

CHAPTER 10

Fictional Dickens

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Much as Charles Dickens's own characters have appeared in various forms since their textual debuts – as discussed with relation to Miss Havisham in Chapter 4, Rosa Bud in Chapter 5, Little Nell in Chapter 7, and the full cast of *Great Expectations* in Chapter 9 – Dickens himself has been fictionalised in diverse ways throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Some of these appearances are vastly popular among audiences who might not be particularly well versed in the author's works, and do not aim for biographical specificity (for example, Gonzo's turn as the Dickens-narrator in *The Muppet Christmas Carol* [1992], or Simon Callow as Dickens in an episode of *Doctor Who*, 'The Unquiet Dead' [2005]). Others have trod the line between biography and fiction unevenly, being read (and reviewed) as pure biography rather than biofiction, causing dedicated Dickensians some headaches but being popularly received as fact. The line between biofiction and biography has long been blurred: as Michael Lackey notes, one of the foundational definitions of biofiction drawn from Carl Bode's 1955 essay suggests that, 'if a biography is either bad or stylized, then it would qualify as a biographical novel' (Lackey 4); Georg Lukács had said something similar in his 1937 study *The Historical Novel*, suggesting that the subject's 'character is inevitably exaggerated, made to stand on tiptoe, his historical calling unduly emphasized ... the personal, the purely psychological and biographical acquire a disproportionate breadth, a false preponderance' (314–21). That the biographical novel might be *too* biographical is a striking claim. So

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too does the question of style and stylisation demand attention. It might not seem overly surprising that biofiction heightens the personal, building its story around the ripples one person might effect on the world around them, much as biography does. What makes the study of fictional Dickens, much like other adaptations of his texts and characters, of interest is that these representations have been present in the popular imagination for a long time, often coalescing around new discoveries or anniversaries but maintaining a steady presence throughout the last century and contributing – sometimes very consciously and deliberately – to a continual shaping and reshaping of Dickens's legacy.

In the case of Dickens, the aims of biofiction are often set against the context and aims of neo-Victorian fiction: as explored in Chapter 4 and in the work of Cora Kaplan, neo-Victorian texts are characterised by their ability to critique the past but also to apply a contemporary lens. As such, to be too biographical is to ignore the wider demands of a genre that seeks to revise and reformulate our relationship to the past, rather than solidify it. Kaplan suggests Dickens 'stalks his virtual world and makes guest appearances in our own' (81), and this can be understood in two ways: first, Dickens's use, as in *Doctor Who*, as a kind of legitimising figure in representations of the Victorian period, and, in the context of the role of the neo-Victorian, as both commentator and subject of critique for the contemporary world. In the words of Georges Letissier, 'many post-Victorian novels are written *after*, or *against* [Dickens]' (113). In the case of Dickens, this might be stylistically, or an attempt to navigate the difficulties of the author's morality and how it might be brought to bear on his works: his treatment of his wife, Catherine, in their separation in 1858 has come under much biographical and biofictional scrutiny, as has his affair with Ellen Ternan, lasting from around the time of the separation to his death in 1870.¹

This chapter will not attempt to catalogue exhaustively all of the many biofictional Dickens that have appeared, but will explore some of the trends in Dickensian biofiction, with a particular focus on the earliest Dickens biofiction, a slight volume titled *The Battle of London Life: Or, Boz and His Secretary* (1849), produced during Dickens's lifetime and little-known since. I will also gesture briefly to the changing face of Dickens in recent years, as a new wave of representations emerges following the bicentenary of Dickens's birth in 2012. Commentators of biofiction trace its rise primarily to the 1960s; as Lackey notes, prior to this (and for some time after), biofiction was interpreted in relation to biography rather than fiction. As such, I will explore how these earlier biofictions interact with contemporaneous approaches to the biographical Dickens.

Cannibalising Dickens

In addition to the more mainstream appearances already mentioned (to which we might also add Ralph Fiennes's turn as Dickens in the 2013 film *The Invisible*

Woman, an adaptation of Claire Tomalin's biography of the same name), Dickens has also appeared as a character in several lesser-known novels and plays, including (but not limited to): a Mills and Boon novel published in 1928 called *This Side Idolatry* by 'Ephesian', otherwise known as C.E. Bechhofer Roberts, in which the long-suffering Catherine Dickens finally gets to say what is on her mind and accuses her husband of 'cant' and 'hypocrisy' (*This Side Idolatry* 319); *The Master of Gadshill: Dickens Returns to Youth. A Drama in Three Acts*, performed in 1935, in which Dickens falls in love with a woman named Dora Spenslow (named after the character from *David Copperfield* [1850]), but is not able to marry her; novels by W.V.Y. Dale (*I Rest My Claims*, 1948) and Hebe Elsna (*Consider These Women*, 1954, and *Unwanted Wife: A Defence of Mrs Charles Dickens*, 1963), within which the writers are similarly primarily concerned with Catherine Dickens; *Girl in a Blue Dress* by Gaynor Arnold (2008) (which is tenuously described as biofiction, given that Dickens and his wife are transformed into Alfred and Dorothea Gibson, aligning Catherine almost as much with the Dorothea of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* [1871] as her biographical counterpart); *Wanting* by Richard Flanagan (2008), which, among other things, looks at the influence of the Franklin expedition on Dickens; *Drood* by Dan Simmons (2009); *The Last Dickens* by Matthew Pearl (2009);² Dickens as a non-playable character in the videogame *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), in which he forms 'The Ghost Club' and gives tasks to the assassins to complete; *The Murder of Patience Brooke* (2014) by J. C. Briggs, and its sequels, in which Dickens solves crimes; and *Death and Mr Pickwick* by Stephen Jarvis (2014), which explores his relationship with the original *Pickwick* artist, Robert Seymour.³ Among these contrasting and varied texts, three central themes emerge.

First, the issue of Dickens's relationships with women forms the troubled centre of several of these biofictions, and Dickens is rarely depicted in a positive light. In the 1920s and 1930s, as rumours about Dickens's affair with Ellen Ternan surfaced, aided by Thomas Wright's biography of Dickens (published in 1935 but compiled earlier), biofiction centred on his romantic relationships with women: as mentioned, *This Side Idolatry* permitted Catherine to confront Dickens in a way that she never has, before or since, in biography. A selection of Dickens's correspondence with Maria Beadnell, his first love, was published in America in 1908 by the Boston Bibliophile Society. An English edition would not appear until 1934, after the last of Dickens's children had died, and was followed in 1935 by a three-act play, *The Master of Gadshill: Dickens Returns to Youth*, which used the letters as inspiration.

Dickens met Beadnell in 1830, before his literary career had even begun; he was only 18. She was the daughter of a banker and he was a promising young reporter, first at Doctor's Common Courts and later a reporter of parliamentary debates. Dickens was passionately in love, writing her bad poetry and declaring his love for her, but the tentative relationship came to an end in 1833, perhaps because her parents viewed him as too young (he was two years her junior) or in light of his father's pecuniary embarrassments. She is often suggested to be

the inspiration for David Copperfield's first wife, Dora Spenlow; the 1908 edition reinforced this connection with the half-title 'Charles Dickens and Maria Beadnell ("Dora")'. Beadnell died in 1886, but the letters remained private until the 1908 American edition.

The subsequent delay in the publication of Dickens's letters in England was largely due to the actions of Georgina Hogarth, Dickens's sister-in-law. Arthur A. Adrian describes a range of incidents in the same vein, including Hogarth, positioned by Adrian as the 'Guardian of the Beloved Memory', writing to Thomas Wright to ask him not to publish what he had learned about Dickens's relationship with Ellen (239), and her publication of a newspaper statement saying that Dickens had never known the Duke of Portland in response to the notorious Druce trial (239–40), in which Mary Ann Robinson claimed to have known Dickens and to have been introduced to the duke by him. Hogarth had a particular investment in Dickens's letters and strong views about what should be made public and what should be kept private, having become the proprietor of Dickens's papers under the terms of his will and having published a carefully edited and censored edition of his letters, together with his eldest daughter, Mamie, in 1880.⁴ However, Hogarth had died in 1917, and, with the publication of the Beadnell letters and Wright's damning biography, the shape of Dickens biofiction had radically altered.

The 1935 play in which Dickens falls in love with Dora Spenlow was clearly influenced by Dickens's relationship with Beadnell and the publication of the letters. Both of them are relationships that predate his connection with Catherine Hogarth, and in both cases he meets his love again, many years later. In reality, Dickens was disappointed by the way that Beadnell had changed in the 24 years since he had last seen her, and she was satirised in the 'diffuse and silly' Flora Finching of *Little Dorrit* (150). Maria, by this time Mrs Henry Winter, contacted Dickens in 1855 and they met secretly without their respective spouses. In spite of Maria warning Dickens that she had aged, he seems to have been dramatically disappointed in their meeting, expecting her to have been unchanged. Although they did meet again, *with* their spouses, Dickens avoided further intimacy with her. The meeting in the play is similarly uncomfortable:

DICKENS

Let me explain. – As Mrs. Hedstone, you are a very bewitching woman; but it was the vision of Dora Spenlow that enchanted me. Do I make myself quite clear?

DORA

Oh yes, quite clear. I'm no longer the Dora of eighteen; and now the woman of forty is almost a stranger.

DICKENS

Not a stranger. ... Just a reminder that youth doesn't last forever.
(*The Master of Gadshill* 98)

Dora offers to have an affair with Dickens, who turns her down. As such, she threatens to publish ‘Dora’s Resurrection’, to tell her side of the story (note too that she is married to a man named Hedstone, who is jealous of the relationship, modelled after the jealous lover Bradley Headstone of *Our Mutual Friend* [1865]). While the play moves the focus to the women around Dickens, it seems more concerned with vindicating him: he turns down Dora, and seeks only friendship from a young, beautiful, blonde prostitute named Caroline Bronson whom he finds injured in the street. Dickens is very much the chivalrous hero of the play, seduced by the prospect of a glimpse of the past but ultimately gallant and appropriate in the present.

The anxiety over letters and blackmail also speaks to the Dickens family’s concerns at this time about controlling the publication of letters and biographical accounts. *This Side Idolatry* was vigorously defended by its author: Dickens’s son Henry was ‘worried to death’ about its publication, seeing it as a ‘challenge’ to him (Storey, note 9 September 1928): this speaks to biofiction’s close alignment to biography at that time, and the power it was thought to hold. The press also asked to have Henry’s ‘answer’ to the author to publish. Though it is clear that the line between biofiction and biography was particularly thin during the 1920s and 1930s, the issue of Dickens and women recurs in biofiction of the 1950s, 1960s, 1990s and 2000s. Dickens’s treatment of women, also addressed in Chapters 2, 4, 5, and 7 of this volume, is a topic that cannot be fully resolved. The play attempts, in an admittedly unmasterful way, to capture the different sides of Dickens’s relationships with women through the figures of Dora and Caroline. His dismissal of Dora, no longer young and beautiful, echoes Dickens’s repeated use of such dollish young women in his fiction, but his redemptive friendship with Caroline captures another Dickens: the social reformer, friend of the poor. Part of the interest in the Dickens women is also an interest in author’s circles and spheres of influence, whether familial, literary, or broader, which I will now turn to in connecting to other trends in Dickens biofiction.

The second and third threads both deal with anxieties around influence. Firstly, Dickensian biofiction seems to take an extraordinarily literal approach to Dickens’s influences. The 1935 play, although it took its cues from the newly published letters, imagined Dickens *knowing* Dora Spenslow – not someone *like* her but her herself. Imaginative uses of Dickens do not credit Dickens with much imagination, and this has been more or less consistent across the decades and centuries. The 1849 biofiction *The Battle of London Life* also shows Dickens’s reliance on real-life events, while in the video game *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* you assassinate a James Jasper who has gone mad (and who has a nephew called *Edward*, mirroring John Jasper and Edwin Drood), and the character of Dickens tells you that he wants to adapt the story into a novel. Even the *Doctor Who* storyline built around Dickens credits his experience as the Doctor’s sidekick with reviving his enthusiasm and inspiring the creation of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), while a further episode of the series set in Victorian

London involves a megalosaurus walking the streets, using the powerful opening image of *Bleak House* (1853) ('As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn-hill' [11]) to both legitimise Victorian London and play with the boundaries of fiction and reality. One of Dickens's most powerful images is thus literalised, and Dickens's genius is reduced to observation rather than imaginative creation.

As well as what may have influenced Dickens, later biofiction seems particularly concerned with the dangers of influence. As I have explored for the *Journal of Victorian Culture Online* (2015), Jarvis's *Death and Mr Pickwick* was received with some indignation because of its suggestion that Dickens drove Seymour to suicide over the *Pickwick* illustrations. This sparked some strong reactions in the Dickensian community, which centred on appropriate commemoration of the anniversary of Dickens's death and emphasis on Dickens's heroic actions at the Staplehurst rail crash. Jarvis's book, based on his own research but fictionalised into an engaging detective novel, pictures the young Charles Dickens as an ambitious bully and thief, manipulating illustrator Robert Seymour and eventually resulting in his suicide, and then obscuring Seymour's role in creating *The Pickwick Papers* (1836). For some, Jarvis's book forms part of a recent trend of publications denigrating Dickens, otherwise known as 'Dickens bashing'.

What do we mean by Dickens bashing? For those who find Jarvis's work problematic, the issue lies in the perception that there is a tendency in recent years to ignore all the good of Dickens's work for social reform, his philanthropy and the excellence of his novels in favour of personal attacks on his character. However, Dickens bashing is not a recent trend. Although the last decade has seen several publications that look at the darker side of his character (such as Lillian Nayder's *The Other Dickens* [2011], a biography of Dickens's wife, Catherine, that highlights his unfair treatment of her), Dickens's affair was not the great secret, even during his life, that many have thought. Patrick Leary's 'How the Dickens Scandal Went Viral' (2013) describes American rumours about Dickens's split from Catherine, showing that Ellen Ternan's name appeared in American newspapers in connection to Dickens in the late 1850s. In Britain, her name was mostly hidden until the early 20th century and the appearance of a spate of biographies and accounts from the 1930s onwards. Biographer Thomas Wright had begun his research in the 1890s, though he did not publish his controversial *Life of Charles Dickens* until 1935, after the last of Dickens's children had died and those personally involved were long gone. Following on Wright's heels, Gladys Storey's *Dickens and Daughter* (1939) was a revealing biography of Dickens and his daughter Kate. As such, there is a cluster of biographical and biofictional accounts appearing in the 1930s, following on from the publication of *This Side Idolatry* in 1928.

Bechhofer Roberts had been a contributing writer for the *Dickensian* magazine, and was connected to the Dickens Fellowship, itself dedicated to promoting and preserving Dickens and Dickens scholarship. He had written biographies of Winston Churchill and Lord Birkenhead – significantly biographies, not biofiction. *This Side Idolatry* was something different, but confusion was, unsurprisingly, fostered by its advertisement as a new book by a known biographer. The novel begins much like any biography, outlining Dickens's birth and childhood. The young Charles's ambition quickly becomes central, and his need for admiration and his weakness for adulation are highlighted. Throughout the novel, Dickens's self-love, his callous treatment of his wife, and his insecurities are the focus. The novel culminates in an (entirely fictional) argument between Dickens and his wife, Catherine, in which she finally accuses him of the cant and hypocrisy that he has set his career against. At the novel's close, we are told that John Forster, Dickens's friend and first key biographer in the 1870s, 'established the tradition that Charles, the Inimitable Boz, had ever shown himself in his life as in his work the uncompromising foe of Cant, Hypocrisy and Humbug. Kate still kept her silence' (319). The book highlights the central role of biography in forming reputation, while also eschewing the form.

The heyday of Dickens bashing, then, would seem to be the 1920s and 1930s, spurred on by the thinning numbers of Dickens's immediate family and closest friends who would – and could – defend the author's name, considering that he had died over 50 years before. A response to *This Side Idolatry*, published in the *Dickensian*, gave this cutting reply: 'For our own part, in making an estimate of the personal character of Dickens, we prefer to pin our faith to the opinions of those who met him in daily concourse; only such opinions count' (1). Unfortunately for those keen to preserve Dickens's reputation, another challenger, Gladys Storey's *Dickens and Daughter*, was based on interviews with someone who knew Dickens better than most. In this account, we hear about daughter Kate's 'poor, poor mother' and the existence of an illegitimate child fathered by Dickens. Although Kate expressed her love for her father, through her we see that he was a deeply flawed man. The Dickensians who had held to the 'true' accounts given by Dickens's family and friends now had a problem, and the *Dickensian* response was that the book 'showed Mrs. Perugini in a not very worthy light' (Ley 250). Kate's account was set against those given by her siblings, and the conclusion was that, weighing up the evidence, 'It does not ring true' (253). Dickens's own daughter was discounted, because she contradicted the image that the Dickens Fellowship had been working to maintain since its creation in 1902, and that the family had been striving to establish for decades before. Thus, Dickens bashing is certainly not a 20th- or 21st-century invention; its roots can be found at least as far back as George Henry Lewes's infamous article 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism' (1872), and the third volume of Forster's *Life* (1874) is characterised by its attempted defence of Dickens – from Lewes, from the French critic H. A. Taine, and from public condemnation of the end of his marriage.

Continuing the trend of biofictional accounts concerned with influence, Simmons's *Drood* explores the difficult relationship between Dickens and Wilkie Collins against a backdrop of Dickens's obsession with a supernatural figure named 'Drood' who also infects Wilkie's life following the Staplehurst railway disaster of 1865. The story is told by Collins himself, an unreliable narrator influenced by opium. The plot hinges on mesmeric influence, drawing from Dickens's own experiences, with clear ramifications for Collins's own writing. There is the implicit suggestion that Dickens has furnished, both through the events of Simmons's novel and through his manipulations, the plot of *The Moonstone* in Collins's mind.⁵ Both men are characterised by modes of literary creation that are heavily reliant on experience: for example, Dickens and Collins work with a Detective Hatchery, who becomes Collins's inspiration for *The Moonstone*'s (1868) Sergeant Cuff ("A privately employed detective," I muttered. The idea had wonderful possibilities' [Simmons 67]), while the name 'Hatchery' itself echoes the 'Datchery' of *Edwin Drood*. Imagination is portrayed as dangerous; the climax of the novel is a dream sequence in which Collins murders his famous friend. Dickens is, once again, positioned as a sinister manipulator in his relationship with his friend and collaborator.

Another way to conceive of these threads is as a preoccupation with *cannibalising* Dickens. *Drood* and the 2008 novel *Wanting* invoke Dickens's defence of the Franklin expedition and refutation of the charges of cannibalism levelled against the explorers directly,⁶ but there are also several different senses at play here: first to make Dickens into a villain, a cannibal himself; second to suggest he cannibalises his friends and his life in his fiction, often cruelly (as in the case of Maria Beadnell); and thirdly the authors of biofiction cannibalising Dickens's works and his life in their own fiction, attempting to draw out the vital organs of the Dickensian Dickens. In this search for the crux of Dickens – as a man, as an author, and as a biographical or fictional subject – many seem to take up the same theme, that of the importance for Dickens of *consuming* the life around him. This idea that Dickens is consuming life, most often in the sense that he is writing about what he observes, is made darkly comic and disturbing in Martin McDonagh's 2018 play, *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*, which renders the imperialism of the Victorian period very literally in having Dickens and Hans Christian Andersen force two imprisoned Congolese women to write their works. The play itself is merciless in its satirisation of these two canonical writers, but the revelation that these women are time travellers (who have come to attempt to prevent the atrocities committed in the Congo from 1885 to 1908) problematises the act of literary creation: did they remember the novels from the future and recreate them, or is there something modern about the stories themselves, brought back in time? (Though, admittedly, the play does not take on these issues itself, instead presenting a post-colonial jab at the problematic inheritances and legacies of the British canon.)

Influence, genius, imagination

The Battle of London Life: Or, Boz and His Secretary (1849), as the first Dickens biofiction, is revealing in how it approaches these questions of influence. The title is obviously punning on Dickens's 1846 story *The Battle of Life*, immediately paralleling the fictional with the biographical. The author, Thomas O'Keefe, was an Irish captain rather than an established biographer or fiction writer, while George Augustus Sala, who would go on to have a close working relationship with Dickens as contributor to his journals *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*, provided the illustrations. The story itself shows Dickens moving from the 'Ideal' to the 'Natural' in his writing, because of the influence of his amanuensis, a strangely off-putting character who turns out to be a police inspector in disguise investigating Dickens's involvement with the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini; Dickens had written 'An Appeal to the English People on Behalf of the Italian Refugees' in 1849, and became publicly identified with the Italian cause at this time. There are a series of stories-within-the-story, including, interestingly, a story of brotherly vengeance involving a married couple called Charles and Catherine.

Biofiction of a living author in the Victorian period is rather rare, and this text is all the more striking for Dickens's own reticence to share details of his life; a short piece identified as the first biographical notice of Dickens to appear, 'Life of Boz' (*Town*, August 1840), suggests his life was 'perfectly smooth' (1358) and that his career 'has been altogether unchequered by those numberless rubs of fortune, those changes and chances which rarely fail to wait on the footsteps of those who reap a precarious subsistence from the pen' (1358). This is captured by another piece, which is a sort of speculative anti-biofiction: Nathaniel Hawthorne's sketch 'P's Correspondence' (1845), which imagines that Dickens had died young, before finishing *The Pickwick Papers* (meanwhile, Lord Byron and Napoleon Bonaparte are still living). The few sentences on Dickens's lost potential conclude that 'Not impossibly the world has lost more than it dreams of by the untimely death of this Mr. Dickens' (416–17). After his death, it would become known that he had worked in a factory (briefly) as a child, but, in the 1840s, Dickens was still in the early years of his fame and forging his identity as a novelist.⁷

Revelations about Dickens's childhood experience crystallised how his imaginative powers were viewed: Robert Buchanan in his article 'The "Good Genie" of Fiction: Thoughts while Reading Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens*' for *St Paul's Magazine* (February 1872) took the incident and turned it into the shaping influence of the author's life, suggesting that Dickens's 'odd' view of life was a result of his childhood experience: 'It may seem putting the case too strongly, but Charles Dickens, having crushed into his childish experience a whole world of sorrow and humorous insight, so loaded his soul that he never grew any older' (579). This is fairly typical of the shape of Dickensian criticism

and psychoanalysis towards the end of the 19th century, and biographies often highlight the author's powers of observation, for example Forster's claim that Dickens was 'keenly observant', uniting this with 'touches of humorous fancy' (816) or Sala's later claim that he 'look[ed] seemingly neither to the right nor the left, but of a surety looking at and into everything – now at the myriad aspects of London life, the ever-changing raree-show, the endless round-about' (9). This vision of Dickens, the observer of minute detail and the scribe of urban life, is reflected in J.C. Briggs's *The Murder of Patience Brooke*, where Dickens becomes a Holmes-esque detective. Those biographical hints become exaggerated into the driver for the story, perhaps taking cues from Dickens's own demonstrated attentiveness to the minutest of details, as explored in Chapter 11 of this volume. In the 1840s, however, Dickens is positioned as needing lessons and instruction in observation.

Early in *The Battle of London Life*, Phillipson, Boz's secretary, says to Dickens:

'You have written many tales ... but you must pardon me if I give it as my opinion, that your characters – powerfully and graphically drawn as the *major part of them are* – are still not drawn from nature. They have more of *romance* than *reality* about them. In a word, they are the result, not of the study of living types, but rather of a rich invention, and prurient imagination. ... [I]f you choose to put yourself under my guidance I can show you many curious specimens of our species; you are a clever workman, I can enable you to strike a new, and hitherto unexplored, vein of ore; in short, to take a stride from the *Ideal* to the NATURAL!' (23–4, emphasis in original)

Where to start with this? There is the patronising approach to Dickens's characters ('the major part' of which are powerful and graphic, to say nothing of the rest) as well as the implicit suggestion that Dickens's *plots* are better than his characters – an unusual stance at any time, in light of the prominence of writing serially in the period. The positioning of authorship as somehow collaborative, something the whole text proposes in having Dickens have a secretary or amanuensis in the first place, is also notable. Dickens's romantic self-creation as a kind of lone genius and the enduring cultural image of eminent authors as fitting this mould was also reinforced by accounts written by Dickens's family later in the century, which often made it clear that he generally did his writing alone and could not be disturbed. This positioning of Dickens functions on several levels, not only to ensure Dickens meets expectations of authorship but also to present him as a male writer of a certain class.⁸ However, his daughter Mamie was on one occasion, when taken ill, permitted to be in her father's study while he was writing. This is how she describes him:

[M]y father wrote busily and rapidly at his desk, when he suddenly jumped from his chair and rushed to a mirror which hung near, and in which I could see the reflection of some extraordinary facial contortions which he was making. He returned rapidly to his desk, wrote furiously for a few moments, and then went again to the mirror. The facial pantomime was resumed, and then turning toward, but evidently not seeing, me, he began talking rapidly in a low voice ... he had actually become in action, as in imagination, the creature of his pen. (*My Father as I Recall Him* 48–9)

Mamie's description of her father's writing process resonates with the idea of a 'prurient' imagination and 'rich invention', and contrasts with the passive Dickens of *The Battle of London Life*. O'Keefe's suggestion that Dickens's imagination is excessive does, to some extent, also speak to criticisms of Dickens – particularly later ones. Lewes's 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism' describes Dickens's imagination as 'approaching ... closely to hallucination' (144). As mentioned, Forster, in his biography of Dickens, felt the need to directly address Lewes's criticisms, as well as those of Taine, who described Dickens's imagination as 'a string too tightly stretched; it produces of itself, without any violent shock, sounds not otherwise heard' (2:343). To defend against this conception of Dickens's imagination as excessive and hallucinatory, Forster gives instances where Dickens drew directly on events in his life, as in creating the characters of Miss Mowcher and Harold Skimpole. His revelations about Dickens's childhood have been used to read Dickens's fiction biographically – and psychologically – ever since, and excesses in Dickens's character are explained by Forster as consequences of his early experience at Warren's Blacking Factory. As such, the roots of the biofictional focus on Dickens as very literally inspired by the world around him are meta-biographical: although there are obvious parallels between Dickens's fiction and Dickens's life, the need to emphasise a sense of reality over the excesses of imagination is the project of Dickens biography itself in reclaiming the author from the kinds of criticisms that arose in the mid to late 19th century.

Similarly, Sala's 1870 book about Dickens, the first biographical text to be published after his death (appearing as a yellowback in July 1870), also emphasised Dickens's way of 'looking at and into everything' (9):

The pictures he drew were clearly not imaginary, for no sooner were they drawn than all the world recognized their amazing vividness and veracity, and only wondered that such scenes had not occurred to them before: and herein his greatness as an artist was conspicuous; for it is one of the distinctive privileges of genius to utter thoughts and to portray objects which at once appear to us obvious and familiar, but of which no definite idea or impression had hitherto been presented to our minds. (30)

Sala had not known Dickens when he illustrated *The Battle of London Life* (and later claimed to have forgotten that he had been involved with the book at all), but his description seems almost to unite the two problems: Dickens is both drawing on life and also imbuing it with a kind of greatness. This is much closer to the meaning of 'Ideal' that O'Keefe is referencing, and also echoes several readings that position Dickens's imagination as a way of viewing the world. Taylor Stoehr synthesises several approaches, drawing a distinction between any possible understanding of Dickens's own perception and the ways in which he narrated the world, while Harry Stone has written that 'By the time Dickens emerged from the blacking warehouse, he could no more extract the magical from his vision of the world than he could divorce his eyes from seeing or his ears from hearing' (69); he adds that 'Everything he wrote filtered through that fanciful vision' (70).

Going back to the quotation, the 'Ideal', we are told earlier in the text, refers to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's conception of it, expressed in 'To The Ideal', the prefatory poem to his 1834 text *The Pilgrims of the Rhine* (Lytton in fact rewrote the poem for later editions as 'The Ideal World', claiming that the original 'had all the worst faults of the author's earliest compositions in verse' [x]). Lytton's original poem frames 'The Ideal' as an escape from the real, 'gladdening all things' (line 10). The rewritten poem focuses this on a picture of a pastoral, Edenic, ideal world, and explores its connection to literature and memory. Both the original and the revision are rather overwrought poems: Bulwer-Lytton seems to have been very concerned that people had got the wrong idea, and has explanatory sections to demystify the argument of the poem and the message of each stanza in subsequent editions. Although some aspects of Dickens's works are undoubtedly sentimental, to align him with a religiously inspired sense of romance is strikingly odd – although it perhaps invokes the title's referent, *The Battle of Life*.

It is, in addition, necessary to the story, which is built around Dickens's writer's block: in that sense, *Boz and His Secretary* is not that different from other kinds of biofiction. In order to establish a central narrative problem, Dickens's life is, perhaps unsurprisingly, treated very loosely. This was particularly important prior to Forster's biography, because of that assumption, captured by the *Town* biographical notice, that Dickens had an easy life: appearing before the revelations made in Forster's biography appeared in 1872, Sala's 1870 account claimed "There are very few "adventures" to record in the life of Charles Dickens' (48). Rather than dealing with known biography in depth, telling the story of Dickens's life as we know it, all of the discussed texts shift the focus away from Dickens, panning left and right to a wider circle of friends and family, both fictional and real; this would seem to contrast Lukács's claim that biofiction disproportionately emphasises the subject, although the question of Dickens's influence, and those rippling effects of the life of the individual, remain. In addition, just as *This Side Idolatry* and *The Master of Gadshill* capture

anxieties around what might be published about an author more than 50 years after his death, *Boz and His Secretary* can also be read in the context of the wider social concerns of the 1840s, notably anxieties about the police force. The detective branch of the police in Britain was only formed in 1842, and the police were viewed by the populace as corrupt and suspect. Anxieties around European influence and the Italian revolution also feed into this distrust of a specifically European model of policing, and so Dickens's strangely repulsive amanuensis, manipulating the author, speaks to this bigger picture of societal change. Just as writings of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were produced against a backdrop of biographical revelations about Ellen Ternan, *Boz and His Secretary* is concerned with 1840s anxieties surrounding knowledge, influence, and detection; this can be further aligned with the increased public consumption of biography. As literary celebrity started to take hold of the public imagination, an insatiable appetite for details of authors' lives began to grow. This became a significant feature in the periodical press and literary culture more broadly, as seen in the proliferation of celebrity interviews and the increasing popularity of the 'celebrity' lecture tour in the mid to late 19th century.

Celebrity relationships are one-sided, with the object of adulation largely passive, and certainly operating in entirely different circles from those seeking greater intimacy with their idols. As such, there's also something suggestive in the idea of Dickens as a non-player character, first expressed by Kamilla Elliott in talking about *Assassin's Creed* in her keynote 'Dickens After Dickens' (2016) at the 'After Dickens' conference that this edited collection stems from. Dickens is someone with whom these stories interact and intersect, rather than the focus. He is in many ways a celebrity presence, a touchstone, a constant, that brings an authority to the story – in *The Battle of London Life* he acts as a witness, while in *Assassin's Creed* he helps to establish that we are in a particular kind of *Victorian* London, and brings with him the cultural and historical associations we expect from that setting. The Dickens of *Boz and His Secretary* faints, gasps, and observes, just as the Dickens of *Assassin's Creed* only exists to act as a cheerleader and taskmaster for the player. Dickens observes, Dickens instructs, and Dickens manipulates, but these stories are more concerned with the other side of the conversation (who is observed? Who is instructed? And who is manipulated?). Dickens remains at the centre, in all cases, but the texts ripple outwards and the narrative follows the ripples.

In the case of *Boz and His Secretary*, it is not just Dickens's fiction that is affected by his life, but also vice versa, and this similarly removes his agency as author. The story resolves by biographically reading Dickens's fiction back onto him:

[S]uch had been the effect of Mr. Phillipson's tutelage on the delicate cerebral organisation of our hero, that he has been since, to all intents and purposes, A HAUNTED MAN! (101)

This rather unsubtle final gesture to Dickens's 1848 text might suggest the success of Phillipson's method in the short story; in any case, it makes Dickens a subject of his own fiction. In *Drood*, we are left with the possibility that Dickens's manipulations led to *The Moonstone*, turning anxieties about authorship and influence into tangible effect, while the suggestion of *The Master of Gadshill* is that Dickens's characters might write their own stories ('Dora's Resurrection'). In the case of *The Battle of London Life*, it is significant, perhaps, that Dickens's series of articles on the police, including 'On Duty with Inspector Field,' would not be published until the 1850s, allowing for the short story to anticipate life (though it is unlikely that Dickens ever read it). Again, the 'cerebral delicacy' of Dickens here can be read in the context of comments about his imagination that would not rise to the surface of Dickensian criticism for another 20 years. As such, what might appear to be a slight biofictional text is powerfully suggestive in its positioning of Dickens, anticipating the concerns of a form that would only be fully realised a century later.

. . .

By creating imagined, heightened climactic events, each of the fictional Dickens presents a challenge to the biographical Dickens: the earliest diminishes Dickens's own imaginative powers by focusing on external influences, for example, while in the 20th and 21st centuries authors and filmmakers have created conversations and scenes that seek to do justice to Catherine Dickens and Ellen Ternan by rewriting Dickens's biography and legacy. These fictional Dickenses can be brought into conversation with Dickensian biography and criticism in revealing ways, and the interplay of biofiction and biography continues to evolve as the broader trends adapt to changing times.

The relevance of Dickens today was well captured by the Dickens Museum's 2017 exhibition, *Restless Shadow: Dickens the Campaigner*, the exhibition explicitly drawing connections between Dickens's charitable work and contemporary concerns, highlighting the author's legacy with particular charities including the Hospital for Sick Children (now Great Ormond Street Hospital), the Foundling Hospital, and the Artists' Benevolent Fund. Considering the political turmoil of the world today, the focus on this link between Dickens's social reform efforts and modern concerns is unsurprising. Perhaps more surprising is the lack of political themes and resonances in media representations of Dickens in 2017 and since, including Dickens's appearance as a character in the 19th-century medical comedy *Quacks* (BBC, 2017) and the film based on Les Standiford's book *The Man Who Invented Christmas* (Rhombus Media, 2017). Both representations are comedic in tone. In *Quacks*, Dickens is a Byronic, troubled hero experimenting with drink and drugs, and the punch line is his plagiarism of one of the main character's ideas for his famous article on executions. *The Man Who Invented Christmas*, meanwhile, blends together Dickens's life with scenes from *A Christmas Carol*. The film is notable for its representation of Dickens's writing process, showing him in conversation with

his characters in a way that harks back to Mamie's account of him performing in front of the mirror (*My Father as I Recall Him*, 48–9). It is a lively account of Dickens as a writer that stands in stark contrast to the very literal inspiration presented by the examples discussed here, though it too highlights the biographical significance of the novel, with the film's climax seeing Dickens himself presented as Scrooge-like in his relationship with his family. The film takes its own liberties with the subject, positioning Dickens as a pioneer of self-publishing – a very contemporary concern, in the age of Amazon self-publishing – and presenting 1843 as a moment of crisis for Dickens, who is depicted as suffering from writers' block.

Consequently, Dickens is still being re-represented in ways that fulfil and subvert audience expectations, reflecting contemporary concerns though, strikingly, largely avoiding the implications of the political, radical Dickens. His role as a legitimising force in neo-Victorian rewritings and the need to write *against* Dickens in applying a lens of critique to the past stands at odds with the biographical Dickens. Nevertheless, Dickensian biofictions largely resist a flattening of his character by exploring his wider social relationships, offering the potential for new readings and new fictional Dickenses. Just as the chapters in this volume represent a diverse spectrum of ways to read, respond to, and revisit Dickens after Dickens, the media and the public have continued to interrogate Dickens's significance: 150 years after his death, we are still finding new ways to write and remember.

Endnotes

- ¹ For a discussion of this interplay between the morality of the author's life and work, see Julia Novak and Sandra Mayer, 'Disparate Images: Literary Heroism and the "Work vs. Life" Topos in Contemporary Biofictions about Victorian Authors', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2014, pp. 25–51.
- ² For a nuanced analysis of Dickens's representation in this text and how it challenges the focus in Dickens biofiction on the author and his works through a focus on Dickens's reading tours in America, see José Viera, 'Our Famous Friend: Analysing Charles Dickens as a Pioneering (Literary) Celebrity in Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens* (2009)', *Persistence and Resistance in English Studies: New Research*. Edited by Sara Martin, David Owen and Elisabet Pladevall-Ballester, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, 78–87.
- ³ This is a continually-expanding list. However, Michael Slater has also summarised several biofictional accounts (see 'Biography of Dickens, Fictional Treatment of.' *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*. Anniversary Edition. Edited by Paul Schlicke. Oxford UP, 2012. 44–45.
- ⁴ The will is presented in its entirety in John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* (857–61).

- ⁵ See Fred Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism: The Hidden Springs of Fiction*. Princeton UP, 1975.
- ⁶ See Ian R. Stone, "'The Contents of the Kettles': Charles Dickens, John Rae and Cannibalism on the 1845 Franklin Expedition,' *Dickensian*, vol. 82, 1987, pp. 7–16.
- ⁷ See Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Becoming Dickens: The Invention of a Novelist*, Harvard UP, 2011.
- ⁸ See John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, Yale UP, 1999, for exploration of masculinity and the role of the study.

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