

Knowing Dickens. By Rosemarie Bodenheimer. Cornell University Press, 2007. ISBN 9780801446146. £17.95.

WHEN ROSEMARIE Bodenheimer speaks of ‘Knowing’ Dickens she means various things. There is the matter of being familiar with, and understanding, Dickens and his works (with the implication – fair enough, as it turns out – that Bodenheimer knows him better than most). There is an allusion to predictability, and perhaps over-familiarity: ‘knowing Dickens (as we do), this character or plotline is going to turn out like this . . .’ And then there is Dickens as a knower. For this is primarily a book about ‘What Dickens Knew’ (the title of the first chapter), and it turns out that Dickens, like Maisie, knew a lot more than he knew that he knew.

The specialness of Dickens, according to this book, lay not just in his huge curiosity, powers of observation, and ability to invent characters and narratives, but also in his outstanding capacity for turning doubts, fears, and confusions about his past, his identity, and the people around him into a source of textual amplitude and suggestiveness, exactly because he could not completely resolve, organize, or manage them. This is a paradoxical kind of knowingness that early critics could not understand, notes Bodenheimer, but ‘[o]nce Freud’s ideas had permeated early twentieth-century culture, Dickens’s kinds of knowledge became more plausible and interesting to his critics and biographers’ (p. 5). Bodenheimer’s Dickens is uncanny, therefore. Insights seethe through his writing, even if it seems that he wants, on some level, to deny them. And we, the readers, seem to learn a great deal from him – indeed, a great deal about him – but cannot quite say, in the end, that we have him figured out.

The value of Bodenheimer’s book lies in re-visiting, yet again, the question of how Dickens’s life and art connect with one another but with the difference that the story here is language-driven. Dickens was a writer and we know him through his texts. Bodenheimer has not done any new archival research (this is not a contribution to Dickensian biography in that sense) but has certainly made great use of the Pilgrim Edition, exploring the letters as texts on the borderline between literature and the practical assertion of self in the world, so that she is able to study the strange echoes and overlaps between what might naively be taken as truth and fiction, or the known and the unknowable.

Dickens’s art of creatively incomplete self-control reveals itself in what Bodenheimer calls ‘Language on the Loose’, the title of her second chapter. Here, she links the ease with which Dickens took offence, the combative stance of so many letters, to his fictional representations of hyperbole. Mr Dorrit’s ‘extreme irritability’, for example, ‘as well as his ability to feel ashamed of it, is Dickens’s own’. Through Dorrit, Dickens gives us ‘a

perfectly rendered description of [himself as] paranoid letter writer [. . .], a testimony to the self-knowledge Dickens could enclose in the safety of his fiction, and to his recognition that the prison of the mind is inescapable' (p. 50). Unlike some earlier critics, for whom this seepage of authorial insecurity into fictional characterization would have been a black mark, Bodenheimer celebrates this sort of thing. She gives Dickens credit for knowing what he was doing, but in a special way: he hints at the dark thing that he knows (enough for us to get the point), but, over and above that, tells us a story about the unacceptability of that knowledge, and how it must be buried or 'enclosed'. The big question is whether this matters for our engagement with the texts, and I think that it does: reading the novels through the letters (and other kinds of ancillary writing), and vice-versa, thickens the texture in important ways. The author's self-projections and manipulations are part of the story.

In her third chapter, on 'Memory', Bodenheimer continues her project of linking the man with the texts but brings it to a kind of crisis by focusing once again on the greatest temptation of all for biographical reducers (including, in some moods, Dickens himself): Warren's Blacking. But whereas more conventional biographical approaches to Dickens have been haunted by the Blacking Factory, this one is haunted by that haunting, or by the question of whether it should be allowed to haunt, or not. 'When he came to record the memories of his blacking days in 1848, Dickens created a multifaceted metaphor of his being. Each part of the autobiographical fragment had already been and would again be elaborated, in life and in writing, in one variation after another' (p. 19). Bodenheimer notes the instability of the narrative over time, the ways in which Dickens recreated and adjusted the story. She suggests that Dickens may have been almost as much affected by the arbitrary and inconclusive way the episode ended, as by the privations that it contained. In keeping with Bodenheimer's whole working model of Dickens, it is the unresolvedness of the episode, the fact that Dickens knew that it was important but could not mark it down and contain it as definitively known that gave it its Protean and fertilizing power. Bodenheimer goes on to trace this power at work through many examples of Dickensian characters strategically remembering, forgetting, and misremembering, for all manner of psychological ends.

Bodenheimer's, that is to say Dickens's, unknowing knowing is thus a way of hinting at the truth by triangulation. Dickens, or a character, says one thing, but that thing does not ring true, and the truth must therefore be located at some third point: not the speaking voice or the person, thing or event that he explicitly delineates, but something else, something absent but implied, known but unknown. One of Bodenheimer's breakthroughs is to link this creative mechanic to a particular set of human dynamics, triangular

relationships, which she explores in her fourth chapter, 'Another Man'. Here Bodenheimer explores a kind of role-playing both in Dickens's fiction and in his private life (again, as facilitated by letters and other texts). Dickens explored, suppressed, and denied aspects of his own personality by splitting himself between the actors in a given situation: in the strange case of Christiana Weller, for example (pp. 101–05). Here Bodenheimer relates the same facts that can be found in many biographies but gives them a new point (even a sort of legitimacy) by making Dickens's shiftiness and perversity part of his creative processes – so that there is a fairly clear and persuasive path leading from the mundane erotic obsessions that anyone might have, through the neurotic and domineering projection of self into the affairs of Dickens's friends, to the kind of half-understood psychological depths that can be plumbed, in all kinds of enriching ways, in fiction. Bodenheimer goes on to discuss various instances of male rivalry and power-struggle, both in real life (between Dickens and Wilkie Collins, for example) and in fiction (notably in *Our Mutual Friend*). These are dramatizations of conflicts that Dickens senses within himself, without being able to speak about them directly. This version of the uncanny, of the triangulation between the subject, that which the subject is able to accept, and that which he cannot, is a kind of divide-and-rule strategy for the management of self.

Many of the big themes of this book are very familiar. It attempts a summing up of all that is most important about Dickens (even if he does remain, at the end of the day, not just Inimitable but also Irreducible), and so, naturally enough, many well-known features of the Dickensian landscape have to be revisited. The great strength of Bodenheimer's fairly short survey, however, is its coherence. There is a single concept running through it, and this concept lends itself very well to tying important features of Dickens's life and work together and subordinating all of them, not to anything so tedious as a full psycho-biographical explanation of Dickens's output, but rather to a kind of poetics of Dickens, writer of books, and of himself. Thus, Bodenheimer's fifth chapter concerns the 'Manager of the House'. This is not a new theme. We have heard a lot about Dickens's domestic establishments, his hatred of untidiness, his often oppressive control of his family. But Bodenheimer makes many fruitful connections across both life and work, simultaneously discussing Dickens's literal houses, the households of others that Dickens became involved with (Urania Cottage, the Ternans), house-like collaborative projects (*Household Words*), and house-like novels (*Bleak House*). In all of these cases we see Dickens the would-be manager at work, and (productively) failing: 'All of these enterprises reveal variants of the pattern or rhythm that showed itself in the matter of the Mile End cottage: Dickens takes detailed control over the practical housing of a complex human situation, and discovers that, in one way or another, his

willed order fails to contain either his own emotional conflicts or those of others' (p. 128). In other words, his adventures with bricks and mortar show the same characteristic of constructing new realities from confusion – without ever eliminating that confusion – that we find in his writing. It is all rather obvious, in a way – this really does sound like the Dickens that many of us will feel that we know – but Bodenheimer has a talent for making the old pieces slot crisply into place. Her orderliness, without reduction, comes almost as a relief.

In her final chapter, 'Streets', Bodenheimer turns to yet another familiar theme: Dickens the walker. Here, she picks up the issues of creative autobiography, self-control, and mastery from previous chapters, noting that Dickens's own 'history underlies the sense of mastery crucial to his creation of London as a known and yet secret landscape of particular streets, houses, churches, and shops' (p. 172). It is easy to assimilate this, once again, to Bodenheimer's general thesis. Dickens wants to be a master, but he is the master that he is precisely because he is not quite able to keep his creations under control, partly in the sense that he is not able to draw a firm boundary (a household wall) between his sense of himself and his sense of the world, between autobiography, fantasy, and fiction. This means that his writing contains more than he knows, which is to say more than he knows that he knows. We get it all: all that Dickens can manage, all that he is not able to manage, and the patterns of argument, suspicion, fascination, guilt, and desire that form and reform between the known and the unknown, taking shape in conflicted characters and unstable self-projections. Dickens was able to live with this, it seems, as long as he kept moving (between self-projections or through the streets of London), and the converse naturally applies: thus Bodenheimer turns fruitfully to solitude, imprisonment and, at the extreme, solitary imprisonment, as the imaginative complement to the Dickensian cityscape. Being alone is horrible because the mind is cooped up with itself, instead of being able to project, diversify, and relieve itself through interaction (however self-obsessed in its own way) with perceived others.

Summing up, Bodenheimer notes that Dickens was 'the great English realist of the fantasy life' (p. 205). This is an insightful formulation, side-stepping as misguided and simplistic the old debate about whether Dickens is realistic or fantastical, an observer or an exaggerator. Dickens dealt with that which is more real than 'everyday' reality, because it is so deep within us as to be imperfectly expressible.

Even if, with 'Knowing Dickens', Bodenheimer speaks to a sense that Dickens is already all too known, all too much discussed (and I did find myself wishing, occasionally, as I read this, that we had no facts about the man at all), even if Bodenheimer's Dickens really is, in a way, the Dickens

one already knows (with the uncanny moment of *déjà vu* awaiting us at every turn of the narrative), perhaps it still is necessary that critics come forward and say that they know that they (and we) know that this is what Dickens was like. The reader herself is part of the web of half-knowledge. 'For various reasons I have been compelled to attempt once more, after all the other attempts, to bring certain aspects of Dickens to life' (p. 16). Here we are not far from the Esther Summerson of *Bleak House* who says, 'It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself!' What, indeed, are these half-acknowledged forces of compulsion and obligation?

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