

## 1.1 Introduction: Dickens as a Voracious Reader

If there was a top ten list of underrated and unrecognised writers (at least from a German perspective), Charles Dickens would be in the top three along with Anthony Trollope and George Meredith. While Meredith, another writer from Portsmouth, has always been credited with being a high-brow author, writing for the splendid few, Dickens is still afflicted with the blot of being a vulgar novelist, who, like his contemporary Trollope, is supposed to have catered to the taste of the masses and, as ‘Mr Popular Sentiment,’<sup>1</sup> gratified the crude demands of the growing Victorian literary market. Mr Polly’s attitude towards Dickens in H.G. Wells’s 1909 novel *The History of Mr Polly* is symptomatic: giving the reader a long list of his protagonist’s favourite writers, which range from Rabelais, Boccaccio to Shakespeare and Sterne, Wells only laconically states that Mr Polly did not take kindly to Dickens,<sup>2</sup> notwithstanding the fact that he lives in a Dickensian universe inhabited by people that might be borrowed from Dickens’s novels.

While critics unanimously agree that the Victorians took to reading and that even anti-heroes such as Mr Polly immersed themselves in canonical texts from the Renaissance to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the image of Dickens as a purveyor of sensational stories and a non-intellectual still persists. Stalwartly ignoring the fact that Dickens possessed an impressive library, which J.H. Stonehouse listed in *The Library of Charles Dickens from Gadshill* as early as in 1935, most of the writers with avantgardist and modernist pretensions seemed to be cementing the notion of Dickens as a cultural Kaspar Hauser. In an autobiographical account by his brother Stanislaus, Joyce, one of the paragons of intertextuality, is reported to have flaunted his indifference to Dickens and to have peremptorily stated that he could not stand the literature of either Scott or Dickens. Given the

---

1 Dickens is satirised as Mr Popular Sentiment in Trollope’s novel *The Warden* (1855). See *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens. Anniversary Edition*, ed. Paul Schlicke, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011, p. 587.

2 Wells, H.G. (1993), *The History of Mr Polly*, ed. Norman Mackenzie, London: Everyman, p. 102.

manifold allusions to and quotations by Dickens in *Ulysses* (1922), in particular in 'Oxen in the Sun,' we must assume that Joyce's attitude towards Dickens was much more complex and characterised by what Harold Bloom called an anxiety of influence.<sup>3</sup> Trying to immunise himself against the negative aspects of influence, to the "influenza in the realm of literature,"<sup>4</sup> Joyce seems to be keen on severing the bonds with the Victorian age and its paragons of culture, but cannot help admitting that he is, like all other modernists, "caught up in a dialectical relationship,"<sup>5</sup> in a love-hatred relationship with Dickens. The simple fact that, in the year of Joyce's publication of *Ulysses*, T.S. Eliot dallied with the idea of giving his poem *The Waste Land* (1922) a title based on a quotation from a Dickens novel – 'He Do the Police in Different Voices' from *Our Mutual Friend* – makes us clearly aware of the fact that – despite their ostentatious disregard for Dickens – the modernists sensed that the argument of Dickens's shallowness was becoming untenable. What they could no longer deny was that there was a submerged plurality of voices, positions and opinions in Dickens's novels, a budding cultural multiperspectivism which not only exceeded the narrow boundaries of Victorian aesthetics, but also revealed the vast knowledge that Dickens must have gained from reading heaps of books and articles.

When poets such as T.S. Eliot attached annotations to their highly convoluted poems they made it patently clear that they, unlike the Romantics, were readers who absorbed huge quantities of literature and that they, unlike their predecessors, defined poetry and fiction as webs of intertextual references, as jigsaw puzzle elements making up the wider context of time-honoured tradition.<sup>6</sup> Their literary works were not only slowly absorbed into the canon of world literature, they were also deeply soaked in the tradition and bristled with clear or oblique references to their predecessors. Before this backdrop, Dickens was considered neither a substantial contributor to the order of the canon nor a reader who processed books and created a repository of time-spanning knowledge. When A.O.J. Cockshut maintains that "Dickens was seldom greatly influenced by other writers; he was at once too original and too egotistical to be a very attentive reader,"<sup>7</sup> he subscribes to the image of Dickens as a dilettante who, despite his originality, invents his stories without intellectual foundation and without tapping the pools of knowledge, which even in the 1960s were supposed to be exclusively reserved for the splendid few.

3 See Bloom, Harold (1973), *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, New York: Oxford UP.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 38. Italics in the original.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

6 Eliot, T.S. (1964), 'Tradition and Individual Talent' *Selected Essays*, London: Faber & Faber, pp. 3 – 11.

7 Quoted in Gager, Valerie L. (1996), *Shakespeare and Dickens. The Dynamics of Influence*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, p. 1.

While both writers and critics disseminated the view that Dickens was scarcely up to his times, that, as a member of the bourgeois class, he abstained from revolutionising Victorian literature (a fact which is questionable when one looks deeper into the political and cultural radicalism of most of his novels),<sup>8</sup> and that, as a retailer of literary mass products, he created novels in a Fagin-like abiogenesis, a closer look at the variegated layers of intertextuality in his novels is evidence of the contrary: that Dickens must have been a passionate reader and an avid processor of texts, who, as a member of the British Library since 1830, had had access to a cornucopia of books, “everything from the works of Shakespeare to Arthur Austin’s *Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life*, and Hans Holbein’s *Dance of Death*.”<sup>9</sup> To what extent Dickens was a pioneer in Victorian novel writing can easily be proved by a close reading of his intricate rhetorics, but what is even more evident is that, by straddling the generic boundaries between fiction, philosophy and natural science, Dickens was a novelist who re-defined the genre of the Victorian novel in terms of an encyclopedic and modern curiosity shop, where the *belles lettres* and (pseudo-) sciences were on the same shelves. Seen before this backdrop, the view endorsed by earlier critics and biographers such as John Forster that after the publication of *David Copperfield* in 1850 Dickens’s creativity was on the decline,<sup>10</sup> is subject to revision. What Dickens reveals in his later, more darkish novels is that he was able to explore new modes of writing, and that in all of his novels he was eager to draw upon a rich literary and scientific history to make his readers alert to the enormous extent to which his individual talent was embedded in various, mutually inspiring traditions.

In contrast to the mushrooming classes of the *poetae docti* in the wake of Swinburne and Mallarmé, who openly fling a welter of intertextual references into their readers’ faces and thus widen the gap between modernist authors and their readership, Dickens prefers to conceal his reading lists and to weave them into his texts less conspicuously. In this context, Harold Bloom’s classification of writers into the categories of weak and strong authorship turns out to be as little helpful as the project of the multifarious (neo-) positivist source-hunters who try to lay bare evidence of Dickens’s eclecticism and lack of invention.<sup>11</sup> Given the fact that he is a strong writer in the Bloomian sense and that he wrestles with his

---

8 See here Lennartz, Norbert (forthcoming 2014), ‘Radical Dickens. Dickens and the Tradition of Romantic Radicalism’ *Dickens as the Agent of Change*, ed. Joachim Frenk and Lena Steveker, New York: AMS P.

9 Douglas-Fairhurst, Robert (2013), *Becoming Dickens. The Invention of a Novelist*, Cambridge/MA: Harvard UP, pp. 66–67.

10 Forster, John cited in Mazzeno, Laurence W. (2008), *The Dickens Industry: Critical Perspectives 1836–2005*, New York: Camden House, p. 21.

11 Bloom (1973), p. 5.

strong precursors,<sup>12</sup> Dickens is neither motivated by a craving for *kenosis* nor by the dubitable desire to “save the Egotistical sublime at a father’s expense.”<sup>13</sup> Shorn of all these Oedipal imputations Dickens’s intentions are more pragmatic: by weaving a net of intertextual references, he seeks to make his stories readable and to give his plots unobtrusively some canonical underpinning to save them from the vortex of emergent mass production.

Faced with the enormous dichotomy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century between trashy melodrama and highbrow culture (later reflected in George Gissing’s dark novel *New Grub Street*), Dickens tries to make up for this gap by hoping to reconcile his readers’ low literary expectations to ideas that he culled from various areas of literary and visual culture, from (pseudo-) scientific discourses, from philosophy and economic texts. Without falling into the trap of being too elitist and suffering from Meredith’s fate of being invisible on the market, Dickens succeeded in co-opting literary authorities for his melodramatic plots that (like the well-cured bacon in *Oliver Twist*)<sup>14</sup> were interlaced with modern and intellectual ideas. One outstanding example of this combination of melodramatic or sensational storylines with fragments of traditional literary texts is the way Dickens deals with Shakespeare in his novels. As a novelist with strong leanings to the theatre and theatrical performance, Dickens is drawn towards Shakespeare, and in particular towards *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, but also to *King Lear* and *Othello*.<sup>15</sup> As Valerie L. Gager writes in her seminal study, Dickens is not only an enthusiast who, even on his trip to America, constantly carries in his great-coat pocket the Shakespeare John Forster bought for him in Liverpool, he also systematically uses quotations from Shakespeare to place him a “line of direct descent from respectable literary tradition, thereby dissociating his novels from such inferior popular genres as the ‘Newgate novel.’”<sup>16</sup> What is striking is that theories of descent, so prevalent in 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture, not only fuel discourses about evolution, but also seem to permeate literature and make writers think about cultural pedigrees they either want to belong to or they repudiate as being degenerate.

Aware of the novel’s liminality in the hierarchy of genres, but also highly responsive to man’s precarious anthropological position in the pre-Darwinian world, Dickens constructs *David Copperfield* as a *bildungsroman* with an educational programme which is deeply steeped in the classics, and, as mentioned before, in particular in Shakespeare. In the novel that can be seen as a morality play translated into prose, David is blind and impervious to the beneficial in-

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p. 91.

14 Dickens, Charles (2003), *Oliver Twist*, ed. Philip Horne, London: Penguin, p. 134.

15 See the entry on Shakespeare in *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, pp. 537–40.

16 Gager (1996), p. 34 and p. 174.

fluence of Agnes, his “better angel.”<sup>17</sup> Captivated by “a worser spirit,”<sup>18</sup> as the speaker is in Shakespeare’s sonnet 144, David is unable to evade the pernicious fascination which radiates not so much from a dark lady as from Jonathan Steerforth, a Byronic hero with traces of the Machiavellian villain, who seems to cast a moderately homoerotic spell over David. To what extent David is exposed to various “sinister love triangle[s]”<sup>19</sup> – as for instance to Uriah, to Agnes and himself – and to variable threatening constellations of figures only becomes retrospectively clear, when the reader is made to ponder on the submerged relevance of Shakespeare’s sonnets for Dickens’s most autobiographical novel.

Having seduced Little Emily and betrayed his friend’s confidence, Steerforth covers up a moment of pensiveness with a slightly altered quotation from *Macbeth*: “Why, being gone, I am a man again” (p. 330). The attentive reader is instantaneously reminded of the banquet scene, where Macbeth has just seen Banquo’s apparition and – due to his mental deterioration – subjected Renaissance images of kingship and masculinity to question. Jeremy Tambling is certainly right, when, in his annotations to the novel, he refers to David assuming the role of Banquo’s ghost and helping to undermine his façade of Byronic libertinism.<sup>20</sup> What the context of the quotation also shows is that Dickens’s notion of anthropology is an open one and hardly in accordance with ideas that Victorians entertained about British man’s superiority. As Steerforth via Shakespeare seems to indicate, man is a brittle construction that purports to fight “the rugged Russian bear, / The arm’d rhinoceros, or th’Hyrcan tiger,”<sup>21</sup> but that is constantly threatened by disintegration and the danger of relapsing into bestiality itself. Even David, the admonishing ghost and the protagonist of the story, had come to realise that he himself, the avid reader of 18<sup>th</sup>-century literature, was not impervious to onsets of animality, when in the company of Steerforth and others he had been drinking too much and jeopardising his position as a rational human being in a *bildungsroman*. In a letter of apology addressed to Agnes, he explicitly quotes Shakespeare who expanded on the perverseness that “a man should put an enemy into his mouth.”<sup>22</sup> This quotation is taken from *Othello*, where Cassio let himself be led into temptation by Iago, and by drinking too much alcohol revealed that the demarcation line between

17 Dickens, Charles (2004), *David Copperfield*, ed. Jeremy Tambling, London: Penguin, p. 844.

18 Sonnet 144, l. 4. Shakespeare, William (2006), *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, London: Thomson Learning, p. 403.

19 Gager (1996), p. 194.

20 Tambling, Jeremy (2004), *David Copperfield*, Annotations, p. 958.

21 Shakespeare, William (2006), *Macbeth* III, 4, 99 – 100. (The Arden Shakespeare), ed. Kenneth Muir, London: Thomson Learning, p. 95.

22 Shakespeare, William (2004), *Othello* II, 3, 285 f. (The Arden Shakespeare), ed. E.A.J. Honigmann, London: Thomson Learning, p. 199.

humanity and animality could easily be blurred. Cassio's entire speech on the imminent process of degeneration which man is constantly exposed to – "that we should with joy, pleasance, revel and applause, transform ourselves into beasts!"<sup>23</sup> – is implied in Dickens's novel and requires a reader who not only enjoys the odd quotation, but is familiar with its context and knows how to appreciate the pleasure of transferring Shakespearean texts into modern times.<sup>24</sup> Thus, before the backdrop of Shakespeare's tragedies, it is, on the one hand, intriguing to see Steerforth in terms of a variety of roles and disguises, as Iago, Macbeth, Edmund or some other malicious schemer and, and on the other, to ascertain the extent to which man is eager to conceal his dormant bestial nature behind histrionic masks and quotations. When Oscar Wilde's Sibyl Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* removes her Shakespearean masks and refuses to impersonate Juliet, Ophelia or Rosaline, she proves to be only an empty husk for the dandyish spectator; Dickens, by contrast, seems to be insinuating that, behind the palimpsest of various early modern texts, man is not only stark naked, but more often than not an intractable monster, a truth scarcely compatible with the framework of melodrama.

The process of unearthing references to Shakespeare's plays in Dickens's novels is rewarding, but is also liable to turn into speculation. Attempts to place little Paul Dombey "within a direct line of descent from Shakespeare's children" sound as vague and far-fetched as the endeavours to interpret Dombey's attempted suicide in the light of the *Macbeth* motif.<sup>25</sup> When Gager finally has to admit that "unlike Macbeth, Dombey is saved by the sudden apparition of the daughter who has always loved him,"<sup>26</sup> the hope to see a Shakespearean matrix lying underneath most of Dickens's novels has turned into an hermeneutic pitfall and created the distorted image of Dickens as an idolater of Shakespeare, going even so far as to cast David Copperfield as "the introspective, self-doubting Hamlet from the very first sentence."<sup>27</sup>

What this collection of essays intends to show is that Dickens is far from being an emulator or plagiarist. Nor is he in the Bloomian terminology a "weaker talent" that idealises its predecessors.<sup>28</sup> As a gluttonous reader, Dickens is eager to build bridges between the past and the present and to find means to show his novels as intricate parts of a long continuum. While critics such as Gager evoke

---

23 Ibid., II, 3, 287 f.

24 This use of Shakespeare's *Othello* is different from the burlesque *O'Thello* that Dickens wrote for the stage and which shows that Dickens was able to approach Shakespeare from various angles. See Douglas-Fairhurst, (2013), p. 89.

25 Gager (1996), pp. 219–220.

26 Ibid., p. 221.

27 Ibid., p. 241.

28 Bloom (1973), p. 5.

the impression that Dickens doggedly followed in Shakespeare's footsteps, a closer look at his novels, however, reveals that Dickens aspired to the status of a Goethean *uomo universale*. Apart from his "greedy relish" for travel literature, for British history, medical treatises, philosophical and economic texts, Dickens indefatigably browsed through 18<sup>th</sup>-century literature, through the picaresque tradition and, last but not least, through the Bible in his almost Faustian pursuit of knowledge, of references and literary foils. Despite the fact that for a growing number of Victorians the Bible had become "a locus of hermeneutical instability,"<sup>29</sup> and although we know that Dickens must have been spared Ruskin's ordeal of being forced by his mother "to learn long chapters of the Bible by heart; as well as to read it every syllable through, aloud, hard names and all, from Genesis to the Apocalypse,"<sup>30</sup> we are left in no doubt that he was familiar with the Bible and knew how to make it profitable for his novels. As each cultural period seems to reduce the entirety of the Bible to a few favourite chapters, it is more than just a simple conjecture that the Victorians were not so much fascinated by the Song of Solomon (as Shakespeare and the 17<sup>th</sup> century were) as by the Book of Genesis with its stories of the Creation, the loss of Paradise and the Deluge.<sup>31</sup> From a literary perspective, the Bible seems to be for Dickens on a par with Shakespeare; and what is clearly an indication of Dickens's excellence as a writer is that he just does not enumerate quotations from the Bible, as scholars in reference books might want to make us believe, but that he amply uses motifs, allusions and loose biblical contexts. Dickens, thus, integrates elements and fragments from the Old Testament so skilfully and unexpectedly that it takes some close reading of the novels to notice that, after his expulsion from the little garden of Eden with the Cerberus-like dog in the kennel, David Copperfield's life is a voyage aboard various arks – Peggotty's ark on the shore of Yarmouth with an odd assortment of social misfits (including Ham, Noah's son), Betsey Trotwood's house giving shelter to Mr Dick and eventually his own home offering hospitality even to Mephistophelean characters such as Uriah Heep. In *Dombey and Son*, Sol Gills and Captain Cuttle are not only the owners and inhabitants of a little nautical shop, they are also the amiable and quirky crew of an ark that defies both the sharks of modern capitalism, Mr Carker, and gaudy pageantries such as Cleopatra's barge, which, however, in ironic contrast to Shakespeare's depiction of Cleopatra's ship in *Antony and Cleopatra*, is now reduced to a dreary wheelchair.

29 Larson, Janet L. (2008), *Dickens and the Broken Scripture*, Athens: U of Georgia P, p. 3.

30 Ruskin, John (2012), *Praeterita*, ed. Francis O'Gorman, Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 7.

31 Lennartz, Norbert (2014), 'Figurative Literalism: the Image of the Creator in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century British Literature' *The Bible and the Arts*, ed. Stephen Prickett, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, The fact that Dickens also cites the New Testament extensively is evidenced in Schlicke's *Companion*, p. 40.

In particular the last example illustrates how wittily Dickens uses quotations, patterns, motifs and references from various sources and creates an intertextual montage to make us aware of the fact that Victorians preferred to think in terms of typology. In this respect, the modern Dickensian arks are symbolic vessels expressive of the hope that the diluvian torrents of modernity can eventually be checked or at least diminished. As we can see, Dickens, the reader of biblical, early modern and contemporary texts, was not just a collector of resonant names, titles and phrases, but an author who fashioned textual structures in the awareness of the presentness of the past, knowing that the creation of texts consisted not so much in an arbitrary mixture of words or semiotic signs as in a typological composition of textual fragments taken from various contexts.

The articles in this book hope to prove that Dickens could not only 'do the police in different voices,' but that he was able to conjure up a kaleidoscope of worlds in myriads of voices. Showing Dickens as a reader of so heterogeneous writers such as Sir Philip Sidney, Cervantes, Jonathan Swift and Tobias Smollett, the essays try to prove that he could not help fashioning chequered worlds, in which ideas of Renaissance chivalry glaringly clashed with 18<sup>th</sup>-century concepts of misanthropy. That Dickens's novels are the arenas where cultures come into conflict, where modernity in the form of mesmerism, phrenology and galvanism encounters traditions of the *commedia dell'arte* and where the fully fledged *homo oeconomicus* meets the epitome of pre-industrialised inefficiency will be highlighted before the backdrop of Dickens's rich reading lists. To what extent Dickens's notion of reading also encompassed visual culture becomes evident not so much in the fact that Dickens was also keen on enacting and performing his or other writers' texts as in the way he enjoyed expanding and commenting on paintings and illustrations in his works. In the end, it would certainly be most tempting to see the extent to which Dickens used iconological patterns from Renaissance or contemporary paintings (Pre-Raphaelites) which he then translated into or re-moulded in his novels.

The ambitious project of tracing Dickens's reading lists would never have materialised if scholars from all over Europe had not been prepared to come to Vechta in the busy year of the bicentenary to discuss Dickens as a reader, as a recipient and user of literature, non-literary texts and visual culture and thus to help to free Dickens from the still virulent German curse of being scarcely more than a prolific writer of adventure books and Christmas stories for children. Moral and financial support for this came from my university, which logistically helped and encouraged me to convene vital parts of the international Dickens community, and the Thyssen foundation, which also generously financed the publication of this volume. Next to the contributors to this book, who willingly provided the substance and flesh for my idea which otherwise might never have gone beyond Mr Dick's sketchy outline, my heartfelt thanks go to my co-editor,



---

Dieter Koch MA, and to my assistant Oliver Schmidt BA, who unwaveringly proof-read the articles and never tired of complying with the spontaneous overflow of my editorial ideas. The service they thus rendered the commemoration of Dickens as a reader will always be dearly remembered.

Vechta, November 2013

Norbert Lennartz