Revising Dickens: Intertext and Originality in the Age of Emerson

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Contents

Abstract

My thesis explores the influence of Charles Dickens on the writings of three American contemporaries: Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Louisa May Alcott. More specifically, I examine how these American authors integrated rhetoric, motifs, and plot material from Dickens' novels into their own works, and thus produced literature that was "original"— a critical and complex ideal of the period—as well as intricately responsive to its cultural context. Inconveniently for countless American authors, Dickens' unprecedented rise to fame coincided with Ralph Waldo Emerson's resounding description of American genius as willfully independent of European literary models. While both Dickens' vast American appeal and Emerson's concept of genius have been rigorously examined in isolation from each other, no book-length study has yet considered how the tension between these cultural forces manifests itself in some the nineteenth-century's most enduring literature.

Mon thèse considère l'influence de Charles Dickens sur les œuvres de trois contemporaines Américaines: Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, et Louisa May Alcott. Plus précisément, j'examine comment ces trois auteurs ont intégré le langage, les motifs, et les histoires de Dickens dans leurs propres créations, produisant de la littérature "original"— un idéal crucial et complexe de la période— qui répond quand même à son contexte historique et culturel. Malheureusement pour innombrable artistes, les succès immenses de Dickens ont coïncidé avec la demande d'Emerson pour des artistes Américain qui seront indépendant des influences Européens. Alors que chacun de ces sujets— la philosophie d'Emerson et la popularité de Dickens en Amérique—a déjà inspire un grand volume de critique, la tension entre ces deux forces culturelles, et son effet sur les chefs-d'œuvre littéraires du dix-neuvième siècle, n'ont pas encore été décrite en détail.

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Introduction

It has been said that American literature was born in 1837, shortly after twelve o'clock, in Harvard Square. There a young minister named Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered an address, titled "The American Scholar," before several professors and two hundred fifteen members of Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa society. This graduating class happened to include several young men who would later emerge as some of the most prolific and influential writers of the century, and they listened with rapt attention to the preacher's cry for a new vision of what American literature and culture could accomplish. Oliver Wendell Holmes would later describe Emerson's speech as "our intellectual Declaration of Independence."[1] "We were socially and intellectually moored in English thought," wrote James Russell Lowell, another graduate, "till Emerson cut the cable and gave us a chance at the dangers and glories of blue water."[2] But these oft-recorded responses do not represent everyone who heard Emerson that day. A very different account of the speech and its impact is provided by John Pierce, a doctor of divinity who doubtless remembered Emerson's late father more favourably than he assessed the son:

> Rev. Ralph Waldo Emerson gave an oration, of 1 ¼ hour, on The American Scholar. It was to me in the misty, dreamy, unintelligible style of Swedenborg, Coleridge, and Carlyle. He professed to have method; but I could not trace it, except in his own annunciation. It was well spoken, and all seemed to attend, but how many were in my own predicament of making little of it I have no means of ascertaining. Toward the close, and indeed in many parts of the discourse, he spoke severely of our dependence on British literature. Notwithstanding, I much question whether he himself would have written such an

[1] Bliss Perry, *In Praise of Folly, and Other Papers* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923), 95.
[2] Perry, *Folly*, 95-96.

> apparently unintelligible address, had he not been familiar with the writings of the authors above named.[3]

Pierce's rather cantankerous disapproval of Emerson, especially when contrasted with the glowing praise of Holmes and Lowell, belies certain more incisive—or at least more interesting—elements of his appraisal. While he may disagree with his pupils about the merits of "The American Scholar," he shares with them a strong impression of that work's principal aim: to drive a wedge between American intellectuals and their European literary models. "Genius," Emerson observes in one of those "parts of the discourse" to which Pierce probably refers, "is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over-influence."[4] Without himself rejecting nationalism wholesale, Pierce recognizes a seeming contradiction of Emerson's writing that has sometimes been dismissed too quickly. As even a cursory reading of his essay will attest, Emerson's repudiation of British or European influence is itself a testament to that influence, filled with references to Goethe, Swedenborg, Shakespeare, and Coleridge, among many others.

Emerson himself would surely have been impatient with such criticism of "The American Scholar," and he tries to anticipate it with a key passage that describes the ideal function of a literary education: "Of course, there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. (…) Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office,—to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create."[5] The truest test of that creativity for American colleges and educators, says Emerson, is whether their instruction has "set the hearts of their youth on flame"[6]—a feat that he achieved constantly through his lectures. Seldom

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[3] Ibid., 93-4.
[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 57. All further citations from Emerson are from this edition.
[5] Emerson, *Collected Works*, 58.
[6] Ibid., 58.

acknowledged by either the most admiring or the most disgruntled recipients of Emerson's ideology, this difference between creating and drilling, or between influence and "over-influence," was nevertheless central to his concept of great art.

The effort to distinguish between Emerson's message and his legacy—among disciples as well as detractors—seems even more culturally significant if we recall another literary phenomenon that took America by storm in 1837—one whose direct impact was felt by many thousands more people than Emerson's Harvard speech. That year also saw the first publication in novelized form of Charles Dickens' *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Society*. Less a novel than an entertainment phenomenon, *Pickwick* shattered all precedent for literary success. English readers looked upon the publication of each new installment as a momentous event, devouring the episodic adventures of Mr. Pickwick and his companions with unquenchable excitement. As would happen again and again throughout Dickens' career, both the names of *Pickwick*'s characters and their most memorable speeches—especially the famous "Wellerisms"— became a sort of cultural currency, the latest tokens of consummate Englishness.

But Dickens' first great success, like his style, was irrepressible, and his new currency soon found its way across the Atlantic and into feverish circulation among American readers. The reasons for his spectacular appeal in America have long been a fertile subject of interpretation. Robert McParland takes a wide-angle view, arguing that Dickens' "sentiment, his caricatures, his social panoramas, his humor, and his melodrama interacted with the lives of his American audience."[7] William Axton underlines Dickens' fascination with "the vital importance of ordinary experience"[8] as a defining cause of his international popularity. Claire Tomalin, in

[7] Robert McParland, *Charles Dickens's American Audience* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 1.
[8] William Axton, *Circle of Fire: Dickens' Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theater* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), 162.

her biography of Dickens, stresses the political dimension: "the Americans, for their part, saw him specifically as 'The Great Republican of the Literary World,' the English writer who was on their side, and who showed in his books that he cared about ordinary people."[9] That Dickens was actually praised in the terms described by Tomalin during a "celebrity dinner" held at Hartford—one of very many such engagements in the course of his 1842 visit to America[10]—suggests some of the latent irony in how broadly he was embraced. As he himself knew all too well, the flourishing of his reputation across the Atlantic was due in large part to the absence of an international copyright law, which made the piracy of English works a staple of American publishers' collective diet. It was partly with a mind to correct that situation by lobbying for new copyright laws that Dickens crossed the ocean at all. Besides challenging the literary status quo, his first tour resulted in two works whose satire of Americans, their culture, and their land would alienate some admirers on this side of the Atlantic: the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* and the non-fiction *American Notes for General Circulation.* Dickens used these books to lambast the faults of American society, which, in his mind, began with the horrors of slavery and ended with the crass custom of spitting in public.

Through all such criticism and controversy, however, Dickens continued to hold extraordinary sway over the hearts and minds of American citizens. Its own staggering popularity aside, *Pickwick* inaugurated a period of approximately thirty years during which he was the most widely read author in America. In "The American Scholar," Emerson claims that "The unstable estimates of men crowd to him whose mind is filled with a truth, as the heaped waves of the Atlantic follow the moon."[11] This imagery calls to mind—perhaps with wounding

[9] Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 127.
[10] Tomalin, *Dickens: A Life*, 127.
[11] Emerson, *Collected Works*, 64-65.

irony—the famous accounts of American readers crowding the docksides in 1841, desperate to claim the last installment of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and learn the fate of Nell.[12]

Such were the bewildering cultural conditions in which the most influential American writers of the century had no choice but to mature. Even as Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists were finding reasons to believe in their country's imminent literary ascendency, the nation as a whole seemed to be falling more deeply in love with British writing than ever before. Americans writers, then, were confronted with a peculiarly mixed vision of the future: on one side, an exhortation to turn away from the courtly muses of Europe; on the other, an inconvenient realization that Dickens, with each new novel, public appearance, periodical, and speaking tour, was cementing his status as one of the most celebrated fiction writers of his age. Like Scylla and Charybdis, these two seemingly contradictory cultural forces, Dickens and Emerson, stood blocking numerous authors' passage to a literary career in America. Between the dawning of what F. O. Matthiessen described as the "American Renaissance" and the outbreak of the Civil War, many of the most circumspect literary minds of a bourgeoning nation faced the question of how to navigate between these two imposing obstructions.

In the project that follows, I will attempt to describe how, in this crucial period for the emergence of an American literature and culture, different authors steered themselves through the narrow breach between American cultural nationalism and the Dickens craze, setting a course that involved neither simple imitation of prior models nor a violent break from all that has gone before. The central concerns of my project, then, involve the dialectical struggle between influence and innovation in this period, and the ways in which different writers treat these approaches as not only compatible, but necessarily interdependent in the creation of "original"

[12] McParland, *Dickens's American Audience*, 18.

work. None of the authors examined in this study chose to ignore Dickens (or other earlier literary productions) altogether; he is a foundational presence, at one level or another, in each of the three principal works that I propose to interpret. At the same time, close reading indicates that these authors were not merely imitating Dickens, but were engaged in a highly self-reflexive process of translation and alteration—importing select Dickensian motifs and plots into their work, and thus answering and rewriting the English master on their own terms.

Organized chronologically, the three chapters of my thesis will consider three works written over three decades, each by a different author. Chapter One, set in the 1840s, will revisit some of the most familiar ground in studies of Poe and Dickens: a tale of two ravens. Poe, who read and twice reviewed Dickens' gothic novel *Barnaby Rudge*, also used the talking raven named Grip as a model for the central creature of his "The Raven." The resemblance between these two black birds is unmistakable, as is the facetiousness with which Poe neglects to credit Dickens with the image in his best-known essay, "The Philosophy of Composition." Whereas most critics—Gerald Grubb, Fernando Galvan, Ada Nisbet—have approached this similarity with the goal of establishing whether Poe plagiarized the British author, I will instead treat "The Raven" as an allegorical challenge to the very concept of plagiarism. The speaker's questioning of his nonhuman visitor—whom he ambiguously labels "bird or devil"— represents a desperate and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to discriminate between possible sources of a terrifying apparition, none of which can account fully for the raven's bewildering power. For Poe, whose works focus so intently on the process of reading, the failure to locate one true source communicates the paradox whereby plagiarism and true creativity can and must coexist.

Turning to the 1850s, and to the nascent genre of short fiction, I will consider the effect of Dickens' early novels on one of his most astute American readers, Herman Melville. Building

upon the scholarship of Robert Weisbuch and Brian Foley, both of whom have written persuasively on the relationship between "Bartleby" and *Bleak House*, I hope to demonstrate that a still more illuminating comparison exists between Bartleby and Dickens' earlier and now largely neglected novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Where the Poe of Chapter One was concerned with two ravens, this section will revolve around two clerks: Bartleby, the scrivener whose inner self remains permanently out of reach, and Dickens' troubled Mr. Chuffey, who likewise spends much of the novel eluding expectations of the narrator or of readers by refusing to explain himself. A close reading of Dickens' most scathingly satiric novel suggests how the British author inspired his American counterpart's uncompromising attack on the condition of culture and consciousness in a rapidly industrializing nation. By rewriting *Martin Chuzzlewit* as a parable of alienation and despair, Melville simultaneously pushes the limits of Dickens poetics—exposing certain limitations of the British novelist's narrative form—and answers Dickens' call for a more authentic and uncompromising brand of American satire.

Chapter Three focuses on Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*, published in 1868, and provides a culminating example of how Dickens' transatlantic influence evolved over thirty years. Alcott's vision of the American artist, exemplified by Jo March, involves a spirited immersion in the great (and not-so-great) European literature of the past and present. For this most literary March sister, performing as one of her favorite Dickens characters, the fake poet Tracy Tupman, during meetings of the girls' Pickwick Society, is a necessary step toward emerging as a legitimate author herself. In the course of this transformation Jo even transcends her own story, ceding her narratively central position to her younger sister Amy, and becoming more an author than a character. This chapter will pay particular attention to the role of theatricality in mediating Jo's relationships with Alcott and Dickens. Both authors considered a

career on the stage as youths, and both later used fiction to portray personal and artistic maturation in quasi-theatrical terms. As I will demonstrate, Jo follows their example by deliberately stepping off the stage of her very novel.

In addition to providing a glimpse of Dickensian intertextuality's evolution over thirty years, my project also considers the role of gender and literary mode—lyric poem, novel, or short story—in shaping that intertextual discourse. Different as these case studies might therefore seem, they share a number of concerns that have merged to form the through-line of my research. In all three cases, the American author's interaction with a Dickensian source is not a passive or uncritical act; on the contrary, that interaction allows the American text to challenge its own structural and narrative assumptions, effectively taking itself as a subject of criticism**.** "The Raven" issues this challenge by withholding any conclusive answer to questions of the bird's nature. As Poe explains in "The Philosophy of Composition," his speaker, after noticing the raven's limited vocabulary, chooses to ask questions that will be particularly devastating—each one more so than the last—when answered with the word "Nevermore."[13] This mix of repetition and innovation, besides reflecting Poe's sense of the two as necessarily conjoined in any creative act, also represents an affront to the tradition of elegiac poetry, in which grief turns slowly to consolation and hope. Instead of describing such solace as would give closure to the poem, Poe leaves his student trapped among "the shadow on the floor."[14] In a similar way, "Bartleby" refuses to indulge the reader with conventional development of either plot or character, instead deriving its disruptive energy from an increasingly pronounced absence of such features. As Chapter Two will discuss in detail, the lawyer's final attempt to make sense of Bartleby's alleged

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[14] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven," in *The Selected Writing of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Graham Thompson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 106. All further quotations from the poem are from this edition.

career in the Dead Letter Office conveys Melville's satiric commentary on the philosophical problem of neat, satisfying resolutions, like those in Dickens' novels. Alcott's example is perhaps the most interesting in this light, as the two-volume structure of *Little Women* allowed her to form a dynamic relationship with readers during composition. After the publication of Volume One, Alcott realized how desperately her readers wanted a sequel in which Laurie marries Jo—and then, out of what she called "perversity," thwarted that hope with the "funny" match of Jo and Professor Bhaer. I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head," she wrote later, "but rather enjoy the prospect."[15] Alcott designed this "funny" marriage to diminish the perceived importance of marriage itself in Jo's development as a character.[16] In disappointing her readers, Alcott preserves Jo's artistic ambitions—nurtured by years of reading and performing the works of Dickens and others—as the core of her identity.

Besides challenging narrative and generic conventions, the texts considered in this project also blur the lines that distinguish author, character, and reader, enveloping all three in a dramatized process of reading. Like Emerson, Poe, Melville, and Alcott expressed firm beliefs about the proper way to read great literature, usually stressing the importance of not mistaking small things for great. While these prescriptions are often communicated explicitly in reviews, essays, letters, and diary entries, they also form a vital part of the veiled literary criticism discernible in the poetry and fiction. This criticism often manifests itself as the failed interrogation of one character by another. Poe's poem relates the student's inability to make determinate meaning out of the black bird itself. This failed interrogation finds its parallel in

[15] Louisa May Alcott to Elizabeth Powell, 20 March 1869, in *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 125. All further quotations from Alcott's letters are from this edition.
[16] Elsewhere in the above letter to Powell, Alcott explains that Jo would have remained a "literary spinster" if not for readers' insistence that she be married off. Ibid., 124.

Bartleby's refusal to participate actively in his own story, despite the lawyer's insistence that he behave comprehensibly. Even Laurie's courtship of Jo, during which he complains of never witnessing the "soft side" of her character, can be read as a one more botched interrogation of a fundamentally elusive and unintelligible literary figure. Against the often cramped backdrop of conventional womanly behaviour, Jo's desire to be a great author makes her as inscrutable and unwieldy as the more unsettling creations of Poe and Melville.

Ultimately, the main focus of my project is the relationship between intertextuality and originality as the latter is defined in a given text. Poe, Melville, and Alcott were deeply invested in the fate of America's literary development. For all their nationalistic verve, however, these writers also show considerable openness to a notion of writing as a process of transformational interaction with traditions of existing literature—Dickens, certainly, but also Shakespeare, Bunyan, the Romantics, and Emerson. These case studies share a preoccupation with the ways in which influence paradoxically fosters new conceptions of what literature is and what it can accomplish. Seen in this light, transatlantic influence is characterized not by antagonism, but highly productive dialogue.

To study Dickens' presence in the work of his landmark American contemporaries is to discover new evidence of how the nineteenth-century artistic imagination perceived reading and writing as profoundly contingent upon one another. However intimidating his success may have been, Dickens became a creative force on American letters, precipitating some of the most important literary experiments of the century. Borrowing a leaf from the comparatively obscure book of John Pierce, I will demonstrate that "The Raven," "Bartleby," and *Little Women*, with all their remarkable innovations and images, would not exist as their final forms if not for their respective authors' familiarity with a British writer.

If Bird or Devil: Meta-Plagiarism in Poe's "The Raven"

Poe's last five years were both the most successful and the most bewilderingly turbulent of his career. By 1845, he had been adopted as the champion and mouthpiece of a nationalist literary movement called Young America. As Meredith McGill has explained, his appointment to this role resulted largely from a single, very effusive essay about Poe, written by James Russell Lowell and published in both *Graham's* and the *New York Evening Mirror*.[17] In this essay, Lowell names Poe as "the most discriminating, philosophical, and fearless critic upon imaginative works who has written in America,"[18] and the Young Americans—Everett Duyckinck, Cornelius Matthews, and Charles Briggs among them—apparently saw no reason to criticize the characterization.[19] A subsequent outpouring of acceptance from the literati allowed Poe to acquire proprietary stake in a literary magazine called *The Broadway Journal*, for which he also reviewed, and to dream more fervently than ever of someday founding his own journal, which was to be called *The Penn* (later *The Stylus*). But until that day arrived, Poe found himself looking down on American letters from a comparatively high vantage point, and charged with defending what nationalists believed was a thin boundary "between honesty and fraud in publishing."[20]

Today, the thought of Poe guarding America's artistic integrity seems odd for a number of reasons. Though deeply invested in the future of his country's literature, Poe had long criticized what he thought were the worst excesses of literary nationalism—a blind devotion that compelled American critics to praise a stupid book merely because "its stupidity was of our own

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[17] Meredith L. McGill, "Poe, Literary Nationalism, and Authorial Identity," in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe,* eds. Shawn Rosenheim and Steven Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 271-304; 272.
[18] James Russell Lowell, "Our Contributors," in *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 656-62; 656.
[19] McGill, "Poe Literary Nationalism, and Authorial Identity," 272-3.
[20] Ibid., 287.

growth, and discussed our own affairs."[21] This is a category in which he would doubtless have placed Duyckinck and the other New York-based intellectuals responsible for his sudden elevation. Even more troubling to this vision of Poe is his legacy of strange, seemingly contradictory statements and attitudes in the face of plagiarism—his own and other writers'. Merciless (and sometimes irrational) in his strikes against contemporaries like Longfellow, Poe was nevertheless quite satisfied to build his own tales and sketches on stolen fragments from the published work of others. In some cases, he even showed an almost perverse habit of revealing his literary indiscretions while straining to expose someone else's. He once accused Nathaniel Hawthorne of stealing from "William Wilson" to compose the story "Howe's Masquerade"—a story published one year before "William Wilson."[22] While some of these accusations were likely calculated by Poe to raise his own visibility in a highly competitive publishing market, they also reflect his highly idiosyncratic views about the nature of both originality and plagiarism. Stealing another man's work verbatim, it seems, did not necessarily make one a plagiarist in Poe's estimation; the difference lay partly in how well those stolen words were put to use.

The most enduring example of alleged plagiarism in Poe—and the central focus of this paper—took place in 1845, just one month before Lowell's essay praised his "power and originality."[23] That was the year Poe first published "The Raven" in the *Evening Mirror*. The poem was an immediate sensation, eclipsing even Poe's previous triumph with "The Gold-Bug."

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[21] Ibid., 274.

[22] Even stranger, as many critics have noted, is that Poe levels this accusation immediately after praising Hawthorne for his "creation, imagination, originality." Robert Regan describes this strange, exaggerated critical misstep by Poe ("arch-plagiarist-hunter") as evidence of Poe's fondness for the "discrete rhetorical trope" of duplicity, as opposed to outright dishonesty. Robert Regan, "Hawthorne's 'Plagiary': Poe's Duplicity," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 25.3 (1970): 281-298; 282, 292.

[23] Lowell, "Our Contributors," 661.

As Poe himself proudly observed: "The bird beat the bug (…) all hollow."[24] Reworked and reprinted numerous times during the late 1840s, it also spawned a number of imitations and parodies, including "The Vulture: An Ornithological Study," "The Turkey," and "The Craven." Meanwhile, the question arose as to whether Poe's fantastic raven was not itself an imitation of some other talking raven—perhaps the one named Grip, from Charles Dickens' 1841 novel *Barnaby Rudge*, a work Poe had read and reviewed twice for *Graham's Magazine*.[25] While several other sources were later put forward as having inspired "The Raven," *Barnaby Rudge* remains the most compelling candidate for this distinction.

It is also, in some ways, the most unruly. Frequently mentioned in Poe and Dickens criticism over the last fifty years, this case nevertheless continues to trouble even the most accomplished interpreters. Most modern critics—among them Gerald Grubb, Fernando Galvan, and Graham Thompson—have approached this topic as a sort of trial, usually defending Poe against charges of plagiarism. In almost all cases, such a defense involves comparing passages from Dickens' novel and Poe's poem, weighing the degree of similarity between them, and deciding whether that resemblance is more likely the product of conscious theft or of unconscious influence. Increasingly, critics have also situated Poe's alleged "purloining" of the raven motif within the historical context of Anglo-American publishing before the rise of International Copyright Law in 1891. While this chapter has benefitted greatly from such studies, I would like to move in a different direction, demonstrating instead how "The Raven" comments self-reflexively upon the tension of its own mysterious origins, as well as on the period in

[24] Poe to F.W. Thomas, May 4th, 1845, in *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 1, ed. John Ostrom, (New York: Harvard University Press, 1948), 287.
[25] Other literary sources for Poe's poem include Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," from which Poe certainly borrowed his formulaic rhyme scheme, and Washington Irving's "Legend of Prince Ahmed Al Kamel; or, The Pilgrim of Love," in *The Alhambra* (1832). See Poe, *Selected Writings*, 59, n.5.

American printing where origins themselves were so often the subject of vigorous, single-minded dispute. Read allegorically, "The Raven" becomes a focused meditation on how originality and creativity are achieved in literature and how they are not. Far from pretending to the status of a purely intuitive production, free of debts to any other text, Poe's most famous poem takes the problem of artistic origins as its prime subject, and even depicts the segregation of borrowed (even plagiarized) content from the "original" as deeply misguided.

Poe's own literary criticism is the inevitable first stop in understanding his views on creativity in general and Dickens in particular. Whether he actually was, as Peter Bracher suggests, "the first American to review the work of Dickens,"[26] his reviews certainly express the highest admiration for this new British talent. Writing on Dickens' *Watkins Tottle, and other Sketches* for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe praises "Boz" as a "far more pungent, more witty, and better disciplined writer of sly articles than nine-tenths of the Magazine writers in great Britain"—a statement that he then hastily qualifies as "saying much."[27] During the five years that followed, Dickens' other early works—*The Pickwick Papers*, *The Old Curiosity Shop,* and *Nicholas Nickleby*—found similarly profuse admiration from Poe. In one such review, the American critic reserves special praise for the neglected side of "Boz"—the qualities of his art that, according to Poe, readers generally miss. "We think it somewhat surprising," says Poe, "that his serious pieces have elicited so little attention; but, possibly, they have been lost in the blaze of his comic reputation."[28] Like Melville's Starbuck, who sees beyond Ahab's fiery rhetoric of revenge, Poe's criticism of Dickens reveals a desire to understand the "little lower

[26] Fernando Galván, "Poe Versus Dickens," in *A Descent into Edgar Allan Poe and His Works: The Bicentennial,* ed. Beatriz Gonzalez Moreno and Margarita Rigal Aragon (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 3.
[27] "*Watkins Tottle, and other Sketches,*" in *Poe: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 204-07; 204.
[28] Edgar Allan Poe, "*Nicholas Nickleby,*" *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* 5.6 (December 1839).

layer"[29] of the great artist. As a critic, he aspires to show readers the dark side of Dickens, too long hidden behind the surface mirth and affability of "Boz."

Barnaby Rudge, in some respects the darkest and most "serious" example of early Dickens, would give him that chance. Published serially from 1841, it was the last of Dickens' works to be reviewed by Poe, and the one that generated his most complex, ambivalent thoughts on the author. Perhaps this is not surprising, however, when we consider how the novel's conflicted nature. Set against the backdrop of the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780, *Barnaby Rudge* liberally mixes the tropes of Gothicism, melodrama, and historical fiction. The result is a novel whose narrative scope constantly expands and contracts between the vast scale of national history and that of the deeply private and terrible intrigues of a few families. Standing somewhere between the Prince of Wales and the hangman, surrounded by soldiers, murderers, star-crossed lovers, and plotting parents, is Barnaby Rudge himself, the simple-minded son of a long-suffering widow, whose birth is connected to a murder committed by his own wayward father. On his wrist can be found a blood-coloured birthmark, a continual reminder of his dastardly parentage. Barnaby's constant companion is Grip, an eccentric talking raven whose repertoire of phrases includes "Never say die!" and "I'm a devil! I'm a devil! I'm a devil!" Even if Poe had never written "The Raven," his particular fascination with this work would surely surprise no one familiar with the dark, mouldering façades, ubiquitous terror, and sensational murders of the American author's own prose.

As a critic, Poe expressed this fascination by writing two reviews of *Barnaby Rudge*: the first was published in May 1841, when only the first three monthly installments of the novel were circulating, and the second in February 1842, after the last numbers had been published. He

[29] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 140.

was clearly spurred to this unusual practice by the conviction that he could predict the novel's ending—specifically the name of Reuben Haredale's killer—from its first few chapters, a feat he actually accomplishes in the pages of *Graham's*.[30] But Poe's reviews are interested in much more than simply guessing the plot of Dickens' novel. Above all, he is preoccupied with "the skillful intimation of horror"[31] through recurring images and symbols, the talking raven preeminent among them.

In his first review, Poe finds great promise in the first chapters of *Barnaby Rudge*, and predicts that the book will "appeal principally to the *imagination*."[32] His most enthusiastic praise is reserved for the strange dynamic between Barnaby and Grip, which he describes as "an original idea altogether, so far as novel-writing is concerned."[33] With extraordinary self-assurance, Poe promises his readers that Dickens' raven, in as-yet-unpublished chapters of *Barnaby Rudge*, will become still more fascinating, changing from a mere clever bird into a supernatural creature

> "whose croakings are to be frequently, appropriately, and prophetically heard in the course of the narrative, and whose whole character will perform, in regard to that of the idiot, much the same part as does, in music, the accompaniment in respect to the air."[34]

Two features of this excerpt are particularly worth nothing. The first is Poe's choice of a musical metaphor to describe the rapport between Barnaby and Grip. As Poe himself acknowledged more

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[30] In his 1926 biography of Poe, Hervey Allen writes that Dickens, on his reading Poe's prophetic first review, was so shocked by Poe's skill as to exclaim, "The man must be a devil!" Hervey Allen, *Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2 vols. (New York: Doran, 1926), 511. Gerald Grubb, writing against this "legend," reminds us that only one of Poe's predictions actually came true—a fact acknowledged by Poe in his second review of the novel. Gerald Grubb, "The Personal and Literary Relationships of Dickens and Poe. Part One: From *Sketches by Boz* to *Barnaby Rudge*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 5.1 (1950): 1-22.
[31] Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 219.
[32] Ibid., 218.
[33] Ibid., 219.
[34] Ibid., 222.

than once, music plays an indispensable role in his poetry, which depends on the precise control of rhythm, repetition and meter to produce incantatory, almost hypnotic effects.[35] By explaining Dickens' characters in terms of accompaniment and air, Poe shows himself to be conceiving of the raven in quasi-poetic terms even at this early date.

The second interesting feature is Poe's use of the word "prophetic" to describe the bird's eventual role in the story. This is noteworthy in part because the speaker of "The Raven" twice describes his winged visitor as a "prophet." But Poe himself, in reviewing an unfinished book, also composes a prophecy of sorts, founding his predictions on the confident recognition of an "original idea." For Poe, it hardly matters that Barnaby and Grip have yet to demonstrate the kind of deep psychological rapport he describes; no other end result is possible, it seems, for two such unique creations. He even claims credit for having realized the characters' potential before the author, assuring his readers that this effect "is clearly the design of Mr. Dickens—although he himself may not at present perceive it."[36] This cryptic remark leads to a telling comment about the nature of creativity as conceived by Poe:

> "In fact, beautiful as it is, and strikingly original with him, it cannot be questioned that he has been led to it less by artistical knowledge and reflection, than by that intuitive feeling for the forcible and true, which is the *sixth sense* of the man of genius."[37]

Here, Poe describes two possible approaches to the "strikingly original" idea of a talking raven and his forlorn master. One road passes primarily through the realm of "intuitive feeling," a region accessible only to the "man of genius," like Dickens; the other, which Poe is implied to

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[35] For more on Poe's poetic technique, especially his use of rhythm and repetition, see Jeffrey Scraba, "Repetition and Remembrance in Poe's Poetry," and G. R. Thompson, "The Visionary Paradox: Poe's Poetic Theory," both found in *Critical Insights: The Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Steven Frye (New Jersey: Salem Press, 2011).
[36] Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 222.
[37] Ibid., 222-23 (Poe's emphasis).

have travelled, takes one through the land of intellect and rationality. For my purposes, it is worth emphasizing that the review asserts no firm boundary between these two realms of thought—that is, one need not (or perhaps cannot) travel strictly in one or the other. After all, Poe does not claim that Dickens had no recourse to "artistical knowledge" while creating Barnaby and Grip; only that he was guided "less" by that knowledge than by intuition. Conversely, though Poe the critic has apparently discovered Grip's true nature mainly by reflection, his own logic suggests that genius and intuition could have aided him in this process—an idea that conflicts, as we will see, with Poe's dubious claim to pure rationality in "The Philosophy of Composition."

Long before the writing of that essay, however, Poe discovered his confidence in Dickens' genius to have been mislaid. His second review of *Barnaby Rudge* is as sombre and downcast and his first was eager and anticipatory. Though he insists that Dickens' finished novel is a work of "high merits" and only "trivial defects,"[38] his disappointment in what the book finally became is palpable from beginning to end. Grip the raven, Poe complains, "intensely amusing though it is, might have been made more than we now see it, a portion of the conception of the fantastic Barnaby. Its croaking might have been heard *prophetically* in the course of the drama"[39] For Poe, having successfully fingered Barnaby Rudge Sr. as the killer months before the ending was published does little to assuage the sense of loss that follows from such a missed aesthetic opportunity on Dickens' part. All of this dejection has long fueled scholarly arguments that Poe, finding Dickens' darkness not quite dark enough for his taste, used the raven to do what his English counterpart would not.

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[38] Ibid., 243
[39] Ibid., 243 (Poe's emphasis).

Of course, a more vital part of such arguments is textual evidence. Nearly all critics fascinated by "The Raven's" resemblance to *Barnaby Rudge* have grounded their arguments in Chapter Seventy-Three of Dickens' novel. Captured and imprisoned for his innocent role in the Gordon Riots, Barnaby waits to patiently to be hanged, with Grip for company. During a visit from his mother, as the conversation turns to the faint hope of Barnaby's release, the boy and his bird join forces in a memorable lament:

> "You hope! Ay, but your hoping will not undo these chains. I hope, but they don't mind that. Grip hopes, but who cares for Grip?"
>
> The raven gave a short, dull, melancholy croak. It said "Nobody" as plainly as a croak could speak.[40]

"Who cares for Grip, excepting you and me?" continues Barnaby, describing how the bird "never speaks in this place, but only sits and mopes all day in this dark corner, dozing sometimes, and sometimes looking at the light that creeps in through the bars."[41] Like the speaker of Poe's poem, Barnaby reasons his way round to a concluding question—again asking, "Who cares for Grip?"—and receives a quick, timely, and devastating response: "The raven croaked again 'Nobody.'"[42] Taking *Barnaby Rudge* as a whole, the reader can trace many other suggestive links to Poe's poem. Grip calls himself a devil, while Poe's speaker labels his raven a "bird or devil"[43]; in Chapter Five of Dickens' novel, Gabriel Varden thinks he hears Grip "tapping at the door."[44]

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[40] *Barnaby Rudge* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 607. All further citations of the novel are from this edition.
[41] Ibid., 607.
[42] Ibid., 607.
[43] "The Raven," 85.
[44] *Barnaby Rudge*, 51.

Clearly, these and other similarities were not lost on "The Raven's" first readers. Just three years after praising Poe's originality in his article for *Graham's*,[45] James Russell Lowell worked the controversy into a couplet in his poem *A Fable for Critics*: "Here comes Poe, with his raven like *Barnaby Rudge* / Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge."[46] A more serious reading was put forward in 1911, when the *Pittsburgh Post* printed an anonymous article, titled "Poe's Raven and Dickens' Raven." This piece was reprinted ten years later by *The Dickensian*, apparently in answer to the question, "raised in correspondence," of whether Poe's poem "was in any way suggested by *Barnaby Rudge*."[47] The article claims that it was, but also stresses that such suggestion has its limits: "None of the foregoing parallels, I hasten to say, show anything that may be called plagiarism—although Poe himself, that literary detective, might have called it such in Longfellow and other poets."[48]

The first scholarly effort to connect "The Raven" with *Barnaby Rudge* was made by Gerald C. Grubb, whose tripartite series of essays on Poe and Dickens, published in 1950-51, added several more parallels to those listed in *The Dickensian*. But, perhaps partly because of the sheer scope of his essay, Grubb foregoes any lengthy discussion of what the resemblance between these works might signify for either one. In fact, he limits his analysis to a brief disclaimer:

> "Now, as convincing as this evidence is, it does not mean that Poe stole his raven from Dickens. Much of the resemblance may have resulted from purely unconscious mental

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[45] For a detailed analysis of the cultural and historical analysis of Lowell's article, and of kits effect on Poe's career, see McGill, "Poe, Literary Nationalism, and Authorial Identity," 272-89.
[46] *Selected Writings*, 697. Lowell had become alienated from Poe due to the latter's attacks on Longfellow, whom Lowell greatly admired. For a history of the "Little Longfellow War," see Sidney P. Moss, *Poe's Literary Battles: The Critic in the Context of His Literary Milieu* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1963).
[47] *Dickensian* 17.3 (1921): 154. See also Fernando Galvan, "Plagiarism in Poe: Revisiting the Dickens Poe Relationship," *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 10.2 (2009): 11-24; 17.
[48] *Dickensian* 17.3 (1921): 154.

> association, but the figure of the raven and the central idea of the poem must have consciously related to *Barnaby Rudge."*[49]

With this passage, Grubb takes much the same precaution as the author of the *Pittsburgh Post* article. Sensing the tendency of his evidence to indict Poe on counts of plagiarism, Grubb tries to reign his reader back and propose a more generous view of the case. What he adds to the *Post* article's argument, besides additional parallels between the two texts, is the possibility of "unconscious mental association" as an alternative to intentional theft. This stress on the unconscious seems somewhat ironic when we recall that Poe, in his first review of *Barnaby Rudge*, described Dickens' own process of creating Barnaby and Grip as largely unconscious—resulting from a "sixth sense."

Writing fifty-eight years after Grubb's essay (and thus marking the occasion of Poe's bicentennial), Fernando Galvan both invokes and largely upholds the premise of Grubb's argument while adding new considerations to the critical discourse. Like Grubb, Galvan eventually presents a kind of disclaimer. The case for Poe's "more than possible debt to Dickens"[50] is strong, he says, but "all this does not strictly mean plagiarism."[51] For Galvan, moreover, charges of literary theft are countered by the sheer quality of Poe's poem—a contention with which Poe himself might well have agreed.[52] According to Galvan, if "The Raven" owes certain "ideas and motifs" to Dickens' novel, "it is also true that Poe managed somehow to develop and improve them in his unforgettable poem," producing a work of art that

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[49] Grubb, "The Personal and Literary Relationships of Poe and Dickens. Part Three: Poe's Literary Debt to Dickens," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 5.3 (1950): 209-221; 212.
[50] Fernando Galvan, "Plagiarism in Poe: Revisiting the Dickens Poe Relationship," *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 10.2 (2009): 11-24; 17.
[51] Galván, "Plagiarism in Poe," 19.
[52] According to Steven Rachman, Poe models a kind of "creative plagiarism (…) where texts are lifted but put to different ends, ends that are paradoxically creative and 'original.'" Steven Rachman, "'Es last sich nicht schreiben': Plagiarism and 'The Man of the Crowd,'" in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, eds. Shawn Rosenheim and Steven Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 49-87; 52.

is "clearly superior to the quoted fragments from Dickens' novel."[53] By using the word "somehow" in talking of Poe's method, Galvan declines to discuss the proportional effect of conscious and unconscious thought, as Grubb as done, and thereby frees himself to class poetic effect as a more compelling species of evidence.

These critics and commentators are, of course, correct in the most basic assertion they share: that Poe's use of the raven motif does not constitute plagiarism. In what remains of this chapter, however, I will consider what Poe's adoption of the raven motif does constitute: a highly self-reflexive comment on the interplay of creativity and originality, issues with which literary plagiarism is necessarily conjoined. To that end I will take up Grubb's concern with "unconscious mental association"—not as a means of speculating about Poe's own process, but as part of an inquiry into how he describes the creative process writ large, both literally (in essays and reviews) and allegorically (in "The Raven" itself).

Let us begin with an essay. One year after the first printing of "The Raven," and three years after his second review of *Barnaby Rudge*, Poe used a prose piece titled "The Philosophy of Composition" to describe the creative process that (supposedly) helped him write his poem.

> I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would –that is to say, who could—detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion.[54]

As this opening hopefully suggests, the difference between the creative method described in this prose piece and the one attributed to Dickens in Poe's first review of *Barnaby Rudge* could hardly be greater. Early in that review, Poe admits some disappointment in the sure knowledge that mysteries raised by the first installments of Dickens' novel will be solved by the last, adding

[53] Galván, "Plagiarism in Poe," 19.
[54] Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 14.

that "no matter how terrific be the circumstances which, in the denouement, shall appear to have occasioned the expression of countenance worn habitually by Mrs. Rudge, still they will not be able to satisfy the mind of the reader."[55] Poe goes so far as to claim that horror can succeed only when there is "no *dénouement* whatever—when the reader's imagination is left to clear up the mystery for itself."[56] In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe makes precisely the opposite argument. "Nothing is more clear," he says, "than that every plot (…) must be elaborated to its *denouement* before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the denouement constantly in view that we give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention."[57] The dénouement, which once counted for practically nothing, now means everything, while the high ground previously held by "uncertain evil"[58] now belongs to "ordinary induction."[59]

How does one interpret the disparity between these two theoretical stances? One possible explanation would involve some dramatic shifting of the foundation of Poe's critical theory. What seems the likelier conclusion—and the one to which most critics ultimately subscribe in varying ways—is that Poe chose to model, through these three prose works, two fundamentally different responses to the singular question of where great poetic images come from. "The Philosophy of Composition," then, represents a highly facetious and unreliable attempt by Poe to style himself as a paragon of such "artistical knowledge and reflection" as he previously assumed

[55] Ibid., 219.
[56] Ibid., 219.
[57] Ibid., 13.
[58] Ibid., 219.
[59] Ibid., 17.

to be largely missing from Dickens' method. As we have already seen, however, Poe's review of *Barnaby Rudge* implies, albeit briefly, that intuition and rationality can work together.

A similarly brief admission of this fact occurs in "The Philosophy of Composition," subverting the essay's apparent allegiance to logic and rationality. In the midst of describing his writing technique, Poe says: "I consider whether it can be wrought by incident or tone (...) afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect." One wonders whether Poe chose to add the phrase "or rather within," so appropriately contained in parentheses, out of fear that "looking about me" was too suggestive of plagiarism. With the critical carnage of the "Little Longfellow War" still quite fresh in his memory, he would probably have been more sensitive than usual to such openings. In any case, his temporary confusion of external and internal space very briefly disrupts the tone of absolute clinical objectivity that elsewhere dominates his essay. Almost in spite of itself, this line exposes the fault line that runs through Poe's entire essay: a thin, all-too-fragile boundary between external influences—the effect of an inheritance of past culture, folklore, and copyrighted literature on one's imagination—and the inner voice of genius. Poe could easily rationalize the process of "looking about" as a clinical and objective one, altogether in keeping with the logical posture of his essay. To look "within" for the means to produce a certain "effect," however, is to dabble in the irrational and intuitive—to rely, that is, upon the "sixth sense" that Poe describes in his first review of *Barnaby Rudge*.

When Jacques Derrida remarks that Poe's fictions often begin "'in' a library: among books, writing, references," and therefore do not begin at all,[60] he is testifying to how often reading becomes the central, inescapable activity of Poe's fiction. This is at least as true of "The

[60] Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," trans. Willis Domingo et al, *Yale French Studies* 52 (1975): 50-101; 101.

Raven," which opens to find its speaker pondering "Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore."[61] The narrator is candid about his motivations for retiring to the written word—"vainly I had sought to borrow / From my books surcease of sorrow"[62]—and the failure of that original objective blankets the poem to follow. Added to this pervading sense of futility are the poem's constant repetitions (the word 'Nevermore' becoming an impasse the speaker cannot penetrate) and its repetitive rhythm, both of which also contribute to a feeling of inescapable stasis, if not captivity. For all these crucial features, however, the poem does describe a form of movement, following the frenzied mind of the speaker while he struggles to find meaning in the raven's ghastly visit. This increasingly desperate process of reading involves several stages, and results in a poem that takes a far more encompassing view of the talking raven motif than either Poe's *Barnaby Rudge* reviews or his "Philosophy of Composition." We tend to think of criticism as somehow closer to our own viewpoint as readers than either prose fiction or poetry, and thus as offering a window into the essential, often complicated truths concealed by these "imaginative" literary forms. But Poe distorts that relationship by writing a poem that comments more directly and insightfully on its central motif than does the fictitious posturing of his allegedly "non-fictional" essays and reviews.[63]

"The Raven" achieves this veiled critical self-commentary by alternating between two broad categories of thought: one that represents the events of the poem as unprecedented (and thus locates their meaning in the inner world of the speaker) and one that constantly relates the bird to some sense of tradition, pattern, or posterity (the world "about" the speaker). We begin with the inner world. The speaker of the poem, recalling the moment when he first heard rapping

[61] "The Raven," 2.
[62] Ibid., 9-10.

at his chamber door, claims that such sounds "Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before."[64] Finding only silent darkness to great him at the threshold, the speaker claims to have "stood there wondering, fearing, / Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before."[65] In both of these passages, the young man locates himself on the threshold of unprecedented experience—a fantastic and thrilling world that lies as far beyond the pale of human reckoning as the supernatural plane described in the final chapters of Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym.*

But the vision does not last, and the aura of total unprecedentedness that precedes Poe's raven is suddenly and swiftly negated when the bird finally appears. Poe introduces his creature as "a stately raven of the saintly days of yore,"[66] thereby alluding, as Graham Thompson has suggested, to the long history of mythic and traditional associations hidden behind this creature's small frame. Like Poe, the ancient Greeks saw ravens as prophetic. They were associated with Apollo, the god of music, poetry, and prophecy. In Roman myth, the raven was held to be an envoy of death, likely because ravens were so often seen scavenging for carrion across desolate battlefields.[67] By further positioning his raven "upon a bust of Pallas,"[68] Poe more pointedly aligns the creature with the world of myth and legend, and thus dispels temporarily the "dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before" to focus instead on dreams as old as civilization itself. A similar tension is present *Barnaby Rudge*, symptomatic of the book's generic hybridity. Dickens' raven is a "strikingly original" gothic creation set within an historical novel, and that novel forms yet another installment of the history of Poe's strikingly original raven. Already the speaker's

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[64] "The Raven," 14.
[65] Ibid., 26.
[66] Ibid.,38.
[67] Thompson, *Selected Writings*, 59, n. 5.
[68] "The Raven" 41.

assumption that tradition and complete originality are distinct from one another seems questionable.

But for the speaker of Poe's poem there is another, more intimate kind of history: that which records the visitors to his own lonely chamber. "Other friends have flown before— / On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before."[69] By locating the bird in a long line of transient visitors, the speaker again contradicts his own earlier characterization of these events as unprecedented and unique. Even the bird's bizarre cry can be explained very simply—or so the student claims. To that end, he invents a previous owner for the bird and gives the reader a short narrative of that man's life:

> "Doubtless," said I, what it utters is its only stock and store
> Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
> Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—[70]

With this brief story, Poe's speaker tries to assuage his own fear of the raven by confining the bird's presence to a realistic narrative about a past history of poetic creation. Of course, whatever calming influence this theory might have promised for the speaker is thwarted almost instantly as his thoughts turn to a vision of "unmerciful Disaster" pursuing the hapless victim. At one level, this former master is Charles Dickens (who happens to have owned three pet ravens, two of them during Poe's lifetime). But turning over the leaves of myth and legend—such "forgotten lore" as the speaker's library contains—we find a considerable supply of ancient stories whose nameless creators could also claim ownership of the bird. Moreover, long after the raven has been identified with classical myth, "The Raven" gradually gathers subtle allusions from a host of

[69] Ibid., 58-9.
[70] Ibid., 63-5.

other sources, among them the Bible, Shakespeare, and Keats.[71] With this single poem, then, Poe is cribbing off not just Dickens, but all of Western literature.

Just as the raven cannot be tidied into a simple back-story, so the originality and power of the poem as a whole cannot be communicated solely with reference to its plot. In the "Philosophy of Composition," Poe summarizes the events of "The Raven" in an attempt to demonstrate how they fall "within the limits of the accountable—the real."[72] According to this summary, which reads like a police report, a raven, "having learned by rote the single word 'Nevermore,' and having escaped from the custody of its owner," travels some indeterminate distance and finally darkens the study of a somber student. Eventually, this young man "guesses the state of the case, but is impelled (…) to propound such queries to the bird as will bring him, the lover, the most of the luxury of sorrow, through the anticipated answer 'Nevermore.'"[73] This relentlessly rational explanation greatly overstates the degree to which rationality itself prevails over the supernatural (the unreal) of his poem. The reader does not see the raven escape from a former master before it reaches the speaker's study; Poe is promoting to the status of objective truth what his poem represents as no more or less than a plausible theory. Just as importantly, the speaker of "The Raven" never commits with complete certainty to "the state of the case" as defined by Poe's essay. Even after supposing that the raven is merely a clever bird that learned to speak from some past owner, he continues to address the creature as a "bird or devil," and so leaves open the possibility of a supernatural explanation for this psychological ordeal.

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[71] When Poe's speaker claims that "the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer," the reader may recall Keats' "Ode to Psyche," which describes a scene perfumed with "No incense sweet / From chain-swung censer teeming."
[72] Poe, *Essay and Reviews,* 23.
[73] Ibid., 24.

Discovery, deception, ownership, originality, history—all of these themes connect Poe's poem with the era of its composition, and with the indeterminacy surrounding the modern practice of authorship in a cultural environment beset by piracy, reprinting, and other species of theft. "The Raven" dramatizes this condition by presenting a world where nothing begins at any determinate point. The speaker bandies between the knowledge of precedent and unprecedented knowledge—a condition with which many Anglo-American writers working before the advent of international copyright law could surely sympathize. These contending forces are contained in the figure of a raven "[w]ith such name as 'Nevermore.'"[74] Indeed, plagiarism plays an overt role in the action of the poem when the student, returning to the subject of his lost love, describes a seat in his study that "*She* shall press, ah, nevermore!"[75] With these words, the young man expresses his grief by self-consciously stealing the bird's refrain and making it his own. In this way, the speaker's language demonstrates one of the most integral paradoxes of Poe's art, defined by Steven Rachman as a tendency toward paradoxical, simultaneous "posing and ex-posing."[76] The poem's frenzied, unsuccessful discrimination between inner and "outer" influences upon the speaker's consciousness represents yet another attempt by Poe the literary critic to comment on the relationship between inspiration and the influence of other writers (or external writings) on one's work.

Though obsessed with origins, the speaker must ultimately concede that certain origins cannot be ascertained. As the poem moves toward its finale, the speaker must abandon any hope of understanding the raven completely: "Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!— / "Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore—."[77] As the

[74] "The Raven," 54.
[75] Ibid., 78.
[76] Rachman, "Plagiarism and 'The Man of the Crowd,'" 66.
[77] "The Raven," 85-86.

speaker comes to realize, the raven, whether a supernatural being or a beast with some intelligible past, throws every bit as imposing a shadow over his grieving mind. By themselves, neither the thought nor feeling, logic nor intuition, the natural nor the mystical, can make sense of the enigmatic black bird. After trying to decide between them, he is left only with the sure knowledge of the raven's power over him. This discovery is consistent with the theory of knowledge expostulated elsewhere in Poe's poetry—a theory that "denies provable truths, yet advances a type of epistemological faith."[78]

Whatever the precise nature of that faith, it defies what often seem the deliberately simple categories of Poe's criticism. Even the highly intuitive form of creativity described in Poe's reviews of Dickens, while probably closer to the truth of Poe's own art than the dispassionate language of his "Philosophy of Composition," does not tell the whole story. Recall an interesting remark from Poe's highly anticipatory first review of *Barnaby Rudge*: "The skilful intimation of horror held out by the artist produces an effect which will deprive his conclusion, of all."[79] But not quite all, "The Raven" would have is believe, since the last lines of Poe's poem balance closure and continuity to give the reader a chilling double dose of everlasting stasis.

> And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
> On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door
> (…)
> And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
> Shall be lifted—nevermore![80]

[78] Heidi Silcox, "Transcendentalism," in *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 269-78; 271.
[79] Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 219.
[80] "The Raven" 103-04.

It seems worth nothing that a similar gesture takes place at the close of *Barnaby Rudge*. The last quoted speech in Dickens' novel is Grip's rapturous cry of "I'm a devil! I'm a devil! I'm a devil!" Using the next and final paragraph of his novel, Dickens sends these cries ringing through history and into the present moment of his readership:

> From that period (although he [Grip] was supposed to be affected much by the death of Mr. Willet senior), he constantly practised and improved himself in the vulgar tongue; and as he was a mere infant for a raven, when Barnaby was grey, he has very probably gone on talking to the present time.[81]

Stephan Rachman has argued that that "[i]n Poe we find an author who is both 'hack' and 'genius,' two aspects of his identity that continually went to war in his prose.[82] However contrary and combative those elements of his persona may seem in reviews, tales, and less easily classified works (like the "Marginalia"), they are reconciled implicitly in "The Raven." At every level, Poe's attitude toward the talking raven motif is characterized by a kind of encompassing ambivalence. As we have seen, "The Raven's" speaker sometimes believes the bird to be otherworldly and sometimes very worldly, but in the end he concludes that its prophetic, otherworldly power does not depend on either explanation, not originate from any distinguishable source. Indeed, the raven's power to arrest the speaker lies principally in its lack of particular origin, much as Poe's poem has fascinated critics by resisting definitive accounts of what is original or derivative in its subject matter. Read together, Poe's critical works result in a series of baffling oppositions: Plagiarism or originality? "Artistical knowledge and reflection" or the "sixth sense" of genius?" Bird or devil? As a critic, Poe forces these questions upon us only to expose their insufficiency in

[81] *Barnaby Rudge*, 688.
[82] Rachman, "Plagiarism and 'The Man of the Crowd,'" 59.

accounting for the origins of great art. As a poet, he allows such rigid frameworks to shudder and collapse under the overwhelming and partly ineffable force of creativity itself.

"A worritin' wexagious creature": "Bartleby," *Martin Chuzzlewit,* and the Poetics of Disruption

In *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* (1953), Melville's granddaughter, Eleanor Melville Metcalf, records an interesting incident from the period when Melville and his family lived in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Apparently, Melville developed the habit of referring to "a certain local lady" as "Mrs. Pecksniff," thereby labelling her as "a feminine counterpart" to the pompous villain from Charles Dickens' 1843 novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. His mother, Maria, not knowing the implications of this moniker, eventually decided to try it herself. When the lady in question paid a visit to Arrowsmith one day, Maria reportedly "sailed in, and in her stateliest manner greeted her, How do you do Mrs. Pecksniff?" Unfortunately for her readers, Metcalf withholds the details of what happened next, writing only that: "The lady had read her Dickens, and never called again. Maria should have known her son better!"[83]

Anecdotes like this one form a small part of the surviving evidence that Melville read *his* Dickens. Since the Melville revival of the twenties, critics have become increasingly fascinated by what Melville read and by how he made use of those sources in his own writing. Such scholarship requires an interesting mix of hard evidence and inventive speculation. Merton M. Sealts Jr., in *Melville's Reading: A Checklist of Books Owned and Borrowed* (1966; revised and expanded 1998), confirmed that Melville possessed copies of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, *David Copperfield*, and an unidentified "Christmas Book."[84] Needing no further encouragement, scholars from both camps have since developed an impressive body of criticism to describe the many forms that Dickens takes in the American author's works. Their efforts are

[83] Eleanor Melville Metcalf, *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 205.
[84] Merton Sealts, *Melville's Reading: A Checklist of Books Owned and Borrowed* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966) 50, 56. Melville may well have owned other books by Dickens, but Sealts' landmark research is concerned only with those works whose physical presence in Melville's hands can be proven conclusively.

well documented in Mary K. Bercaw's *Melville's Sources* (1987), which complements Sealts by listing every book and article that has located another author's intertextual allusions in Melville's writing. Bercaw records studies that connect Melville to *American Notes, Bleak House*, *Martin Chuzzlewit, Nicholas Nickleby, David Copperfield*, and *The Pickwick Papers,* all of which books he could easily have obtained throughout his life.[85]

It should come as no surprise that Melville's style rewards studies of literary influence so abundantly. Like Ishmael, the sub-sub-librarian who swims through countless volumes of accumulated knowledge about the sea before committing his own sea voyage to the page, Melville practiced a kind of imaginative "research," using material from multiple other texts—often copied verbatim—to establish an ambience of restless inquiry and perpetual skepticism. This is particularly true of his early fictions, in which quotations from various authorities on any subject—a foreign culture, a rare commodity, or the proper way to run a man-of-war—ironically reveal the ambiguities still surrounding that subject. Melville's intextual references and allusions are never an end in themselves, then, but a means to critiquing the ideologies, implicit or otherwise, in the texts that he encountered. Both the sources of information and its application by past authors become as important as the information itself. Like Poe, Melville also makes reading itself the central task of his art, turning his characters into readers so that his readers will become like characters—active participants in the struggle to find meaning in the events of his fiction. The result is a style both allusive and introspective, subtly invoking other texts with the purpose of establishing a complex exchange with them.

Among the most intriguing arguments for such a multi-leveled intertextual exchange between Dickens and Melville is advanced by Robert Weisbuch in his *Atlantic Double-Cross*

[85] Mary K. Bercaw, *Melville's Sources* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1953) 76, 129.

(1986). Weisbuch describes "Bartleby, the Scrivener" as an "all-out attack on *Bleak House,"*[86] motivated by a mix of nationalism, writerly fraternity, and "personal ire."[87] According to this view, Melville, noticing the resemblance of certain passages in *Bleak House* to *The Scarlet Letter,* and incensed by Dickens' mocking reference to spontaneous combustion—a device from *Redburn*—in that same novel, contrived his tale of the enigmatic law copyist as a "parodic, competitive return"[88] on Dickens' most legalistically-minded work. According to Weisbuch, by distilling the soul of *Bleak House* into a magazine story about a clerk supposedly from the Dead Letter Office, Melville tries to expose Dickens' sprawling novel as a dead letter in itself. The "Story of Wall-Street" thus strikes a blow for American literature in general and the genius of Hawthorne and Melville in particular.

Weisbuch's article makes a persuasive case for the idea that Melville, in composing "Bartleby," was somehow writing back to Dickens. Granting, as scholars certainly should, that Melville read *Bleak House* in 1852,[89] he points to an early passage of Melville's story (published one year later) which nevertheless denies the very existence of that novel. The lawyer, in announcing "law-copyists or scriveners" as the topic of his narrative, also describes them as a "singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know has been written."[90] This "claim to originality,"[91] says Weisbuch, situates Bartleby as the earliest in a line of fictional scriveners,

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[86] Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 39.
[87] Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross,* 41.
[88] Ibid., 41.
[89] Weisbuch, 36, notes that *Bleak House* first appeared serially in *Harper's*, to which Melville subscribed.
[90] Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: a Story of Wall-Street," in *The Writings of Herman Melville: The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall et al (Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), 14. All further quotations from "Bartleby" are from this edition.
[91] Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross,* 43.

ignoring the more legitimate claim of *Bleak House*'s Nemo to that distinction.[92] I wish to point out, however, that Bartleby is also described throughout his story as a "clerk," and that this title marks him as no less a spiritual descendent of perhaps the strangest clerk in Dickens: Mr. Chuffey, the "little, blear-eyed, weazen-faced, ancient old man" from *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843), who, like Bartleby, constantly confounds his fellow characters with riddling remarks and profound silences. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Bartleby's Dickensian pedigree cannot be understood completely without close examination of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, a novel whose impact on Melville's style, subject matter, and artistic self-conception has not yet been recognized fully While my interest thus lies primarily with the oft-neglected "English" chapters of Dickens' transatlantic novel (since Chuffey appears there), I will also focus on one particular episode from Martin's misadventures in America to speculate about how Dickens shaped Melville's sense of the possibilities for satirical critique of American culture. Ultimately, by further probing the role of Dickensian influence and inheritance in the "little history"[93] of an enigmatic clerk, I hope to shed some additional light on the vision of authorial originality and creativity modeled by Melville's art.

Perhaps no nineteenth-century American story more relentlessly dramatizes the problem of its own interpretation than "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Bartleby himself is, above all, a problem figure whose utterly disruptive yet inscrutable presence demands narrative interpretation while forever withholding definitive answers. It is not surprising that the vast majority of criticism about "Bartleby" written in the last hundred years has been chiefly preoccupied with explaining the clerk's character. During the first half of the twentieth century, scholars found in Bartleby the

[92] Indeed, Melville's lawyer seems to be ignoring a long line of stories about clerks and law-copyist, including Akaky, the beleaguered protagonist of Gogol's "The Overcoat."
[93] "Bartleby," 14.

image of Christ, Thoreau's vision of passive resistance, and Marx's alienated worker, among many other paradigms.[94] More recently, the very process of reading Bartleby has become a popular critical topic. Richard Zlogar suggests that all readings follow the same three steps: "we begin with the 'facts' surrounding Bartleby within the fictional work, advance to the condition that these facts depict, and then conclude with the person or situation we settle on as a reasonable match for the figured condition."[95] Focusing on step two in this process, Zlogar calls Bartleby a "figurative leper,"[96] justifying his choice with a reminder that "Bartleby is alienated, rejected, *and yet alive*."[97] This stress on the livingness of Bartleby is intended to counter Richard Hoag's discussion of the clerk as a figurative corpse, but it has value beyond that particular debate. At the most basic of levels, it is Bartleby's status as a living being, capable of movement and speech, which gives such poignancy to his frequent and unalterable bouts of motionlessness and silence. The most illustrative contrast is with Dickens' Nemo, who enters *Bleak House* already dead and who therefore cannot possibly provide any information about his past or interior life. That Bartleby is threatened, cajoled, flattered, and mocked into explaining himself suggests how different a place he occupies in both the mimetic surroundings and the narrative structure of his story. Melville's tale, like Poe's "The Raven," consists primarily of a botched interrogation.[98] Just as the poem's speaker, unable to determine whether the raven is "bird or devil," must think and speak of him as both at once, so the employer and the reader of Melville's story find in

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[94] For a biographical reading, see Lewis Mumford, "Melville's Miserable Year"; for Bartleby as Thoreau, see Egbert S. Oliver, "A Second Look at 'Bartleby.'" Richard Chase, in "A Parable of the Artist," varyingly reads Bartleby as a schizophrenic, a Christ figure, the artist figure in general, and Melville in particular, though his reading is predicated on certain problematic assumptions (e,g. the identification of Melville with his lawyer-narrator). All of these essays are included in *Bartleby the Inscrutable,* ed. M. Thomas Inge (Hamden: Archon Books, 1979).

[95] Zlogar, Richard, "Body Politics in 'Bartleby': Leprosy, Healing, and Christ-ness in Melville's 'Story of Wall-Street,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53.4 (1999): 505-29; 506.

[96] Zlogar, "Body Politics in 'Bartleby,'" 506.

[97] Ibid., 507.

[98] For greater elaboration of the "botches" in Melville, and of his (failed) attempts to portray failure as triumph, see Gavin Jones, *Failure and the American Writer* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 35-59.

Bartleby's quiet workplace vigil both the absence of meaning and the disorienting convergence of many possible meanings. In both works, the refusal (or failure) of an enigmatic figure to communicate its own origins and motivations—that is, to participate in the narrative creation of intelligible character—provides latitude for a critical reconsideration of creativity itself by the reader. As I will suggest later, Dickens, through Chuffey, flirts with a similar kind of narrative indeterminacy, but finally resolves the mystery in service of his novel's overarching plot. Like all his early novels, *Martin Chuzzlewit* concludes with a bleak, anarchic vision of crime, chaos, violence, and injustice giving way to the certainty of redemption and happiness.[99]

To appreciate how Melville consistently avoids even the faintest trace of that certainty, the reader must pay close attention to what Bartleby does. If this sounds like a ridiculously self-evident proposition, it is nevertheless easily neglected due to the very nature of Melville's story. Bartleby is constantly described in terms of what he will not do—copy documents, describe his past, leave the office—or will not become. Even while announcing Bartleby as the subject of his story, Melville's narrator takes care to indicate that many other potential stories will be left untold for the sake of this exercise: "But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener the strangest I ever saw or heard of."[100] Such is the fundamental tension of his narrative: Bartleby, though highly eccentric, stands at the centre of this tale, frustrating readerly definitions—ours and the lawyer's—of what constitutes meaningful action. As with so many characters in Beckett, it is the minuteness (and even the banality) of Bartleby's actions that keeps them hidden in plain sight. Even the immortality of his famous phrase, "I would prefer not to," belies both his many interesting variations on that phrase

[99] Recall *Barnaby Rudge*, in which the chaos and horrors of mob rule in London dissolve into a sentimental finale. Poe and Melville are alike in isolating one feature of a Dickens novel and using that feature to stave off the closure of which the young Dickens was so fond.
[100] "Bartleby," 13.

and his several other memorable retorts throughout the story.[101] Revealing the nuances of his character in the slightest additional word or moment of silence, Bartleby becomes a perpetual stumbling block to his own (or, more accurately, the lawyer's) narrative—a character who is inconvenient, uncooperative, "and yet alive."

It is with the livingness of Melville's clerk in mind that I choose to ground much of this essay in the first stage of the interpretive process defined by Zlogar: the "facts" in the case of Bartleby—what he does and what is done to him. Besides illuminating the scrivener's considerable resemblance to Dickens' Chuffey, this literal-minded approach reveals how the conventional aims (plot and character development) of both narratives are subverted by the foregrounding of one character's ability to do and say as much or as little as he chooses. What Melville's tale derives from Dickens' novel, then, is the notion that the narrative and mimetic aspects of a story can be played against one another. A character who lacks any power in his fictional milieu (i.e. Wall-Street) can become powerful narratively by refusing to play a clear role in the drama at hand.

Bartleby wields this narrative power at all moments of the tale. Indeed, a close reading of "Bartleby" yields surprisingly detailed descriptions of how he behaves—even when that behavior constitutes a seeming lack of behaviour. Consider the detail with which Melville's narrator, working from memory, describes the comportment of the scrivener:

> His face was leanly composed; his grey eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience, or impertinence in his manner;

[101] These other comments include: "No more," "Do you not see the reason for yourself," and "I am not particular." Perhaps the most unsettling sentence spoken by Bartleby is one of his last: "I know you (…) and I want nothing to say to you" (45). His ambiguous use of "want" encourages two very different interpretations: either Bartleby has no desire to address the lawyer, or his mind already contains everything that might be said to this man. Of course, we cannot determine which reading is correct, any more than Poe's poem resolves the question of "bird or devil."

> in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises.[102]

Instead, the lawyer chooses "to forget the matter for the present,"[103] asking Nippers to carry out the task in question. Confronted for the first time with Bartleby's mild-mannered brand of defiance, the lawyer suddenly finds himself stripped of the options legally available to him as employer. His power to direct Bartleby is cancelled by the clerk's words; his power to dismiss Bartleby, by his silence. With neither conventional response available to him, the narrator can do little more than watch as Bartleby gradually ceases copying altogether, at which point the clerk's abiding physical presence becomes even more disruptive—and even more threatening. In the lines immediately following Bartleby's renunciation of his work, the narrator observes: "He remained, as ever, a fixture in my chamber. Nay—if that were possible—he became still more of a fixture than before."[104] The word "fixture" is important here, as it reminds us that Bartleby's disruptive power over the narrator, while increasingly psychological as the story progresses, originates in his physical presence in the office. The simple fact of his actually being there is easily forgotten in the rush to assign symbolic and ideological meanings to his personage. Decades after his death, Bartleby haunts the aging lawyer's memory as a metaphysical presence that cannot be dismissed; for the younger clerk of the story, however, the problem of Bartleby is a very tangible one—that of a live body that will not be moved. When the narrator asks, "What are you doing here, Bartleby?" clearly expecting some explanation of the clerk's motives, he instead receives a humorously and disarmingly literal reply: "Sitting upon the banister."[105] Recall how Poe's raven becomes, in the poem's final stanza, an everlasting fixture of the speaker's

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[102] "Bartleby," 20-1.
[103] Ibid., 21.
[104] "Bartleby," 32.
[105] "Ibid.," 40.

private study: "and the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting."[106] The creature's silent vigil becomes the overriding action of the poem, overwhelming all previous attempts by the student to make meaning out of his sudden visit.

At this point, it may be worth suggesting what Melville's clerk shares with that of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Both Chuffey and Bartleby upset their fellow characters by their presence as inscrutable living beings, a style of disruption in which Nemo, who is already dead at the outset of *Bleak House*, cannot share. Weisbuch is right to describe Nemo as "present yet absent"[107]— able to shape the events of Dickens' novel from beyond the grave— but that does make him a "fixture" as Bartleby and Chuffey are fixtures of their respective narrative worlds. Speaking out at the wrong moment, travelling unbidden through streets and into private chambers, the latter two clerks often seem "unstuck" (as Vonnegut uses the word in *Slaughterhouse-Five*) from their respective fictional surroundings.

How exactly does Dickens' novel deploy the livingness of Chuffey? Let us turn to his first appearance in the novel, which shares much with the early movements if Melville' story. The clerk's entrance is just as sudden and unceremonious as Bartleby's. Like Melville's clerk, moreover, he seems from his story's outset to disrupt the normal affairs of his fellow characters, causing particular frustrating for the viciously self-important Jonas Chuzzlewit:

> "Now Chuffey, stupid, are you ready?"
>
> Chuffey remained immoveable.
>
> "Always a perverse old file, he was," said Mr. Jonas, coolly helping himself to another splice. "Ask him, Father."
>
> "Are you ready for your dinner Chuffey?" asked the old man.

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[106] "The Raven," 61.
[107] Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross*, 47.

> "Yes, yes," said Chuffey, lighting up into a sentient human creature at the first sound of the voice, so that it was at once a curious and quite a moving sight to see him.[108]

This first passage establishes Chuffey's tenuous relationship not just with his own house, but also with the text itself. For a moment, it is unclear—to the reader, if not to Jonas—whether Chuffey's remaining "immoveable" constitutes an act of defiance or merely a sign of his failing senses. Not until the clerk becomes "a sentient human creature" and speaks to Anthony is his earlier silence confirmed as a subtle sign of agency—or perversity, as another character in the room would have it. Ignoring Jonas' cruel question and responding to that of his more benevolent father, Chuffey indicates quite clearly which Chuzzlewit he "prefers" (to borrow from Bartleby). And yet, as the last lines of this excerpt suggest, there is still much ambiguity about the little clerk. According to Dickens' narrator, Chuffey's revival arouses somewhat incompatible responses in those around him: it is a sight "at once curious and quite moving." That phrase conjures the atmosphere of pathos and bewilderment that will hang over his every further appearance throughout the novel—with the possible exception of the last. But Chuffey's curious air is the result of more than his appearance and personality. Further obscuring the clerk's bizarre character is the initial lack of any clearly defined role in Dickens' often sensational drama of love and inheritance. The very title of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" makes clear that Bartleby, despite his strangeness—or rather because of it—will be the principal subject of the tale that is to follow, a fact soon confirmed by the lawyer-narrator's aforementioned introduction. Dickens' narrator, in contrast, gives no clear indication of the centrally important role that Chuffey will play during the novel's finale. As of Chapter Eleven, he seems to be little

[108] Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 156. All further citations of the novel are from this edition.

more than a mild distraction from more urgent matters: Tom Pinch's fate, Martin Chuzzlewit's fortunes, and Seth Pecksniff's schemes.

Nor does Chuffey's narrative stature increase very soon after. Ever the consummate literary juggler, Dickens, having established his cast, scatters them to the winds, even allowing his protagonist and another character to cross the Atlantic (which the author himself had recently done). Throughout the middle chapters of *Martin Chuzzlewit,* as the plot splinters repeatedly—first with the Pecksniff family's ignominious trip to London, then with Martin and Mark's departure for America, and still later with Tom's expulsion and disillusionment—Chuffey's early appearances likely become quite faint in the reader's memory, while his role in what remains of the novel seems uncertain and perhaps unimportant. That state of affairs changes dramatically, however, after the death of Anthony Chuzzlewit, the one man whose voice could elicit some sensible response from the clerk. From that point onward, Chuffey's importance to the novel increases precipitously, though the reader is kept relatively in the dark as to why. Even while Anthony is dying, Dickens forcefully invites the reader to suspect wrongdoing on Jonas' part, but the nature of his actions—and their connection to Chuffey—remains unknown. In this atmosphere of half-disclosed guilt and mysterious distress, the troubled clerk becomes the bottleneck of Dickens' plot; his grief is not only a symptom of the novel's unresolved state, but also the key to its final resolution. Eventually, both the book's heroes and its principal villain, Jonas, realize that their fate will be decided by whether Chuffey confesses what he saw on the night of Anthony's death. Thus the management of Chuffey's body and mind becomes the deciding factor in a work that seems hardly to notice him at its outset. In a novel that Dickens himself described as being centrally concerned with "how selfishness propagates itself,"[109]

[109] Dickens declared this to be the novel's theme in the preface to the 1849 "Cheap" edition.

closure is ultimately achieved by thrusting a virtually selfless and utterly marginal figure into the centre of the narrative—and then returning him to the margin when his purpose has been served.

A similar narrative effect occurs in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," but Melville ironizes it by giving us a first-person narrator who appears in the story and whose judgment is often highly suspect. In his role as storyteller, the lawyer puts Bartleby precisely where he does not belong: at the centre of things. Bartleby's decision to stop copying changes his character much as the death of Anthony Chuzzlewit does Chuffey's; after these respective turning points, both clerks become "fixtures" that resist the control of other characters and even expose the tenuousness of narrative itself. Faced with a living mystery whom he cannot unfix from his office by any conventional means, the lawyer formulates three different strategies to deal with the clerk's troublesome personage, only two of which he puts into practice. The first (and ultimately untried) approach is simply to deny that Bartleby even exists. On returning from an afternoon walk to find Bartleby still occupying his office, he resolves to "assume" the opposite—that Bartleby is in fact gone. "In the legitimate carrying out of this assumption, I might enter my office in a great hurry, and pretending not to see Bartleby at all, walk straight against him as if he were air."[110] Whereas Whitman, in "Song of Myself," uses the word "assume" to access rolling vistas of bodily self-knowledge, the lawyer would apply his own "doctrine of assumptions"[111] in the hope of making solid bodies disappear. Although the lawyer soon dismisses this plan's chances of success as "rather dubious," it remains telling that he would dream of abrogating Bartleby's form as though it were some contractual agreement. If the clerk's body must be suffered to exist, then the lawyer is left with only two options: he can remove himself from Bartleby's presence, or remove Bartleby from his own. Both strategies fail for the obvious and inescapable reason that Bartleby

[110]"Bartleby," 35.
[111] Ibid., 35.

must exist somewhere—he cannot simply disappear. Like Chuffey before the exposure of Jonas, then, Melville's clerk confounds his interpreters with his persistent refusal either to die or to reveal his inner self (which, in a narrative sense, is also death).

Another likeness between Chuffey and Bartleby deserves particular mention, since it further underscores their shared role as narrative destabilizers: both men are mocked and threatened by characters with more straightforward motivations. Asked (in the afternoon) what he thinks of Bartleby's behaviour, Turkey thunders: "Think of it! (...) I think I'll just step behind his screen, and black his eyes for him!"[112] Compare this threat with the advice of Mrs. Sarah Gamp, for whom the riddling, unproductive Chuffey becomes an object of contempt and ridicule: "You want a pitcher of cold water throw'd over you to bring you round; that's my belief; and if you was under Betsey Prig you'd have it, too, I do assure you."[113] In a move of special interest to this essay, she further rebukes the clerk for having too much license, telling Mercy Pecksniff: "You give him his own way too much by half. A worritin' wexagious creature!"[114] It has become a truism of "Bartleby" scholarship that Melville uses Turkey and Nippers to caricaturize the Dickensian vision of character, setting their one-note personalities and repetitive quirks against the utter unpredictability of Bartleby. Eccentric, talkative, and often inebriated, Mrs. Gamp is precisely the sort of minor Dickens character that would have inspired such caricatures as Melville draws. By setting her against Chuffey, whose only predictable tendency for much of the novel if his refusal to speak clearly, Dickens establishes a contrast not only between victim and oppressor, but also between two different experiences of narrative character. Chuffey, before the novel's conclusion, cannot be identified by any familiar

[112] Ibid., 24.
[113] *Martin Chuzzlewit,* 604.
[114] Ibid., 605.

catchphrase or predictable tick. He is consistent only in his baffling ability to disorient and unsettle characters around him.

This quasi-supernatural power, quite like that of Poe's black bird, grows as the novel progresses. As the intrigue surrounding Anthony's death increases (and Jonas' paranoia with it), Chuffey becomes, like Bartleby, "still more of a fixture than before." Indeed, several of the later passages that describe Chuffey seem awash with the dark lyricism of Poe's writing in general and "The Raven" in particular: "Under the hearthstone, like a creature of ill omen, sat the aged clerk, with his eyes fixed on some withered branches in the stove."[115] Chapter Forty-Six gathers all the principal players of the novel into the dank chambers of Jonas Chuzzlewit and his abused bride, Mercy Pecksniff. This scene becomes Chuffey's tour-de-force. Although Dickens' narrator has hinted repeatedly to the reader that Chuffey holds the secret to Anthony Chuzzlewit's sudden death, that secret will not even be suspected by the novel's virtuous characters for several chapters yet. To Martin, Tom, Mercy, and the other assembled guests, Chuffey seems both mad and profoundly knowing at once. Halting all conversation with his questions and accusatory looks, he is impossible to dismiss from the room, let alone from thought. In one of Dickens' most chilling scenes—and one that Poe must have admired very much—the little clerk demonstrates his newfound power by wandering the house, casting the shadow of death over all that he sees:

> "There's some one dead," he said, "or dying; and I want to know who it is. Go see, go see! Where's Jonas?"
>
> "In the country," she replied.

[115] Ibid., 364.

> The old man gazed at her as if he doubted what she said, or had not heard her; and rising from his chair, walked across the room and up stairs, whispering as he went, "Foul play!"[116]

This scene is Chuffey's last major appearance before his terrible secret is brought out. Far from waiting on the right command from the right master to leave his seat, the clerk goes wherever he chooses, saying whatever occurs to him, regardless of whether it is understood by anyone. Reading *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Melville must have realized the sort of conclusion to which Dickens was tending. He may well have been more struck, however, by scenes like this one, in which the narrative temporarily grinds to halt on the whim of what seems its most powerless character. If this comparatively unpopular Dickens novel was sufficiently in his thoughts during the Pittsfield years (1850-1863) to prompt his invention of the "Mrs. Pecksniff" moniker, then it seems plausible that Chuffey, too, was on his mind during the composition of "Bartleby" in 1853.

And yet Bartleby would hardly be worth comparing with Chuffey if that comparison yielded only similarities. Their common features are the backdrop against which certain crucial differences become vivid and instructive to the close reader. In the end, these two characters develop strikingly different relationships to their respective narratives. While Chuffey transforms from a narrative stumbling block into the linchpin of his novel, Bartleby consistently remains a friction against any tidy satisfying resolution of his own tale. As Pearl Chester Solomon observes, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" "does not have a beginning, middle, and end (...) and this may be so because, to Melville, life neither shapes itself into beginnings, middles, and ends, nor derives meaning from that form."[117] Melville is highly sensitive, however, to the human habit of imposing such forms upon the formlessness of experience. After Bartleby's death, the lawyer,

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[116] Ibid., 604.
[117] Pearl Chester Solomon, *Dickens and Melville in Their Time* (New York: Columbia University Press), 9.

shifting his narrative to the present of thirty years later, still finds himself staring into the fathomless mystery of the clerk's life and death. From this vantage point, the lawyer, realizing the insufficiency of his "little narrative" to explain Bartleby's nature and history, confesses himself "wholly unable to gratify" his readers' deepest curiosity, which he himself "fully share[s]."[118] But having admitted his limitations as a storyteller, the man cannot resist trying to exceed them. "Yet here I hardly know," he says somewhat coyly, "whether I should divulge one little item of rumour, which came to my ear a few months after the scrivener's decease."[119] This rumour, "that Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in a Dead Letter Office," becomes the basis for the story's second ending—one that is predominated by the lawyer's voice rather than by Bartleby's silence. Indeed, even as he doubts the authenticity of this intelligence—"how true it is, I cannot now tell"[120]—the lawyer fashions it into an epiphanic realization about the essence of Bartleby's motivations. While seeming to lament the sad fate of a man he could not save, Melville's opportunistic narrator actually saves himself from total disillusionment—a fate worse than death to him, as to Amasa Delano of *Benito Cereno* and many other characters in Melville. The lawyer's famous final cry of "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!"[121] merely insulates him against excessive exposure to the meaninglessness of life.

Even the mature Dickens never quite allows the thought of existential emptiness to permeate his writing as it does "Bartleby." Behind every mad, distraught, or otherwise unapproachable character there is always some truth, no matter how sordid, whose discovery can illuminate that character' motives and give shape to his struggles. This perceived significance of this truth depends on Dickens' ability to create for each character a traceable trajectory through

[118] "Bartleby," 45.
[119] Ibid., 45.
[120] Ibid., 45.
[121] Ibid., 45.

the world of the novel. Consider the moment in *Martin Chuzzlewit* when Jonas gives his future wife an account of how the Chuffey became so strange and unapproachable:

> He's been addling his old brains with figures and book-keeping all his life; and twenty year or so ago he went and took a fever. All the time he was out of his head (which was three weeks) he never left off casting up; and he got to so many millions at last that I don't believe he's ever been quite right since.[122]

This early glimpse of Chuffey's history, though presented by a character much fouler than Melville's lawyer, bears a striking resemblance to the rumour about Bartleby's employment in the Dead Letter Office. That Dickens supplies this sort of information as fact at the beginning of his narrative, rather than as rumour at the end, as Melville does, suggests the former author's much firmer belief in plot material as significant to the development of literary character. In other words: Dickens immediately gives his clerk "a fever" so that the reader may watch it subside. For all the strange riddles and profound silences with which he disrupts his surrounding narrative, Chuffey finally becomes a crucial part of that narrative—nothing less than the linchpin of the *denouement*. Without his testimony, the confederacy of heroic characters in *Martin Chuzzelwit*—among them Martin, Tom Pinch, and John Westlock—cannot expose the grisly truth behind Anthony's death. Once a marginal figure whose behavior was a friction that threatened to derail the plot, Dickens' bizarre clerk is, in the end, absorbed into the heart of that plot, becoming the unlikely bearer of closure and satisfaction despite his earlier remoteness from both.

Dickens' novel thus gives readers a glimpse of something more radical than the novel's ending. So long as his mystery remains unsolved, Chuffey retains Bartleby-like power to disrupt

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[122]*Martin Chuzzlewit,* 154.

not only the peace of other characters but also the very forward motion of the story in which he has his being. This power cannot endure, however, and precipitates a climax in which Chuffey, once the most marginal of supporting characters, brings about the timely unmasking of villainy and triumph of good. Once Jonas is punished and Old Martin proves healthy, Chuffey becomes little more than an accessory to the requisite operations of Dickens' happy ending. Regardless of the degree to which Melville was conscious of the resemblance between his story and *Martin Chuzzlewit,* the former becomes a forceful push away from the eventual (epistemological) certainty that Dickens needs to resolve his story. By only pretending to resolve its own narrative tensions, "Bartleby" marks Melville's abandonment of any artistic dependence upon that certainty.

So far, we have seen how Melville's project in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" both emulates and extends the narrative strategy used by Dickens to choreograph Chuffey's character. By writing the narrative of a clerk whose motivations he refuses to expose even for the sake of a satisfying conclusion, Melville appears to be overstepping the boundaries of what Dickens found permissible or even possible in his own fiction. Whether that forceful break truly represents an "all-out attack," however, as Weisbuch suggests, is a question that we may begin to answer through close reading of an early episode in Dickens' novel. When Martin and Mark Tapley arrive in America, they quickly stumble into the acquaintance of a man named Mr. Bevan. The only free, American-born character in the novel who is not a scoundrel or buffoon, Bevan serves Dickens' scathingly satirical agenda by becoming a mouthpiece for the author's criticism of American society. When Martin suggests that it would require "great courage to write freely on any question that was not a party one in this very free country," Bevan takes his own criticism a

step further, declaring that "no satirist could breathe this air." He goes on to describe how utterly poisonous the American intellectual climate has become to great satire:

> If another Juvenal or Swift could rise up among us tomorrow, he would be hunted down. If you have any knowledge of our literature, and can give me the name of any man, American born and bred, who has anatomized our follies as a people, and not as this or that party; and has escaped the foulest and most brutal slander; the most inveterate hatred and intolerant pursuit; it will be a strange name in my ears, believe me."[123]

Poe would have concurred bitterly with this statement. Twain, who read *Martin Chuzzlewit* as a teenager,[124] would send his own pair of travelers, Huck and Jim, on a journey to discover America's character—a satirical quest that resembles Martin and Mark's insofar as it involves exposure to confidence men, poverty, and the evils of slave ownership. Thirty years before *Huckleberry Finn,* however, Melville answered Dickens' challenge to American satirists by different means. Indeed, the satire of "Bartleby" answers (and even exceeds) the prescription of Mr. Bevan perfectly; making no reference to political parties, it is not even "particular" about what elements of the nation are under attack. At one level, the story derides the nascent commercial culture that substitutes control for compassion and authority for altruism—the opposite of the shoulder-rubbing line that Ishmael idealistically describes in "Loomings." But, as critics have demonstrated, "Bartleby" also functions as a satiric meditation on transcendental philosophy, genteel Christian culture and society, and the alienating effects of capitalist industrialization, among many other widely varied topics. If Melville used his "Story of Wall-Street" to transcend the psychological bounds of Dickens' narrative form, he also simultaneously

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[123] *Martin Chuzzlewit,* 237.
[124] Joseph H. Gardner, "Mark Twain and Dickens," *PMLA* 84.1 (1969), 90-101; 91-2. Gardner mentions a brief letter in which the young Twain urges his father "not to be discouraged, but 'come out strong' like Mark Tapley."

responded to Dickens' cry for an undiscriminating indictment of American consciousness in the nineteenth century. And though Melville's name was not strange to Dickens, the extent of his satiric triumph with "Bartleby, the Scrivener" undoubtedly was.

Melville's relationship to Dickens, then, is not purely—or even primarily—antagonistic. Like Poe, Melville was a literary nationalist of the most aesthetically-minded sort; preferring great American books to British ones at the present time, he also maintains that genius trumps all patriotic obligations. As an essayist, Melville also declares that readers have barely begun to appreciate even the most enduring works of literary genius. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses," he rebukes "those mistaken souls, who dream of Shakespeare as a mere man of Richard-the-Third humps, and Macbeth daggers."[125] This is much the same thought expressed by Poe in his review *Watkins Tuttle*—a sensitivity to what is truly admirable, and therefore consistently neglected, in the work of a (British) man of genius. For Melville, then, as for Poe, great art doubles as clear-sighted criticism of other great art. In revising *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Melville looks past the most familiar and lauded features of Dickens writing—his flair for comedy and the theatrical, his management of multiple plot lines, his sentimentality—and instead reproduces something altogether different: an enigmatic, untouchable figure of narrative disruption. "Bartleby, the Scrivener" freezes Chuffey in the state he assumes near the climax of the novel: a living ghost, unintelligible, pathetic, and somehow all-powerful, threatening to collapse even his surrounding narrative into abject indeterminacy with what Melville calls "the sane madness of vital truth."[126]

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125 Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in *The Writings of Herman Melville: The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall et al (New York: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), 239-53; 244. All further quotations from Melville's essay are from this edition, which, though authoritative, has also generated controversy with its implied image of Melville as an ardent nationalist. For more on this subject, see P. Marc Bousquet, **"**Mathews's Mosses? Fair Papers and Foul: A Note on the Northwestern-Newberry Edition of Melville's 'Hawthorne and His Mosses,'" *New England Quarterly* 67.4 (1994): 622-49.

126 Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," 244.

Setting aside this likeness between the two clerks, I submit that "Bartleby" owes another debt to *Martin Chuzzlewit.* Aside from offering a model for Bartleby himself, Dickens' novel elsewhere provides a rather comic subplot of which Melville's tale seems a perfect tragic inversion. In Chapter XL, Tom Pinch, recently expelled and disillusioned by his former employer, Mr. Pecksniff, and having traveled to London in search of his fortune, finds employment "under very singular circumstances." Approached by the mysterious Mr. Fips, who claims to represent an employer whose name he cannot (of prefers not to) reveal, Tom soon finds himself installed as a clerk at Temple Gate in Fleet Street, in an office that seems too disorderly even to be Kafkaesque:

> Moveable of every kind lay strewn about, without the least attempt at order, and were intermixed with boxes, hampers, and all sorts of lumber. On all the floors were piles of books, to the amount 'perhaps of some thousands of volumes: these tied in bales: those wrapped on paper, as they had been purchased: others scattered singly or in heaps: not one upon the shelves which lines the walls.[127]

Clearly, Tom's new job is intended to seem almost too perfect—especially by comparison with the constant degradation he endures under Pecksniff. Indeed, the terms of his employment seem particularly fantastic when one remembers the abysmal working conditions chronicled everywhere else in Dickens' canon. According to Fips, the new clerk need not observe rigidly fixed hours: "Let us say from half-past nine, or thereabouts; one day perhaps a little earlier, another day perhaps a little later, according as you feel disposed, and as you arrange your work."[128] Nor is the work itself remotely unpleasant; the amiable Tom describes the task of

[127] Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit,* 525.
[128] Ibid., 526.

arranging books as "an occupation full of interest to me,"[129] a phrase that could not be farther from Bartleby's refrain of "I would prefer not to." Indeed, Tom's excitement and gratitude are dampened only by the mystery surrounding his employer. Every attempt to discover the man's name meets with the same irrelevant reply from Fips: he urges Tom to "shut the door" when he's finished, adding, "It'll lock itself if you slam it."[130] Recall Bartleby's disarmingly literal reply to his employer's question of "What are you doing here?" Dickens' mounts the same joke by letting his character pose a crucial question and then slamming a door in his face. The difference between these two scenes, of course, is one of tone: Dickens plays Tom's powerlessness off for comic effect, while Bartleby's proves either tragic or worryingly devoid of any structure at all.

At the end of the novel, Tom's pleasant problem is solved. In Chapter Fifty-Two, his employer is unmasked as none other than Old Martin Chuzzlewit, the same righteous figure who punishes Pecksniff, blesses Martin's engagement to Mary, and generally wields wealth and influence in such ways as to set everything right with those characters who have behaved well throughout the story.[131] There are many such perfect benefactors in Dickens—among them *Oliver Twist*'s Mr. Brownlow and the Cherryble brothers of *Nicholas Nickleby*—there are none in Melville. In an essay on Dickens' relationship to theatre, John Glavin cheekily submits these characters as evidence that the British novelist could never have made it as an actor: "Dickens can imagine performances," he insists, "but not drama. In fact, what he delights to imagine is the displacement of dramatic action: surrogate intervention, someone else acting on your behalf."[132]

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[129] Ibid., 525.
[130] Ibid., 525.
[131] Old Martin can be read as a comic counterpart to King Lear—a patriarch whose madness gives way just in time, allowing him to dispense justice and reward loyalty and integrity just as Dickens readers might wish. While this resemblance has yet to be described in published criticism, Alexander Welsh discusses the profound influence of William Charles MaCready's 1838 Lear on Dickens' youthful writerly sensibilities. See *The Humanist Comedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 216-29.
[132] John Glavin, "Dickens and Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. John O. Jordan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 195.

In its simplest form, Melville's story is about the lawyer's repeated failure to become such a benefactor for his clerk; no application of wealth, power, ingenuity, kindness, or love can prevent the little clerk's descent into the Tombs. Melville's Wall-Street seems neither as just as Dickens' England, where the corrupt Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Insurance Company is ultimately thwarted, nor as deliberately nasty as Dickens' America, where con artists lure naïve travelers into a toxic cesspool disguised as the land of opportunity. Instead, the American author paints an amoral world in which people cannot even communicate with one another. By reversing the dynamic of this subplot, Melville converts Tom's dream into the "Bartleby" lawyer's nightmare, in the process revealing the perceptual limitations of Dickens' novels.

The abject failure of Dickensian charity is built into the narrative structure of "Bartleby." Whereas Dickens' narrative aligns us with the perspective of the curious (and highly sympathetic) clerk, Melville put his reader behind the lawyer's shoulder, far from the inner workings of Bartleby's mind. The two clerks represent startlingly different conceptions of an everyman figure: long-suffering Tom continually models the good that may reside in everyone, while Bartleby seems a blank slate onto which any personality, any motivations, can be projected by the reader. Though Tom's repeated inquiries about his employer are rebuffed as flatly as the layer's questions about Bartleby, there is an unmistakable and deceptively simple difference in tone between them—the difference between inexplicable good fortune and inexplicable suffering. In turning Tom's experience inside out in this way, Melville turns modern comedy to modern tragedy, testifies to the alienation of the modern era, and models the sort of consistently unsettling fiction that can capture such alienation as art.

Melville's story thrusts an uncooperative character into the center of narrative attention and then records not his story but the failure to tell his story. Dickens does the opposite,

introducing Chuffey as a peripheral figure and then granting him a crucial part in resolving the mystery of Anthony Chuzzlewit's death—the better to solve a murder and resolve the ambiguities of Chuffey's character in one fell swoop. In this way, Chuffey's disruptive power is curtailed in service of a happy ending. A similar operation takes place in *Bleak House*, when the enigmatic Nemo metamorphoses into the romantic hero Captain Hawdon. Chuffey's final transformation, though not so dramatic or sensational, does leave his character fairly "settled," to borrow a loaded term from Henry James' "The Beast in the Jungle."[133] At the close of *Martin Chuzzlewit,* Dickens' clerk reappears, more composed and coherent than ever before, as a companion to the bereaved Mercy Pecksniff. According to the narrator, "The room looked very sorrowful, and so did she; but she had one friend beside her, faithful to the last. Old Chuffey."[134] Once a walking mystery, Chuffey has become a walking solution. His sane ramblings have dissolved into quieter expression of the faithfulness that had precipitated them all along. Later, when Old Martin offers to spare Mercy the torment of witnessing her cruel sister's sham wedding, we are told that "Mrs. Todgers, though most unwilling to part with her, added her persuasions. Even poor old Chuffey (of course included in the project) added his."[135] The parenthetical remark suggests somewhat ironically that Chuffey has become an afterthought in the scheme of Dickens' narrative. Melville, writing ten years after the serial publication of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, refuses to integrate Bartleby's quietly disruptive nature into the "project" of any larger, conventional plot, instead leaving his clerk as a figure both profoundly unsettled and unsettling. Melville's revision of Dickens represents not full-blown antagonism but a paradoxical fulfillment of the Dickens' vision for American art. In denying his story the kind of ostensibly

[133] John Marcher, the protagonist of James' story, dreams of such a dramatic, life-altering event as would give shape to his existence.
[134] Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit,* 708.
[135] Ibid., 709.

happy ending that Dickens perfected during early career, Melville makes a bold statement about the role and capabilities of American art.

Jo's Other Secret: Theatre and Authorship in *Little Women*

An avid reader with eclectic tastes, Louisa May Alcott often wrote the same qualities into her characters, particularly those trying to become artists themselves. Much as Bronson Alcott, who was a close friend of Emerson, famously revolutionized American education by enshrining dialogue, not straight lecture, as the primary tool for instructing children, his daughter depicts girls and boys forming dynamic, even critical relationships with their favorite books. Young talents like Jo in *Little Women* (1869) and Christie in *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873) develop their creative sensibilities by immersing themselves in the craft of certain prolific role models, including Dickens (a hero to both girls).In its exploration of how reading shapes the minds of precocious young Americans, Alcott's fiction also speaks volumes about how literary influence itself was perceived during the later nineteenth century.

Chapter Ten of *Little Women* provides the perfect case in point. Entitled "The P.C. and P.O.," this chapter finds Meg, Beth, Amy, and Jo absorbed in the business of their very own secret society, complete with badges, rituals, and their own publication. "[A]s all of the girls admired Dickens," the narrator explains, "they called themselves the Pickwick Club,"[136] but Dickens' influence over this clandestine organization runs deeper. Each girl has her Pickwickian counterpart, chosen on the grounds of compatibility: "Meg, as the eldest, was Samuel Pickwick; Jo, being of a literary turn, Augustus Snodgrass; Beth, because she was round and rosy, Tracy Tupman; and Amy, who was always trying to do what she couldn't, was Nathaniel Winkle."[137] In what seems a particularly canny commentary on the form and appeal of her own novel, Alcott also casts Laurie, who energizes *Little Women* with his pranks and his eventual romantic

[136] Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, ed. Anne K. Phillips (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 85. All further citations of the novel are from this edition.
[137] *Little Women,* 85.

feelings, as *Pickwick*'s most galvanic character, Sam Weller.[138] This is merely the first sign of how Alcott's Dickensian allusions, far from facile gestures to a popular text, establish a meaningful relationship between her own characters and those of an author whom she enjoyed immensely from girlhood.

How to interpret that relationship, however, is a problem that Alcott scholars have yet to explore in very much depth. The role of Dickens' works—but also of European literature more generally—in *Little Women* is a topic that strikes at the heart of American literary culture during Alcott's lifetime. Here a return to the discussion of Emerson would be helpful. Chapter Ten, when compared with certain later episodes in Volumes One and Two, would seem to encourage a certain cultural nationalist reading of the process of personal and creative development modelled by *Little Women*. Admiring European things in childhood, the March girls seem to turn gradually away from dependence on foreign models and influences, instead finding beauty and purpose in both themselves and their immediate surroundings. Such a reading can be understood and justified differently for different characters. Meg's domestic education involves rejecting the imported luxuries enjoyed by wealthier families (like the Moffats) in favour of a simpler happiness with John Brooke; for Amy, who remembers her priorities just in time, the temporary allure of majestic European art comes with the danger of a loveless marriage to Fred Vaughan; Jo, who bemoans losing a European tour to her younger sister, instead finds unexpected success when she gives up writing in an imitative, foreign mode and commits her cherished childhood memories to the page, in the process finding her own characteristic "style" at last. In every case, Alcott's vision of American identity-formation seemingly disavows the benefits of contact with

[138] The addition of Weller to the Pickwick Society precipitated the dramatic rise in popularity of Dickens' book. While Alcott seems therefore to appreciate her book's reliance on Laurie for excitement, it is doubtful whether she could have predicted the level of aggravation she would suffer over Laurie's potential relationship with Jo.

the wider world, or of the shaping influence of previous human achievements. By this logic, Dickens, though properly the stuff of childhood games and amusements, must be put aside as the March sisters mature.

However plausible this interpretation might seem at a glance, however, it fails to account for the full effect of transatlantic influences in general and British fiction in particular on the very literate American world of Alcott's novel. Indeed, the March girls' relationship to British novelists and dramatists seems to recall Emerson's important distinction between the right and wrong educational practices of various American colleges, mentioned in the Introduction to this project. Rather than "drill" themselves with the works of Dickens and his forbears, memorizing and repeating their lines in a process of rote imitation, the March sisters use those texts as a necessary backdrop against which to perform highly creative versions of both national and more deeply personal identity, even crossing social and gender divides in the process. The extent of the creative power deployed in these childhood theatricals is never more apparent than in "The P.C. and P.O." It would be hard to imagine two novels less similar in their structure, tone, and aims than *The Pickwick Papers* and *Little Women*. One follows the madcap, picaresque wanderings of four perpetually misguided and untrustworthy grown men; the other records the earnest moral and personal development of four dutiful young girls. While the gaping differences between these two works give Alcott's Chapter Ten a certain comic energy, there is more to this episode than a generic joke. The March girls successfully turn *Pickwick* to their own purposes, transforming certain elements of Dickens' novel and leaving others relatively intact. Jo, who "can't get over [her] disappointment in not being a boy," is unusually free to perform masculinity in the context of the game, and assumes for herself—paradoxically through imitation—a

facsimile of the self-determination that women cannot access in the public sphere.[139] Her sisters, for their part, use their game as a pretense to write stories and articles that are collected in their *Pickwick Portfolio*, flexing their creative muscles and developing skills necessary for life in the public sphere. Even Beth, who lacks Jo's "literary turn," manages to transform one of Marmee's recipes into "The History of a Squash." If the March girls' impersonations seem laughably modest by comparison with the rambling adventures of the real Samuel Pickwick and his companions, that modesty also represents a kind of mastery; distilling Dickens' rambling style, they perform only those elements of *Pickwick* that are of interest to them. Seen in this light, the "P.C." becomes not merely a repetition, but rather a clever revision of the Pickwick Society, as distinct from its source as any skillful dramatic adaptation of a literary work.

An exercise of creativity in itself, adapting Dickens also leads to further creative opportunities. When the girls admit Laurie into the "P.C"—despite rather ironic misgivings that he will spoil the propriety of their "ladies' club"[140]—he shows his gratitude by giving them a post office (the "P.O."), "as a means of promoting friendly relations between adjoining nations."[141] This gift widens the March girls' communicative network, strengthening their *Pickwick Portfolio* with a new contributor and subscriber. Laurie's choice of words, moreover, while intentionally grandiose, subtly underscores the international scope of the girls' cultural horizons. From his first appearance in the novel, the "Laurence boy" is identified with foreign countries and faraway travel. Jo's first conversation with Laurie, which transpires during the Gardiners' party, is consumed in large part by discussion of his time abroad. Though Laurie's

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[139] *Little Women,* 13. Jo declares her disappointment in Chapter One, whose title, "Playing Pilgrims," offers the first indication of how important performance and theatricality will become to the March sisters' development. See also Elizabeth Keyser's discussion of theatricality in the novel: Portrait(s) of the Artist: *Little Women*," in *Whispers in the Dark: The Fiction of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Elizabeth Keyser (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 58-82.
[140] *Little Women,* 90.
[141] Ibid*.,* 91.

experiences of the real Vevey and Paris are what initially fascinate Jo, it is the March sisters' domestic adaptation of an English culture—their private Pickwick Club—that inaugurates an intimate friendship with the mysterious Laurence boy. American precocity allows Alcott's youthful characters to explore the world even from the confines of their attic.

By staging one of her novel's most important scenes—Laurie's figurative adoption by the March girls—in the midst of so much Pickwickian play-acting, Alcott also advances an idea of creativity in which familiar literary fictions can be made "new" through the revitalizing power of theatricality and performance. It is the act of performing a Dickens' novel—transforming his original text into a differently original creative experience—that makes contact with British art conducive rather than stifling to the children's development. For Alcott, more than for Poe and Melville, the very idea of revising Dickens had very personal implications. This fact is suggested by a parenthetical remark in Chapter Ten, one of the few passages in which Alcott's narrator deploys a first-person pronoun: "As the President finished reading the paper (which I beg leave to assure my readers is a bona fide copy of one written by bona fide girls once upon a time), a round of applause followed, and then Mr. Snodgrass rose to make a proposition."[142] Notwithstanding the dangers of identifying an author too closely with her narrator, it remains well worth noting that Alcott and her sister, Anna, as young girls, did produce a paper containing all the articles, poems, and stories featured in Chapter Ten—plus many more such papers. Indeed, the girls' Pickwick Club, and the various other amateur performances of their youth, represent one of the most pointedly biographical features of *Little Women*. Madeleine Stern, in her landmark study of Alcott's artistic maturation, describes the profound effect these elaborate creative exercises on the mind of the future author. Like the March girls, Alcott and her sister

[142] *Little Women*, 89. Phillips and Eiselstein's edition of the text describes the origins of several items in the *Pickwick Portfolio*, many of which Alcott submitted for publication.

had a knack for building dramatic marvels from whatever was close at hand, and often played four or five roles in a single production. For both girls, this early experience was more than child's play. As young adults, they even joined the Concord Stock Company, a theatrical troupe recently formed by the "tall, dark-haired, book-laden" Frank Sanborn.[143] Stern adds a word about the skills and qualifications of the Alcott sisters: Anna had already performed in *Scenes from Dickens* in Syracuse, while Louisa "spoke Dickens almost in her sleep."[144] With these new talents in their repertoire, the company quickly settled on a fit subject matter for their Christmas performance: a series of popular scenes from Dickens novels, including the flight of little Emily, from *David Copperfield*.[145] The untimely death of Lizzie Alcott caused Louisa to abandon this particular production, but both Dickens and the theatre would continue to shape her maturation as an artist in interesting ways.[146]

Though Alcott's early dreams of a career on the stage—like Dickens' own—went unrequited, *Little Women* demonstrates time and again just how firmly theatricality held its fascination for her. Long after the curtain falls on their Christmas pageant in Chapter Two, Jo, her siblings, and their friends continue to cast themselves and one another in the roles of different characters from world literature. From the moment when Alcott's narrator remarks that Jo "had been considered 'a Sancho' ever since she was born,"[147] through the many chapters whose titles suggest plot structures derived from important British works,[148] to Jo's study of Goethe in adulthood, *Little Women* follows a cast of characters who discover themselves by

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[143] Madeleine Stern, *Louisa May Alcott: From Blood & Thunder to Hearth & Home* (Richmond: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 18.
[144] Stern, *Blood & Thunder*, 19.
[145] Ibid., 19-20.
[146] Ibid.,
[147] *Little Women,* 22.
[148] Examples include "Meg Goes to Vanity Fair," "Amy's Valley of Humiliation," and, of course, "The P.C. and the P.O."

temporarily assuming the speech, habits, and attitudes of characters from their favourite books. For this reason, the novel sometimes reads like an ongoing play for which no single, coherent script has been prepared.

Just as important to the novel as theatricality itself is the way that one character, in her turn, plays many parts. A pair of examples involving John Brooke, Laurie's tutor and Meg's eventual husband, is especially telling. When the March girls learn by telegram of Mr. March's having been taken seriously ill at the front, Brooke wastes no time offering his services as a chaperone to Marmee. Her daughters' gratitude for this service is apparent in their altered view of him the following day: "Mr. Brooke looked so strong and sensible and kind that the girls christened him 'Mr. Greatheart' on the spot."[149] This nickname derives from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, specifically from the benevolent guide and protector of Christian's wife, Christiana. Such a comparison is high praise indeed, especially coming from children who use Bunyan as the framework for their plans for moral development. Clearly literature, with its wide array of potential roles, holds a central position in the Marches' everyday experience, giving them a shared lexicon with which to make sense of people's actions, whether kind or cruel. Compare this scene with a very different moment of intertextuality in Volume Two. "Domestic Experiences," the chapter that describes Meg and John's first months of marriage, records an incident in which Meg must inform her new husband that she has spent too much money on a new dress. In a rare moment of anger, Brooke deploys an unpleasant reference while pressing his wife for answers: "Well, dear, what is the 'dem'd total,' as Mr. Mantalini says?"[150] Also known as Alfred Muntle, Mr. Mantalini is a highly detestable character in *Nicholas Nickleby*—one of the many Dickens villains who threatens, flatters, and manipulates others in service of his greed.

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[149] *Little Women,* 135.
[150] Ibid., 225.

As his marriage to Madame Mantalini is one of the most vitriolic and self-destructive in Dickens, Meg's frightened reaction to these words is understandable. Alcott's narrator describes her inward distress with a simple yet poignant phrase: "That didn't sound like John."[151] The assumption of this persona also seems ironically at odds with the dynamics of Alcott's scene, since it is Mantalini's "reckless extravagance" that eventually bankrupts his wife.[152] Having taken this new role for himself, John Brooke cannot bear to stay in character for very long; before the end of the chapter, he reverts to such quiet, steadfast kindness as inspired the Bunyan reference in Volume One. Like real actors, then, the cast of *Little Women* are better suited to some parts than to others. Brooke's brief attempt to perform as a Dickensian villain underscores how wrong such parts are for him, as well as how much more capably he acquits himself in the role of Mr. Greatheart.

And yet, while John ultimately chooses the better part, his brief performance as Mantalini suggests the power of literature and theatricality to bring out the worst in people—a lesson with serious applications for the period. In Alcott's lifetime, the American theatre could be a violent place—nothing less than ground zero for battles of class and nationalistic principle. This fact was never more vividly demonstrated than during the Astor Place Riots of May 1849, which left between twenty-five and thirty people dead.[153] The riots, which raged around the Astor Place Opera House in New York, grew out of a conflict between supporters of the aristocratic British stage actor (and friend of Dickens) William Macready, and those of the popular American performer Edwin Forrest. Macready, deeply shaken by the attacks and eager to leave New York,

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[151] *Little Women*, 225.
[152] Gilbert A. Pierce, *The Dickens Dictionary* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1900; rep. 2006), 130.
[153] Christine Doyle suggests that another forty-eight people were injured during the riots, while other sources place the number around one hundred twenty-five. Christine Doyle, *Louisa May Alcott and Charlotte Brontë* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 156.

was persuaded to remain a while longer when he received a kind of petition from a group of concerned American theatre-lovers. The document urged him not to cancel his final performance, offering "the good sense and respect for order, prevailing in this community" as protection against further violence. Among the signatories of this consoling missive were Everett Duyckinck, Washington Irving, and Herman Melville.[154] As part of its efforts to nurture desirable values and behaviour in young readers, *Little Women* considers how performative skill can be channeled according to the principles of "good sense and respect for order." Throughout Volume Two, the adult March sisters learn that the power to assume and quickly master different roles, though eminently desirable for the purpose of children's games, poses a danger to one's progress through the more restrictive drama of adult society. Their different responses to this danger—some settling into fixed roles, some leaving the proverbial stage altogether—form the essential matter of the novel's ending.

Alcott's concern for the right uses of theatrical energies might have made Dickens a still more admirable figure in her eyes. After all, America's reception of Dickens' works on the stage, and of his theatrically-minded prose style more generally, was unmarred by such intense hostilities as those that produced the riots at Astor Place. The vast appeal of Dickens' style, which transcended distinctions of class, patriotism, and politics as no contemporary author could do, was partly rooted in his vision of character as something to be performed with extraordinary dramatic flourish. Readers on both sides of the Atlantic were engrossed by larger-than-life characters who constantly perform themselves with extraordinary vigour. Peter Ackroyd, in his biography of Dickens, even suggests how the sketches and novels may have changed the comportment of people around him.

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[154] Dennis Berthold, "Class Acts: The Astor Place Riots and Melville's 'The Two Temples,'" *American Literature* 71.3 (1999): 429-61; 429.

> So strong was Dickens' imaginative hold upon his readers, in fact, that it is also entirely probable that people began to behave in a Dickensian fashion when they were in his presence; in other words, they unconsciously exaggerated their own mannerisms and behavior in order to conform to the types which he had already created.[155]

If Dickens had grown accustomed to that sincerest form of flattery among his British readers, he might well have been surprised to discover much the same behaviour in America, which he toured in 1842 and again 1867. While supporting Ackroyd's hypothesis, testimonials from the period suggest that the tendency of nineteenth-century life to imitate Dickens' art was by no means limited to the author's close proximity. In his study of Dickens' American audience, Robert McParland quotes a warning from the Reverend Noah Porter which paints Dickensian influence as a serious and pervasive problem. The reader of fiction, Porter warns, is all too likely to absorb the traits of whatever fictitious society he keeps: "like the chameleon, he takes the colour of the bough and leaf from which he feeds. (…) The admiring and passionate devotee of Dickens is in danger of copying his broad caricature, his not very elevated slang, and the free and easy swing of the society in which Mr. Dickens delights."[156]

This idea of readers as performers of their own favourite novels adds significance to the theatrical intertextuality nature of *Little Women*. For her characters, Dickensian role-play is a much more a conscious act than the kind of borrowing described by Ackroyd and Porter. The March sisters do not repeat Dickens' lines blindly or compulsively, but transform his words to suit their semi-private world of child's play. Nevertheless, Porter would likely have been troubled by a scene in Volume One of Alcott's novel, where Jo shows her keen remembrance of

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[155] Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), 260.
[156] Noah Porter, *Books and Reading, or What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* (New York: Charles Scribners. 1871; repr. 1877), 230.

Dickens' less wholesome side. In Chapter Eleven, "Experiments," the girls decide to do nothing but rest and play for one week, forgetting their duties and consciences all the while. Jo heralds the start of their vacation with typical flourish: "'I now propose a toast, as my 'friend and pardner, Sairy Gamp,' says. 'Fun forever, and no grubbage,' cried Jo, rising, glass in hand, as the lemonade went round."[157] Alcott must have chosen this reference to prefigure the misguidedness of the girls' plan. Though not nearly as vile as Mr. Mantalini, Mrs. Sarah Gamp—pronounced "Sairy" by herself—is among the more selfish and patently unreliable figures in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. (Recall Chapter Two of this project, which discusses her verbal assault on the sympathetic clerk, Mr. Chuffey.) Porter would likely have found two offenses to decency in Jo's brief impersonation. The first and more obvious consists of replicating some of Dickens' "not very elevated slang"; the second pertains to another persistent rhetorical habit of Dickens' character. As fans of *Chuzzlewit* will remember, Sarah Gamp is always invoking the authority of her closest friend, Mrs. Harris, whose opinions never fail to align themselves exactly with Gamp's own. That Mrs. Harris never actually appears in the novel is evidence enough for the reader to conclude that she does not exist—in other words, that she is fictional even among the fictional characters of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Jo, by calling Gamp her "friend and pardner," has replicated Gamp's habit of talking about nonexistent persons as though they were real—and citing them as models for life. This means that Jo has found a way to be Dickens' character and speak about that character simultaneously—a feat that symbolizes her unique dual status as a character and an author, existing inside and outside of Alcott's text at one time. A sign of her prodigious creative mind and artistic potential, this unique ability, I will argue in more detail

[157] *Little Women*, 93.

somewhat later, suggests an interesting way to read her famously controversial fate at the end of Volume Two.

Besides providing a glimpse of Dickens' influence as it manifests itself in the day-to-day lives of middle-class Americans, what does Alcott achieve by invoking his novels in her own? It is surely an effect very different from either Grip's rebirth in "The Raven" or Bartleby's in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. As I have tried to demonstrate, Poe and Melville import Dickensian characters and motifs into their works to mount subtle arguments about the nature and practice of truly creative writing. Both writers ultimately contend, albeit subtly, that creative and "original" texts do not exist in isolation from other texts, but in conscious cooperation or interactive dialogue with them. Alcott too uses Dickensian material to redefine creativity for herself, but does so far more explicitly, mentioning the British author and his works by name and thus removing all doubt as to their presence in her story. To an even more conspicuous degree than either Poe or Melville, she also makes reading the essential task of her writing, and fills her fictional worlds not only with books but also with the readers who prize them. The most striking effect of her intertextual references is a kind of bookish realism; her characters seem less fictional for having read what we may recognize as "real" fiction. While paying homage to Dickens' imagination and gift for characterization, she also uses the fictionality of his works as a foil for the more true-to-life familiarity of her own. Even in particularly sentimental moments of the novel, Alcott's narrator insists that *Little Women* represents real life accurately: "Now and then, on this workaday world, things do happen in the delightful storybook fashion, and what a comfort that is."[158] If her fictional readers are designed to seem more real than characters, then that effect is never more successfully achieved than in the person of Jo, whose talent for playing

[158] *Little Women*, 173.

widely different literary (and later social) roles in the drama of the novel disqualifies her from holding any one of them permanently. While Brooke, Laurie, Amy, and other characters settle more or less into secure and recognizable positions within their fictionalized community, Jo remains restless and unable to accept one role unreservedly. The abiding tension in her character is amply demonstrated by the divided critical response to what becomes of her; while some scholars have read Jo's ultimate fate as a triumph of individuality, others have seen only the failure of a defiant childhood spirit.[159] Laurie himself, while bemoaning Jo's refusal to be courted by anyone, bears witness to the inscrutability of her character:

> You won't show the soft side of your character; and if a fellow gets a peep of it by accident and can't help showing that he likes it, you treat him as Mrs. Gummidge did her sweetheart; throw cold water over him, and get so thorny no one dares look at you.[160]

Mrs. Gummidge, a supporting character in Dickens's *David Copperfield*, lives with Mr. Peggotty following the death of her husband, is generally very gloomy and forlorn, and can be recognized by her catchphrase: "I am a lone lorn creetur and everythink goes contrary with me." At least as important to this passage as the details of Gummidge's character, however, is the context in which her name is dropped. While trying to explain Jo's behavior with a literary reference, Laurie seems only to highlight what he cannot see of Jo's character—her "soft side." Any similarity of Jo's to Mrs. Gummidge lies in the forceful means by which she conceals this

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[159] "Feminist explications have for the most part focused on Jo, who has been variously read as 'the one young woman in 19th-century fiction who maintains her individual independence, who gives up no part of her autonomy as payment for being born a woman—and who gets away with it' and as a character who is betrayed and even murdered by her creator, who allows her to be tamed and married." Barbara Sicherman, "Reading *Little Women*: The Many Lives of a Text," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Gerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, et al (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 245-266; 248. The latter half of this comparison alludes to an essay by Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant (see n.169), while the quotation is from Elizabeth Janeway, "Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy and Louisa," *The New York Times Book Review* (September 1968), 42.

[160] *Little Women*, 198.

authentic part of herself, refusing to reveal who she really is. Laurie's frustration, then, arises precisely from the sense that Jo is not like Mrs. Gummidge, yet chooses to behave like her—and plays the part all too well. Unlike the casting of Brooke as Greatheart, or even his later, unsuccessful attempt to play Mantalini, this moment of intertextuality fails to reveal much of anything about its subject, and that is the point. As the novel progresses, Jo grows too ambitious and complex to continue playing the familiar parts that were nevertheless essential to for her childhood development.

With this point in mind, let us briefly reconsider the Pickwickian episode in Chapter Ten. Jo's "literary turn" results in her taking the role of Tracey Tupman—a fictional writer in more ways than one. Aside from the comical fact of his never writing much of anything, Tupman exists only in the literature of the real Charles Dickens, the true object of Jo's admiration. Several chapters later, the reader watches Jo take her first steps into the world of professional writing, with the publication of her "Rival Painters" in *The Spread Eagle*. As Jo announces her achievement and receives the clamouring congratulations of her mother and sisters, she wonders inwardly "wondering whether Miss Burney felt any grander over her *Evelina* than she did over her "Rival Painters."[161] While other characters are satisfied with likening themselves to famous fictional characters, Jo here compares herself to a "real" and very famous author. Even the choice of "Rival Painters" as the title of Jo's first published work is suggestive of her ambitions and her perceived relationship with other artists. This episode, though brief, is among the most telling markers of Jo's gradual transformation from a fictional writer to a writer of fiction.

But even in less overtly metafictional moments of the novel, a preoccupation with performance and theatricality is very much on display. Consider "Calls," the chapter that invites

[161] *Little Women*, 128.

comparison of Amy and Jo by sending them out together on a series of visits to wealthy and respectable families. Amy, with her perfect sense of decorum, advises Jo to remain "cool, calm, and quiet" during their first stop.

> Let me see. 'Cool, calm, and quiet!'—yes, I think I can promise that. I've played the part of a prim young lady on the stage, and I'll try it off. My powers are great, as you shall see; so be easy in your mind, my child.[162]

Jo's powers prove very great—to the dismay of her younger sister. At the Chesters, she sits "with every limb gracefully composed, every fold correctly draped, calm as a summer sea, cool as a snow-bank, and as silent as a sphinx."[163] Later, while visiting the Lambs, she switches to a burlesque of the "charming girl" type, using the effusive May Chester as her model. Amusing some guests and appalling others, Jo demonstrates a level of histrionic versatility that makes her unfit for the sedate rituals of well-bred Concord society. Amy, in contrast, has perfected a single, stable role that serves her well at every house and before every audience. "When Jo turned freakish," her more predictable sister Amy remembers, "there was no knowing where she would stop."[164] Jo understands every part too well to play any part for very long.

Something similar might be said of Alcott, whose desire to be an actress evolved into the aspirations of a young playwright. Stern says it best: "The delights of writing (…) had always rivaled the call of the stage for Louisa, and what was more natural than that she should combine her two interests and produce a 'great' drama?"[165] She had already sold an early story, "The Rival Prima Donnas," to Concord's *Saturday Evening Gazette* for ten dollars, a commercial triumph that finds its counterpart in *Little Women* when Jo sells her "Rival Painters." This was

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[162] *Little Women*, 230.
[163] Ibid., 230.
[164] Ibid., 231.
[165] Stern, *Blood and Thunder,* 21.

the tale she chose to adapt into a theatrical that, like the Sanborn's Christmas play, never materialized. Always hampered in her efforts as an actress and dramatist—whether by family crises, professional disputes, or other caprices of circumstance—Alcott eventually turned away from drama toward the more lucrative opportunities available to a novelist, albeit one with dramatic sensibilities. By the time that *Little Women* appeared, says Stern, "Louisa had taken another pseudonym, and Jo March stormed through the pages of a book that an older Jo March has once lived."[166] Literature and theatricality form a two-way street between Alcott and Jo, both of whom find that while the author may leave the stage, the stage does not leave the author.

Of course, as I mentioned earlier, the young Dickens also contemplated an acting career, and in many ways his fiction bears witness to the abiding fascination that drama held for him later in life. One clue is found in his rather dramatic writing process, which involved standing in front of a mirror and performing his characters' lines, all the while observing changes in his own expression and setting them to paper.[167] A more abstract sign of his allegiance to the theatre, mentioned in Chapter Two of this project, can be found everywhere in the sketches and novels. In comparing the fortunate Tom Pinch of *Martin Chuzzlewit* to the unfortunate Bartleby, we have considered Dickens' career-long preoccupation with surrogate action—the benefactor who saves the long-suffering protagonist from an otherwise unavoidable fate. This is where the British master and the author of *Little Women* part ways, for Alcott's writing exhibits no great fondness for such surrogacy. On the contrary, her most compelling characters—generally female—are usually seeking the power and opportunity to act for themselves. Indeed, the socially

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[166] Ibid., 27.

[167] Dickens' daughter Mamie once described a personal encounter with this writing process: "One of these mornings, I was lying on the sofa endeavoring to keep perfectly quiet, while my 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." Her account is quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2002), 561.

circumscribed world of Alcott's novel can be seen as a stage where every character plays her assigned role to perfection or risks being forcibly removed from the stage. Jo, however, deliberately removes herself from that stage in order to become the writer—in other words, a figure capable of altering the drama itself.

Critics have not always read Jo's fate in these optimistic terms. In an influential feminist analysis of *Little Women*, Angela Estes and Kathleen Lant contend that after Beth's illness, "Jo as we know her mysteriously begins to disappear—or to be erased—from the story."[168] To describe this erasure at length, they choose a very memorable conceit in which Jo is murdered, her body spirited away and replaced with the zombified corpse of her departed sister, Beth. Besides allowing for an invocation of the bloody sensation writing for which Alcott has only lately become known, Estes and Lant's choice of imagery presents Jo's domestication as an author's covert act of violence against the girl who knew too much. Their assessment is based upon the impression that Jo, following Beth's death, ceases to drive the story as she once did, suddenly seeming downright zombified by comparison with the young girl who energized the novel with her yearning for travel and adventure. While I agree that a figurative removal of Jo from her own novel does take place, I believe that this removal represents less the bloody murder (or killing off) of a character than a kind of metafictional transcendence—or an act of stagecraft. Where Estes and Lant perceive Alcott "mutilate[ing] her text" so that Jo can "maintain her position within the narrative framework" of *Little Women*, I find that Jo sheds that stifling central position in favour of something potentially more promising, if also necessarily impossible to represent fully within the scope of a novel. This interpretation depends upon Jo's unique status as the novel's most determined and most promising artist figure.

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[168] Angela M. Estes and Kathleen Margaret Lant, "Dismembering the Text: The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*," *Children's Literature* 17 (1989): 98-123; 112.

Even as *Little Women* progresses through its Second Volume, Jo has already become too much an author to remain a character. With her presence in the story waning, Alcott pushes Amy onto the novel's centre stage. The youngest March sister has been called "an especially important alter ego for Jo because she, like Jo, wants to be an artist." More than an alter ego, however, Amy is nothing less than Jo's replacement. While the reader may detect early hints of this substitution in the first chapters,[169] it does not begin to take place until the end of "Calls." In one of the more memorable scenes of Alcott's story, Jo spoils her dreams of travel by showing the defiant side of her character at the worst possible moment, saying: "I don't like favors, they oppress and make me feel like a slave. I'd rather do everything myself, and be perfectly independent."[170] The direct consequence of this radical announcement, the reader discovers somewhat later, is Jo's loss of an opportunity to join Aunt Carrol on a trip to Europe. It is Amy who takes this trip instead, hoping to improve her innate painting ability by exposure to works by the masters of Europe. It is also Amy who, during this trip, becomes entangled in the sort of love plot that Alcott readers had wanted so desperately for Jo. By presenting Amy's impressions of Europe (and of Fred Vaughan) in the form of candid letters that consume whole chapters, Alcott invites readers to discover her "soft side." Meanwhile, Jo becomes a pale reflection of the vibrant, determined, and often hilariously awkward figure she once was. Though readers have bemoaned this change in her since 1869, it nevertheless marks her transformation into a consummate artist whose personality and imagination are too large for the confines of her own narrative. As the Introduction to this project suggests, the Jo who emerges at the end of *Little Women* might be compared with Bartleby, whose character cannot be contained within the naïve

[169] Amy is the heroine Jo's "Operatic Tragedy," a fact that seems to prefigure her assumption of the narrative centrality once enjoyed by Jo.
[170] *Little Women*, 236.

narrative of the lawyer. Writing in different genres and for vastly different audiences, Alcott and Melville are nevertheless alike in their self-conscious commentary upon what contemporary fiction can communicate and what it cannot.

During the New York chapters, Alcott prefigures Jo's transformation by contrasting her character with those of other fictional artists whose literary ambitions seem less substantial than hers. Chapter Eleven of Volume Two, titled "A Friend," takes Jo into "a select symposium, held in honor of several celebrities."[171] Casting a glance around the room, the young author finds much lacking in the behavior of authors whom she once adored.

> The great novelist vibrated between two decanters with the regularity of a pendulum; the famous divine flirted openly with one of the Madame de Staels of the age, who looked daggers at another Corinne, who was amiably satirizing her, after outmaneuvering her in efforts to absorb the profound philosopher, who imbibed tea Johnsonianly and appeared to slumber, the loquacity of the lady rendering speech impossible. [172]

At one level, the scene contrasts Jo's youthful idealism and sincerity with the jaded complacency of established intellectuals. These "mighty ones" are not at all the sort of people whose example Jo would like to follow, because they themselves are merely aping the behaviour of better minds. This scene is yet another example of the preoccupation with performance that recurs so often throughout *Little Women*. The great authors pictured in this scene are themselves merely nameless characters with the same objective as Jo: to become "real." The woman looking "daggers at Corinne" is not the actual art patron Anne Louise Germaine de Staël-Holstein, but a conceited counterfeit whom Alcott sketches with a casual stroke of her pen; the "profound philosopher" standing beside her, meanwhile, has no greater claim to substance (or the reader's

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[171] *Little Women,* 277.
[172] Ibid., 277.

attention) than his Johnsonian style of drinking tea. In both cases, Alcott's invocation of an historical figure underlines the unreality of the caricaturized, fictional artist upon whom that sarcastic comparison is bestowed. Like the readers of Dickens whom Poe critiques for dwelling too much on his comedy, and like the American theatregoers lambasted by Melville in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," these pompous frauds have mistaken the trivial for the substantial in those whom they admire. Jo, as we have seen, does not allow hero-worship of British models to obscure her own creativity. Much as she admires Dickens, the young writer never attempts to become him; even her childhood theatricals adapt Dickensian models instead of slavishly imitating them. Alcott will not allow her character to play at authorship; for Jo must be a "real" author in every sense of the word.

In Alcott's own time, the tendency of her book to suggest that its heroine is somehow stepping off the page was only increased by the promotional tactics of her publisher, Thomas Niles, Jr. It was Niles who urged Alcott to write a "girls' story"— something she likely would not have attempted otherwise—in the first place, and he realized the commercial importance of urging readers to identify this text with the real world of middle-class girlhood it depicts. Advertising for *Little Women* stressed the autobiographical nature of Alcott's work, thus encouraging readers to treat Alcott and Jo as a single person. Barbara Sicherman cites numerous examples of how Jo and Alcott were treated as "interchangeable" both during and after the latter's lifetime. These include Niles' habit of addressing the author as "Jo March" or "Aunt Jo"; fan letters written to Alcott but addressed to Jo; responses to these letters, in which Alcott herself maintained the illusion by signing as her own character; and the decision of Alcott's sister, Anna Pratt, while preparing a collection of their juvenilia to label these plays and stories as the work of

"Meg" and "Jo."[173] This peculiar conflation of author and her creation was surely more advantageous for Jo than it was for Alcott. While Jo gained the substance of a living author, Alcott soon discovered that her own history, personality, and career became circumscribed by those of her fictional protagonist. In answering to Jo's name, she took on the role of a fictional character—for good or ill—as convincingly as Jo does the part of a real one.

Such conflation of Alcott and Jo persists even in much more recent interpretations of the text. The 1994 film version of *Little Women*, directed by Gillian Armstrong, bears witness to Jo's exceptional status as a character with one foot planted outside the parameters of her very narrative. In the years immediately following its theatrical run, this adaptation, though popular with film critics and audiences, was panned by several feminist literary scholars for adopting too conservative a viewpoint on the girls' development, effectively stripping Alcott's novel of its politically rebellious subtext.[174] One interesting change from the novel seems to have gone largely unnoticed by critics. During the first minutes of Anderson's film, as the camera transitions between multiple idyllic shots of snow-covered Concord, a female narrator sets the scene with a brief monologue original to the film:

> "My sisters and I remember that winter as the coldest of our childhood. A temporary poverty had settled on our family some years before. The War had made fuel and lamp oil scarce. But necessity is indeed the mother of invention. Somehow, in that dark time, our family, the March family, seemed to create its own light."[175]

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[173] Sicherman, "Reading *Little Women*," 253.
[174] An example of such criticism can be found in Linda Grasso, "Louisa May Alcott's 'Magic Inkstand': *Little Women,* Feminism, and the Myth of Regeneration," in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 19.1 (1998): 177-92. Though quite perceptive in noting several differences between the novel and film, Grasso's essay sometimes unfairly critiques the movie's failure to portray details from Alcott's life, too closely conflating Jo with Alcott and Marmee with Alcott's mother, Abby.
[175] *Little* Women, directed by Gillian Armstrong (1994; Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2000), 2:53-3:16. DVD.

The personal pronouns in this introduction—coupled with the fact that it is spoken by Wynona Rider, who plays Jo—confirms that this narrator is the adult Mrs. Bhaer and not the anonymous third-person omniscient figure from Alcott's text. In the transition from novel to film, then, Jo is transformed from the novel's "writer" to its writer; from a participant in the novelistic drama to the artist whose intellect has arranged the events of her family's life into the narrative before us. Though Alcott herself did not make Jo the narrator, her novel testifies constantly, as we have seen, to Jo's unique fitness for such a privileged position—her hybrid status as a character, an author, and even an editor. Recall that besides playing the part of Snodgrass in her childhood Pickwick Club, Jo also served as the editor of their Pickwick Portfolio, arranging her sisters' texts into a coherent variation upon a popular style, reminiscent of Dickens' and yet entirely their own. By the novel's end, Jo moves beyond the confinements of fictionality imposed by Alcott's tale almost as decisively as she did those of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers.*

This movement of Jo's requires a crucial qualification: to transcend Dickens' (or Bunyan's, or Shakespeare's) works is not to transcend their influence. Much as Melville, in altering one of Dickens characters, ultimately fills the British author's prescription for American literary satire, Alcott's fictional author ceases to perform Dickens so that she may stand on the same plane as Dickens. Becoming an author, Alcott's novel would suggest, involves a dialectical movement from the local to the foreign and back again. *Little Women*, with its numerous references to Bunyanesque allegory, ultimately allegorizes such dialectic through Jo's journey to New York, where she studies under the German pedagogue Friedrich Bhaer, and later return to Concord, where she writes a novel based on personal experience. Interestingly, Jo herself has trouble recognizing and interpreting the artistic achievement that culminates this dialectical process. Even after learning of how favourably her "simple story" has been received, she

struggles to understand what qualities distinguish that work from her first novel. Her parents are quick to supply an answer:

> There is truth in it, Jo, and that's the secret; humor and pathos make it alive, and you have found your style at last. You wrote with no thought of fame or money, and put your heart into it, my daughter; you have had the bitter, now comes the sweet. Do your best, and grow as happy as we are in your success.[176]

Despite the expository air of this passage, the "truth" described by Mrs. March is a difficult thing for readers' to identify with any precision. Indeed, as a culmination of Jo's literary efforts since the start of Volume One, this passage is remarkable for what it does not reveal: the actual text of Jo's greatest work. In earlier chapters, Alcott allows her reader a direct experience of Jo's writing: we "hear" the March girls speak lines from their "Operatic Tragedy" in Chapter Two, and read the playful poem enclosed by Jo in a letter to Mr. and Mrs. March. If we do not feel the absence of Jo's greatest literary achievement, it is likely because we intuit that her style has been before us all along—that her book may well be *Little Women* itself. In Marmee's sweeping backward glance at Jo's progress throughout *Little Women*, the discovery of "style"— a unique linguistic mode and perspective with which to represent experience—is figured as the most important stage of her ascent to the status of true literary artistry. And yet that assessment is at odds with Alcott's motivations in writing the novel. When she set out to produce her "girls story," Alcott's doubts about the project—"I don't enjoy this sort of thing"—were counterbalanced by a feeling that her "queer plays and theatricals might prove interesting."[177] It was not the style of her book that seemed worthwhile in her eyes, then, but its content—more

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[176] *Little Women*, 340.
[177] Alcott, Louisa May, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Joel, Myerson and Daniel Shealy (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 165-66.

specifically, the sections made possible by her reading of Dickens and other great European authors.

This is the unacknowledged "other" secret of both Jo's novel and Alcott's. In its final emphasis on personal style and private experience, *Little Women* seems to give us a perfect Emersonian *Kunstlerroman* in which Jo successfully dismisses the courtly muses of Europe in favour of her inner creative voice also taking as her true subject matter not exotic foreign scenes and events but everyday life in her own modest home. And yet, in committing her childhood games, theatricals, and wishes to paper, Jo will inevitably return to the very British authors from whom she has ostensibly emancipated herself. Surely she cannot describe the girls' struggle toward moral perfection without invoking Bunyan and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, or their theatricals without alluding to Shakespeare, or their penchant for starting clubs and secret societies without writing the stately name of Pickwick. In the last of these cases, Jo will reveal to her readers, as Alcott's narrator reveals to us, that "all of the girls admired Dickens."[178] Like the white badges described in Chapter Ten, and like *Little Women* in its entirety, Jo's first great novel, for all its heart and stylistic disintictiveness, is stamped with the initials "P.C."

This is not a bad thing. At least, Alcott's text encourages us not to think of it as such. Transatlantic influences, though not praised or even acknowledged in Marmee's congratulatory critique of Jo's novel, are essential to the realistically allusive world that Jo portrays in her seemingly "simple" story. Readers of the novel saw themselves in characters who so often measure their reality by the standards of fiction. Far from overlooking the significance of these foreign models for the development of an artistic mind, Alcott takes ownership of that influence. Long after the first publication of *Little Women*, she continued to think of English Romantic and

[178] *Little Women*, 85.

Victorian literature as a critical component of Jo March's personality and talent. In *Jo's Boys*, the last novel of the March family, the elder Jo counts Charlotte Brontë among her favourite authors.[179] As I have attempted to demonstrate, the artistic values espoused by Alcott, much like those of Emerson, are more oriented toward creative transformation of foreign material than to a revolt against that material.

Indeed, Jo's enduring appreciation of European literature, and of creative models more generally, is everywhere apparent in her development as an author. The "independence" that she achieves is not a forceful separation from these sources, but a transformation of her relationship to them and to her own text. The childhood process of playing at authorship, Alcott would show us, is essential to the development of a successful author—something she herself became. The first printing of Volume One, which consisted of two thousand copies, sold out in less than one month. Volume Two appeared shortly thereafter, and by 1868 there were thirty-eight thousand copies of both in print. 1870, the year of Dickens' death, saw the printing of another thirty-two thousand. With much the same sort of canny performative skill that Jo demonstrates while calling upon wealthy families, Alcott played a necessary part within the stifling and sedate drama of female authorship available to women in her time. Even while doing so, however, she also created a character who transcends those limitations by stepping out of her own text and into the real world. For the first generation of readers, Jo March herself was the author of *Little Women*, her rebellious spirit acquiring all the credibility of historical fact in the young minds of her admirers.

Though celebrated from its first appearance for being simple and true-to-life, Alcott's novel makes a clever game of the distinction between reality and fiction. I have pointed out how

[179] Doyle, *Alcott and Brontë*, 25.

this game caused Jo and Alcott to swap places in readers' imaginations, but another, more linear model also suggests itself: Alcott, who grew up reading and performing Dickens, writes a novel about a girl who grows up reading and performing Dickens and who then writes a novel about a girl who will (presumably) grow up reading and performing Dickens before finally writing a novel herself. Seen in this light, *Little Women* achieves the textual equivalent of the "Droste effect" in visual art: a series of images that seems to continue forever but is in fact limited by the resolution of the image. While such visuals are often described as endlessly recursive, they also push in the other direction—against the very frame that contains them. Alcott's text likewise offers a character for whom American creativity, fostered by childhood encounters with great European authors, overwhelms even the boundaries of fictionality that hold her story in check. Refusing to remain a character, Jo comes to stand on the same plane of authorship as Dickens himself, the contemporary novelist whose writings have most clearly shaped the story of her development.

Conclusion

In exploring the influence of Charles Dickens on the writings of three major American authors, I have attempted to learn how these authors reconciled Dickens' fantastic popularity in America with the ideal of cultural autonomy preached by Emerson and other transcendentalists during the same period. My research shows that Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Louisa May Alcott were themselves highly astute readers of Dickens, and that they ingeniously revised the British novelist by integrating certain elements of his fiction into their own works.

Certain findings recur in all three case studies. For my purposes, the most interesting of these involves the American authors' separate yet like-minded attempts to define creativity. All three suggest that truly creative writing is fueled by thoughtful reception of existing literature. This emphasis upon reading is apparent in how Poe, Melville, and Alcott deploy subtle Dickensian allusions that reflect careful consideration of the British novels in an American cultural context. It is demonstrated even more clearly by the huge thematic importance of readerly activity in "The Raven," "Bartleby," and *Little Women.* At least one character in each work is confronted with a subject—whether black bird, curious clerk, or aspiring author—that demands to be interpreted yet refuses to indulge the interpreter with any final, definitive answers. Through form as well as content, these three texts proclaim their own dependence upon an exercise of literacy. Great writing, it would seem, begins and ends with reading.

Closely linked to this theme of reading are the different ways in which Poe, Melville, and Alcott use their respective texts to pay Dickens homage while still critiquing and ultimately transcending his aesthetic limitations. Poe's effusive praise of Grip in a review of *Barnaby Rudge* precipitates his attempts to give world literature a still darker and more disturbing incarnation of the raven motif; Melville, while answering Dickens' call for a better calibre of American satire, rejects the British author's dependence on charity and general determinacy as

the pillars of an effective ending; Alcott, meanwhile, gives us a protagonist for whom portraying characters from *Pickwick* is the first step toward writing a very different novel in her own unique style. Each of these seemingly paradoxical relationships to Dickens reflects the extent to which writerly critique and admiration were compatible in the minds of at least three prolific American authors.

Of course, the limited space available in a master's thesis prevents an expansive study of Dickens' of presence in nineteenth-century literature. Choosing which authors and texts to analyze therefore became the most important—and the most daunting—stage of my preparations. Ultimately, I made selections that seemed to offer a collective cross-section of Dickensian intertexuality over three decades, and to suggest the role of gender and genre in shaping those intertextual dialogues. Without offering any definitive conclusions about the role of either factor, I would point out that Alcott's novel is the only text that mentions Dickens and his characters by name, and generally establishes a far more overt intertextual relationship than either Poe's poem or Melville's story. This comparatively straightforward approach might be explained by the later publication date of Alcott's novel—at a point when Dickens had reached the peak of his international celebrity—but it might also reflect the female artist's greater willingness to acknowledge outright the influence of a male contemporary (something that Poe refuses to do in "The Philosophy of Composition"). Certainly, the most productive continuation of my research would involve expanding its scope to more fully represent the effects (if any) of gender, race, class, literary genre, historical context, and geography upon the form of nineteenth-century Dickensian revisionism.

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