1830-1900* (*Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens*, 2005), the South in Anglo-American travel writing (*L'Appel du Sud dans la littérature de voyage anglophone*, Éditions A3, 2009), *Cultural Transformations in the English Speaking World* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), and she is currently co-editing a volume on *Provence in the British Imagination* as well as two special issues entitled *Dickens Matters* and *Dickens His/story* for the *Dickens Quarterly*.