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[Review of: A. Bove (2021) Spectral Dickens : The Uncanny Forms of Novelistic Characterization]

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Welcome to the (in the bleak mid-)Winter issue of the *BAVS Newsletter*, filled with news, book reviews, recent publications, reports, and CFPs.

Thanks to everyone who attended the BAVS Conference in Birmingham in September. It was by all accounts an unmitigated success, and a wonderful opportunity to catch up with old friends and make new ones. If you weren't able to attend (or would like to re-live it!) a flavour of this fantastically wide-ranging conference can be gathered from the two reports in this issue, which include a charming illustration by Billie Gavurin inspired by Professors Strange and Hamlett's keynote on Victorian pet culture.

The [BAVS Newsletter Archive](#) has now launched. It contains the contents lists and PDFs for all of our issues going back to 2009. This webpage makes past (and future) *Newsletter* content more accessible and searchable – do take a look!

This issue of the *Newsletter* includes the first of our new 'Foundational Text' review series that re-visits a significant contribution to Victorian studies published between 1950 and the present, with Irmtraud Huber reflecting on Robert Langbaum's 1957 monograph on the dramatic monologue. If you'd like to contribute to this series, please do send your pitch to the *Newsletter* team.

Wishing you all a joyful and restful holiday period,
Clare Stainthorp & Sarah Wride
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resolved the real, and the differing ways in which these novels conceived of the formation of readerly communities and their capacity to be accurately represented by print media.

Valdez primes the reader for her argument by first interrogating some of the best-known critical assumptions about the function of both novels and newspapers in nation-building and in authorizing personal experiences by linking form to fact. Specifically, Valdez is interested in the news and the novel as more than parallel analogies for the national community, reading against Benedict Anderson's famous argument for (imagined) simultaneity in reading practices as the germ of the modern nation. Rather, Valdez gestures to the multiplicity of ways in which Victorian novels conceived of newspapers, so that neither newspapers nor novels are stable metaphors for the nation. Valdez productively recasts Anderson's reading of *Semarang Hitam* (1924) so that it points not to the collapsing of the novel-reader into the fictional newspaper-reader, but the markedly different reading practices engendered by novels and newspapers. In effect, novels enable readers to reflect on their reading practices with greater self-consciousness than Anderson's account suggests.

The first chapter explores the metaphors used by Charles Dickens to contrast news and narrative, beginning with *Household Words* and ending with the post-script to *Our Mutual Friend* (1864). In *Household Words*, Dickens imagines the ceaseless production of news as a storm engulfing London, a metaphor which foregrounds the disorganized and destructive potential of unmediated news output on readerly communities. In contrast, the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend* compares the novel writer to a weaver who creates complex patterns out of seemingly random threads, seeing the whole of the pattern before the reader is able to. For Valdez, these metaphors demonstrate how nineteenth-century novels invest realism with meaning not by reference to external, verifiable fact, but by imposing the guise of random occurrence onto a patterned structure. These realisms produce readers capable of thinking about their own place within extra-textual communities.

The self-reflexive nature of novel-reading is essential to Valdez's later observations about how nineteenth-century novels do imagine communal formation (and exclusion) as a consequence of newspaper reading. This comes across most clearly in chapters three and four on the sensation novel and representations of Anglo-Jewish communities. Here, Valdez reads *Armada* (1866) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863) to resist the critical view that suggests sensation novels and early crime journalism function primarily to index the strange and alienating effects

of modernity. Instead, these novels make plain the ways in which sensation and melodrama are integral to the newspaper, community building, and heterogenic constructions of the real, such that both novels and newspapers transform uncommon occurrences into narratives of the 'everyday'.

Turning to Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), Valdez grapples with how this novel negotiates the impulse of newspapers like *The Jewish Chronicle* to represent minority communities as homogenous, coherent communities in need of anglicisation, at the same time that they reified cultural differences. This is the only chapter which does not read the novel as a reworking of a specific contemporary news story; instead, Valdez positions Zangwill's novel as a reworking of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), in which Deronda's final longing toward Palestine is reshaped into a longing for the Jewish ghetto and proximal communities over nationalistic imaginings. Valdez's book offers an impressive reconsideration of the role of the nineteenth-century novel in national social formation, which usefully foregrounds changing reading practices and critical attitudes toward realism and form. It is a fascinating exploration of different narrative realisms and fictionalized representations of the press.

Lisa Bilella (University of Leeds)

***Spectral Dickens: The Uncanny Forms of Novelistic Characterization*, by Alexander Bove (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), x+242pp., £85.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781526147936**

Charles Dickens's relation to realism has been in question for a long time, at least since G.H. Lewes's letter on the death of Mr Krook in *Bleak House* (1852-3), which claimed that 'Spontaneous Combustion could not possibly be' (Charles Dickens, 'Preface' to *Bleak House* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 6), or George Eliot's 1856 suggestion that Dickens scarcely ever passes from the external to the internal without 'becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness' (p. 97). In *Spectral Dickens*, Alexander Bove takes up a position in this long-running debate, arguing that 'it is difficult to situate Dickens within the tradition of Victorian realism at all' (p. 31), especially in terms of character.

Spectral Dickens thus follows G.K. Chesterton, who praised Dickens as a writer of caricature, in seeing his work as constituting a critique of realist character itself and, ultimately for Bove, of subjectivity in general. The title might suggest that

Derrida will be prominent, and Bove does draw on his concept of 'hauntology' (p. 23), but only to lead into what Bove sees as fundamentally a psychoanalytic question, especially in its Lacanian form, as explored and extended by Dolar, Zupančič and Žižek. What hauntology (as opposed to ontology) points towards most importantly is that character is not so much an encounter with a simulacrum of a real person, but 'an encounter with the Real, which is as such a distinct kind of encounter with otherness/impossibility' (p. 23). This kind of encounter is 'precisely what is conjured away in the idea of mimetic realism' (p. 23), but it comes to the fore in Dickens, and gives character its 'ethical force' (p. 23).

To demonstrate this uncanny, non-realist nature of character in Dickens, Bove offers three related approaches to his writing. Part I begins with a discussion of caricature, especially the French illustrators Honoré Daumier and Grandville, read in relation to anamorphosis (proceeding from Lacan's famous reading of Holbein's 1533 painting *The Ambassadors*). These topics are then placed in dialogue with Phiz's illustrations and Dickens's writing, focusing on *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-7). Part II argues that Dickens's characters often function as effigies, on the border of living and non-living, making them what Chesterton calls 'moor effocish things' (p. 83), alluding to Dickens's childhood experience of seeing the sign COFFEE ROOM from the opposite side of a glass panel (which Žižek reads as a sign of the repression of the Real, pp. 114-6). One such figure is the Wooden Midshipman in *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), who is 'the central effigy of the novel, generating an almost irrepressible proliferation of animatic metaphors' (p. 109), linking him with human characters such as Quilp from *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1). Another is Esther's doll in *Bleak House*. This part leads to a provocatively speculative analysis of Phiz's famous image of Tom-All-Along's (used as the cover image of the book). For Bove, this image should be read not only as the perspective of Woodcourt as he enters these streets, but also the first-person view of Jo as he flees from him, making it a 'dreamlike' (p. 154) and condensed symbolic image. Part III picks up this interest in dream structures, building on Steven Marcus to argue that 'Dickens's novels use representational material in the same way as the dream does' in Freud, giving a material (but spectral) form to the signifier, and hence drawing attention to the 'drive or cut inherent to the split structure of the signifier' (p. 166).

As this summary indicates, this is often a densely argued book, which relies heavily on Lacanian categories such as the threefold division of symbolic, imaginary, and Real. (It is a pity, then, that quite a number of typographical errors have crept in—'teaming' instead of 'teeming' (p. 105), 'I know

am' instead of 'I know I am' (p. 132)—which sometimes disrupt the flow of reading). It is also a polemical work, which takes issue with critics who have not pushed their insights in this direction far enough. So, for instance, while Audrey Jaffe approaches Esther Summerson as a character structured by the symbolic order in *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (1991), she grounds her approach on 'a traditional notion of self that must either fail or succeed based on autonomy and wholeness', whereas for Bove 'we should do away with the teleological notion of a self altogether' (p. 133). Occasionally this approach risks over-reading in a particular direction, as when Bove argues that the metaphoric image which structures *Dombey and Son* is 'that of mirror reflections' (p. 104), rather than for instance the sea or the railway. Nonetheless, the central contention is, to me, highly convincing. It leads to several fantastically insightful ideas, such as the final chapter's interpretation of *Little Dorrit* (1855-7) as itself having 'the structure of the *as if*' (p. 204), Dickens's favourite form of comparison. In *Spectral Dickens*, then, Bove has produced both a work that expands the ways we think about character, and a sustained demonstration of the continuing value of Lacanian thought for literary analysis.

Ben Moore (University of Amsterdam)

***The Crimean War in Victorian Poetry*, by Tai-Chun Ho (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), 304pp., £56.65 (hardback), ISBN 9781788741798**

Tai-Chun Ho's original *The Crimean War in Victorian Poetry* offers the first book-length examination of the work of a group of British poets during one of the most important conflicts of the nineteenth century. Exploring the cultural impact of the war on the home front through the medium of poetry, this volume complements the books of Cynthia Dereli, Stefanie Markovits, Holly Furneaux, Trudi Tate, Paul Huddle, Lara Kriegel, and others, which have amply demonstrated that the Crimean War had more to it than a notoriously complex diplomatic background, a disastrously mismanaged campaign on the part of the British, and a series of well-known battles fought on the Black Sea peninsula and elsewhere.

The Crimean War, according to Ho, saw a 'literary war' on the home front fought by a diverse group of poets: men and women, 'canonical' and less well-known, working-class and middle-class. In examining 'a multiplicity of civilian voices in various literary forms and styles', the book challenges 'the current canon of British war poetry forged by the modernist appreciation of soldier poets' (p. 14), and