

Eventual Laughter: Dickens and Comedy

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Abbreviations

References to Dickens are indicated by the abbreviations below from the new Penguin editions unless otherwise specified. Where other editions of Dickens have been consulted this has been noted in the footnotes. For the journalism I have used the complete *All The Year Round* and *Household Words* made available by Periodicals Archive Online, which are indicated by both issue number and date. For these I have also consulted *Dickens's Journalism: The Dent Uniform Edition*, ed. Michael Slater and John Drew, 4 vols. (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1994-2000). Letters are indicated by volume and date and are from *Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey, 1965-2002 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

| | |
|---------|-----------------------------------|
| AN | <i>American Notes</i> |
| AYR | <i>All The Year Round</i> |
| BH | <i>Bleak House</i> |
| BR | <i>Barnaby Rudge</i> |
| CC | <i>A Christmas Carol</i> |
| DC | <i>David Copperfield</i> |
| DS | <i>Dombey and Son</i> |
| GE | <i>Great Expectations</i> |
| HTI | <i>Holly-Tree Inn</i> |
| HW | <i>Household Words</i> |
| LD | <i>Little Dorrit</i> |
| Letters | <i>Letters of Charles Dickens</i> |

| | |
|-----|-------------------------------|
| MC | <i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i> |
| OCS | <i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i> |
| PI | <i>Pictures from Italy</i> |
| PP | <i>Pickwick Papers</i> |

All references to Shakespeare are from the Norton Critical Edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (London: Norton, 1997).

All references to Forster's *Life of Dickens* are from John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd, nd).

All references to Freud are from Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and others, 24 vols. (London: Vintage, 2001).

References to major Jacques Lacan texts are as follows:

| | |
|-----|--|
| S1 | Jacques Lacan, <i>Freud's Papers on Technique</i> , ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. James Forrester (London: Norton, 1991). |
| S7 | Jacques Lacan, <i>The Ethics of Psychoanalysis</i> , ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Norton, 1992). |
| S10 | Jacques Lacan, <i>Le Séminaire: Livre X : L'Angoisse 1962-1963</i> , ed. Jacques Alain-Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2004). ¹ |
| S11 | Jacques Lacan, <i>The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis</i> , ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Norton, 1998). |

¹ Translations from this seminar is my own, although it owes much to the unofficial online translations of Cormac Gallagher. Changes have been made where it is felt that something of the French has been lost in those translations. Those translations can be accessed at lacaninireland.com. The new 2014 translation has been consulted and compared and its reference is Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

- S17 Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Russel Grigg (London: Norton, 2007).
- S20 Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (London: Norton, 1999).
- Ecrits* Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1989).

Abstract

This thesis attempts to redress the drought of work on Dickens on comedy, which is surprising considering how often Dickens is thought of as a comic writer. The thesis uses Dickens to demonstrate problems with and resistance to existing theorizations of laughter, and attempts to develop a new way of thinking about laughter through Dickens.

The thesis begins with a theoretical section, which is a discussion of existing discussions of laughter followed by an attempt to develop a new way of thinking about laughter by making use of Alain Badiou's concept of the 'event.' The thesis then moves to Section Two, in which these ideas are discussed alongside Dickens's novels.

Chapter Four attempts to show in a general way how Dickens and these discussions of laughter belong together, and how a certain moment in the nineteenth century that Dickens was a unique part of shows that new ways of discussing laughter are needed. Chapter Five argues that laughter in Dickens is not natural or spontaneous but part of constructing an idea of natural spontaneity. *Pickwick Papers*, it is argued, is the novel of retroactive causes, showing how laughter can create ideas of 'nature' which then appear to explain social behaviour such as laughter itself. Chapter Six tackles the relationship between laughter and anxiety. It argues that laughter creates order by 'dealing' with anxiety, but that this order it produces is profoundly unstable and has new anxieties. *Barnaby Rudge* is the novel which shows this in its particular historical context. The final chapter argues that Dickens's writing can be called 'comic' in the terms that have been established throughout the thesis.

Discussing *Great Expectations*, it argues that laughter is a plotting force that creates narratives and structures.

Finally, the conclusion discusses changes that may have happened to laughter in the nineteenth century and what it means to find ourselves laughing at Dickens's texts today.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Introduction: Dickens and Laughter

My philosophy is a philosophy of laughter.

Georges Bataille¹

With laughter one is treating one of the most general subjects there is. Laughter is something everyone experiences (though not everyone in Dickens). At least since Aristotle argued that it marks the difference between man and animal, laughter has been seen as a universal human trait.² This is a view which continues into the nineteenth century; William Hazlitt remarks in 1819, for example, that ‘man is the only animal that laughs’ (though man is not the only animal who laughs in Dickens).³ The idea of laughter as universal affects the way it was seen in the nineteenth century, and it has also affected trends in its scholarship since then; laughter has been treated broadly and generally, with a focus on how all laughter can be explained in one or a few swoops. A critical summary of work on comedy will be reserved for Section One of this thesis, but this trend is embodied by Murray Davis’s position:

I will study instances of humour less to discover the features of our specific society that led to their special creation than to discover the abstract universal properties of society that allow the creation of humour in general.⁴

On the other hand, with Dickens one is dealing with one of the most unique and specific examples of literature, a writer of particular genius from a particular historical moment and culture. Thus, in thinking about Dickens and laughter one encounters a clash between these two levels of scholarship, a divide between what we might be able to call micro and macro

¹ Georges Bataille, ‘Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears’ in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2001), p. 138.

² Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals I-IV*, trans. James G. Lennox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 69. On this theory of laughter in Greek culture see Stephen Halliwell, ‘The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture’ in *Classical Quarterly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, vol. 41, no. 2, 1991), pp. 279-296.

³ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1819), p. 1.

⁴ Murray S Davis, *What’s so Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), p. 31.

approaches; one which risks being relevant only to a specific moment or text, and another which dangerously claims to speak for 'all.'

To some extent straddling this divide is an existing body of work on the comedy of individual writers and artists, from Shakespeare and Jonson through Fielding and Swift to Beckett, Chaplin, The Marx Brothers, Woody Allen, and even, occasionally, Dickens himself. These projects have usually insisted, not wrongly, that the subject of the study in question is unique and individual, either personally, historically, or most likely both. They have therefore resisted the idea that laughter can be treated broadly or in general terms. This thesis is something of an attempt to work in between these two approaches, addressing questions of universality and particularity which are vital to both laughter and to Dickens, a writer whose work was and remains both the most individual and the most popular, work which has universally driven its millions of readers to laughter, and yet contains the most unusual and particular laughs and laughers.

This thesis argues that a certain moment in the nineteenth century was unique in its uses of laughter and that Dickens was especially aware of this. The thesis uses this uniqueness to challenge and problematize existing ways of writing and thinking about laughter but it does not see Dickens's comedy as separate from laughter found and experienced elsewhere. It may be useful to frame this in the terms used by Deleuze and Guattari in their promotion of a 'minor' literature. Deleuze and Guattari explain that a 'minor' literature does not arise from a literature written in a 'minor' language. It is, rather, using a major language but finding something minor in it which can undo the normative functions of that language.⁵ Dickens's humour operates in a major way, using and repeating major and sometimes normative conventions and tendencies, but it always does so in search of the minoritarian elements within these processes. Dickens taps into a set of nineteenth century traditions which blow open or make visible the structures that they emerge from.

In the nineteenth century it was a fairly common conception of Dickens's humour that it operated on something like a base level, that it was universal and that anyone could 'get it.' Quoting the joke from *American Notes* concerning 'portmanteaus which could now no more

⁵ Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature: The Components of Expression,' trans. Marie Maclean, in *New Literary History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, On Writing Histories of Literature (Spring, 1985), pp. 591-608.

be got in at the door, not to say stowed away, than a giraffe could be persuaded or forced into a flower-pot,' reviewer Samuel Warren writes in 1842 that Dickens may 'provoke a loud laugh from persons of uncultivated taste' but that 'to persons of superior education and refinement [his jokes] are puerile and tiresome indeed.'⁶ As Dickens's famous biographer John Forster notes, Dickens's contemporaries, including G. H. Lewes, associated him with great 'fun' but often 'did not concede' him the title of 'humourist,' as if he were not worthy of a descriptor implying complexity (*Life*, 1:192).

It is relevant that humour is a word often applied to the modern; according to Milan Kundera for instance, 'humour was born with Cervantes and Rabelais.'⁷ On the other hand words like mirth, buffoonery and even comedy (when one thinks of Greek and Roman comedy) are words applied to laughter of the past, as if less refined and civilized, perhaps more 'natural,' and certainly more 'basic.' G.K. Chesterton, who shared this view and thought that humour began with Chaucer, wrote of scientific treatments of laughter that 'whatever be their value touching the primitive function of laughter, they throw very little light on the highly *civilized* product of humour' [my emphasis].⁸ In his series of lectures on *English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*, Thackeray also shares this idea, beginning by writing that 'if humour only meant laughter, you would scarcely feel [...] interest about humorous writers.'⁹ Though reversing the idea that intelligent comedy is modern, essayist and philosopher William Hazlitt, whom Dickens read in detail, and who wrote interestingly on comedy, also separated 'the best of our old Comedies' from 'the coarse jests of a set of country clowns.'¹⁰ Dickens's comedy has usually been associated with more 'elementary' or less refined, more 'basic' laughter.

This thesis argues not only the opposite, that Dickens's laughter is some of the most complex in the history of literature, but also that laughter in Dickens demands that the relationship between laughter and civilization be interrogated. Dickens is a writer of the most intelligent and various laughters, whose work challenges many if not all existing models of laughter,

⁶ Samuel Warren quoted in Phillip Collins, (ed.), *Charles Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 125.

⁷ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp. 5-6.

⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *The Spice of Life and Other Essays* (Beaconsfield: Darwen Finlayson, 1964), p. 11.

⁹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth-Century: A Series of Lectures* (New York: Leypolt and Holt, 1867), pp. 1-2.

¹⁰ William Hazlitt, 'On Modern Comedy' in *Selected Writings*, ed. Jon Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 101-9 (p. 105).

opening up the relationship between laughter and rationality, and insisting we form new hypotheses about what laughter can do and how it can be discussed. Dickens in fact deliberately associated his comedy with something that was not highbrow, commenting in the preface to *Pickwick Papers* that 'Cheap Literature is not behind-hand with the Age, but holds its place, and strives to do its duty, I trust that the series in itself may help much worthy company to show' (*PP*, 762). Dickens saw radical potential within what others considered low or base humour and responded to the idea that this humour was unimportant. This idea of Dickens's writing as simple is what this thesis responds to, stressing that both laughter and Dickens, as well as the relationship between the two, cannot be dismissed as straightforward or unimportant.

A starting point of what is argued here is that no two moments of laughter are ever the same; no two laughs in Dickens and no two laughs at or with Dickens are ever identical. The character of Bar in *Little Dorrit* has a 'light-comedy laugh for special jury-men, which was a very different thing from his low-comedy laugh for comic tradesmen on common juries' (*LD*, 585). Laughter, even when not so clearly demarcated into types as Bar's, is always different dependant on the conditions of its moment. As such the thesis is against those theorizations which attempt to provide a key to laughter, or explain it in overall terms. However, this does not mean that laughter is indeterminate, or that it cannot be read, as some have argued. Those theories are also resisted here, on the grounds that laughter can be determined and determinate, it can have real effects in the world, and these can be specific and definable effects. Georges Bataille raises the issue when he writes:

My philosophy is a philosophy of laughter. It is a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter, and it does not even claim to go further. It is a philosophy that doesn't concern itself with problems other than those that have been given to me in this precise experience.¹¹

Bataillan laughter has often been treated as a laughter which escapes rationality, and indeed in this essay he aligns laughter with what he calls 'nonknowledge,' and elsewhere with

¹¹ Georges Bataille, 'Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears,' p. 138.

‘death.’¹² Following this, many have used Bataille to argue that laughter escapes theorization.¹³ And yet Bataille is a theorist of laughter, returning to the topic many times in his career, and here calling his work a ‘philosophy of laughter.’ His interest is in the problems that laughter raises, the issues that are broken open by experiences of laughter. It is the argument of this thesis that the same could be said of Dickens’s project; that he is a comic writer whose aim is not simply to make people laugh, but to experience laughter in all its complexity and to think about its connection to subjectivity and thought; to experience laughter as something involving change and difference, and to think about the effects and implications of such change. Dickens’s texts know that laughter is capable of controlling and ordering the world, as much as it is capable of disordering and challenging it.

Although it cannot be clear what is meant at this stage, this thesis has three main points. The first of these is that laughter is what Alain Badiou calls an ‘event,’ an occurrence which radically transforms the world around it. An event might be provisionally thought of as something that both disorders and re-orders the world. For Badiou, ‘there are no natural events, nor are there neutral events.’¹⁴ The event is a political and cultural occurrence that arises in and from a set of conditions, but it also exceeds and interrupts these conditions and causes, changing the world it erupts into and taking it in new and unpredictable directions. The event therefore breaks chronology and linearity, and seeing the world in terms of the event is anti-essentialist and unsecuring; it means accepting that nothing is constant and that everything is subject to change. The first half of this thesis is dedicated to developing an argument that reads laughter as an event. More specifically, it is argued that laughter is not just an event but a moment which shows to us that our world is constructed by events. Laughter can be something that *shows us events happening*. Second, I argue that the nineteenth century is a time at which this function of laughter becomes increasingly apparent, and third, I argue that Dickens and the traditions of which he was a part are particularly demonstrative of this function of laughter. In my conclusion I extend these arguments slightly to suggest that the nineteenth century documents a shift away from

¹² On this see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, “The Laughter of Being”, in *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 146-166 (p. 150, 159).

¹³ See for example Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 178.

laughter functioning as an 'event' as modern discourse attempts to contain and control laughter's transformative power.

Although few disagree with John Forster's famous comment that 'his leading quality was humour,' comedy in Dickens has received surprisingly little critical attention throughout the history of Dickens scholarship (*Life*, 2:195). Compiling the *Dickens Critical Heritage* in 1971, Phillip Collins remarked that if we were to judge from the history of scholarship, we would never guess that Dickens was a comic author.¹⁵ Edmund Wilson has written that 'in praise of Dickens' humour, there is hardly anything new to say.'¹⁶ Dickens's humour, like so much comedy, has always been praised and appreciated, but very rarely discussed in any depth. Northrop Frye in treated the topic 1968 and James Kincaid returned to it in 1971 with the first sustained book on the subject.¹⁷ For Frye, comedy in Dickens reflects his broader thesis that comedy provides a 'scapegoat' for frustrations, functioning as a licensed transgression that allows society to continue unharmed.¹⁸ On the other hand, Kincaid argues that this idea of laughter as 'a holiday or relief' is demonstrably false and that laughter implies 'a very solid agreement with a certain value system.' Far from being a release, he claims that Dickens controls our response to his humour, using laughter to manipulate the audience towards his worldview.¹⁹

Such a view is one that had already been articulated in the nineteenth century. Speaking negatively about a re-issue of *Martin Chuzzlewit* in 1861, an unsigned article in *National Review* wrote that only 'those who are satisfied to laugh when they are bid, and see in funny writing a perpetual order to be merry' will be happy with Dickens's writing.²⁰ John Carey dedicates a chapter to Dickens's humour in his 1973 book *The Violent Effigy*, in which he argues that Dickens's humour is connected to the ability 'to see through pretence,' a position

¹⁵ Collins (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 1-27.

¹⁶ Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1997), p. 13.

¹⁷ A couple of discussions appear in the years preceding Frye's treatment. See V. S. Pritchett, 'The Humour of Charles Dickens' in *The Listener*, 51 (1954), pp. 970-8; Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) and Barbara M Cross, 'Comedy and Drama in Dickens' in *WHR*, 17 (1963), pp. 143-49.

¹⁸ Northrop Frye, *Dickens and the Comedy of Humors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).

¹⁹ James Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 22.

²⁰ Collins (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, p. 200.

which fits neither Frye's nor Kincaid's model.²¹ After this, attention to Dickens's comedy has been sporadic and irregular, and has been limited to a number of articles. Richard Barrickman, for instance, has argued for comedy as a survival technique in Dickens.²² In an argument quite opposed to that made here, Andrew Sanders's article, 'Dickens and the Idea of the Comic Novel' argues that Dickens's comedy, like Shakespeare's, aims to affirm a particular order of things.²³ Recently, questions of Dickens and the comic have gathered some renewed attention with Malcolm Andrews's 2013 book *Dickensian Laughter*, the book which most closely shares its subject matter with this thesis.²⁴

The point to take from this is that there is no agreement about what laughter in Dickens does. Far from wanting to counter this and provide a definitive answer to the problem of laughter in Dickens, this varying critical response provides a key support for the argument made here. Laughter in the nineteenth century plays a number of roles that resist earlier models of explanation, and many of these models continue to dominate studies of and responses to laughter today. My intention is to show how particular aspects of Dickens's work continue to trouble and problematize what has been said about laughter, both academically and in general. In his important book on psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Jean-Claude Milner puts it nicely when he writes that:

It is not, therefore, appropriate to present Lacan in a way that would bind it within its own internal logic – consistent or not – and that exposes it completely so that any misinterpretations are corrected. My intention is another entirely: not to clarify Lacan's thoughts, nor to rectify what has been said about it, but to express clearly that there is thought in Lacan's work. Thought, by which I mean something whose existence imposes on those who haven't thought it.²⁵ [my translation]

²¹ John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp. 54-79 (p. 54).

²² Richard Barrickman, 'The Comedy of Survival in Dickens's Novels' in *NOVEL: A Forum of Fiction*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Winter 1978), pp. 128-143.

²³ Andrew Sanders, 'Dickens and the Idea of the Comic Novel' in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2006), pp. 51-64.

²⁴ Malcolm Andrews, *Dickensian Laughter: Essays on Dickens and Humour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also his previous book which began to deal with elements of the topic, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves: Dickens and the Public Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁵ Jean-Claude Milner, *L'Œuvre claire: Lacan, la science, la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995), p. 8.

Milner wants to return to Lacan much as Lacan himself returned to Freud, not to develop a totalizing and complete theory but to show how his work reveals problems with or gaps in what has been said up to this point. Lacan said of Freud that he was read 'as one can read anything new [...] pulling it completely to the side of already accepted notions.'²⁶ Instead, he wanted to revisit Freud in order to see what his work does which cannot be reconciled with existing thought. Likewise, it is the intention here to look back at Dickens in order to show how his work problematizes current discussions of comedy and laughter and opens up points which are often foreclosed upon, how Dickens's work shows that 'already accepted notions' about laughter are inadequate.

There is much other work on Dickens which is vital for these discussions but does not directly address the subject of laughter. The question of Dickens and popular culture, for instance, has been discussed many times since the major study by Paul Schlicke in 1988.²⁷ Michael Hollington has perhaps been the major scholar to work in this field, from his work on Dickens and the Grotesque through to his current work on clowning and the circus.²⁸ Another area of Dickens studies which has touched significantly upon the comic is those who have worked on the relationship between Dickens and other writers, though these have also been surprisingly limited when it comes to comic writing. Valerie Gager's book is the only sustained study of Dickens and Shakespeare, and the subject of Dickens and Jonson has only recently attracted attention with Jeremy Tambling's article, despite Dickens's acting and directing several Jonson plays.²⁹ Dickens and Chaucer is a subject occasionally touched upon, though again no sustained study exists.³⁰ The relationship between Dickens and

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, 'The Tokyo discourse', *Journal for Lacanian Studies*, 3, 1, (2005), pp. 129-144 (p. 32).

²⁷ Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1998).

²⁸ Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Michael Hollington, 'Dickens's *Hard Times*: The Father as Tragic Clown' in *Fathers in Victorian Fiction*, ed. Natalie McKnight (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), pp. 35-50; Michael Hollington, 'Dickens and the Circus of Modernity' in *Dickens and Modernity* ed. Juliet John (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), pp. 133-149; Michael Hollington, 'Dickens, The Pantomime and Circus' in *That's the Way to Do It: British Popular Culture of the Nineteenth Century*, ed., Joachim Frenk (Saarbrücken: Verlag Universität des Saarlandes, forthcoming 2014).

²⁹ Valerie L. Gager, *Shakespeare & Dickens: The dynamics of influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jeremy Tambling, 'Dickens and Jonson' in *English* (Spring 2012) 61(232), pp. 4-25. See also Mario Martino, 'Dickens and Ben Jonson' in *Dickens: the craft of fiction and the challenges of reading, proceedings from the Milan symposium September 1998* ed. Rossana Bonadei (Milan: Edizioni Unicopoli, 2000). On Dickens's comedy and the history of drama see R. C. Churchill, 'Dickens, Drama and Tradition' in *Scrutiny* 10 (1942).

³⁰ See Lawrence Besserman, 'Chaucer and Dickens Use Luke 23.34' in *Chaucer Review*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2006), pp. 99-104, and F. T. Flahiff, '"Mysteriously Come Together": Dickens, Chaucer and *Little Dorrit*' in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, no. 61 (1991), pp. 250-68.

eighteenth century writers such as Sterne, Fielding and Smollet, whom Dickens thought of as three of the greatest English novelists, has not been sufficiently studied, and neither has Dickens's relationship to other nineteenth century humourists such as Thackeray.³¹ Though there is by no means space to achieve what is possible here, the final chapter of this thesis makes an attempt to situate Dickens in relationship to a history of comedy, and it is hoped that this project will open up ways of discussing relationships between comic writers. In summary, given the scope of Dickens studies, there is a remarkable drought of work on Dickens and comedy in all its forms, which this thesis attempts to play its part in redressing.

Ideas of laughter as emanating from within, as a physical or natural reaction, are resisted in this thesis. These have sometimes been scientific arguments, and have been invested in the idea of laughter as positive. Despite this being a thesis grounded in the arts, a large body of scientific work on humour and laughter has been consulted in the course of the project.³² Whilst some of such work has maintained this line, recent work, though sometimes still within a positivist discourse, has found clear evidence that laughter should not always be seen as positive or healthy, arguing for its negative effects.³³ Scientific studies have pointed out this problem and acknowledged that the cultural investment in laughter as positive is problematic.³⁴ Thus, while this scientific material will be left behind in what follows, it is worth pointing out that the social approach here is not in contradiction with current scientific studies of laughter. Given that comedy studies have, at least since Thomas Hobbes and his idea of laughter as caused by superiority, been attentive to the dangers of laughter, it is surprising that so much discourse around laughter, particularly in cultural and literary studies, should still be unquestionably on the side of laughter as positive.³⁵

³¹ On Dickens's interest in these figures see the chapter in *Life*, 2:72-77.

³² For some who have argued for humour's positive effects see G. E. Vaillant, 'Adaptive mental mechanisms: their role in a positive psychology' in *American Psychologist*, 55 (2000), pp. 89-98; H. M. Lefcourt and R. A. Martin, 'Humor and life stress: Antidote to adversity' (New York, NY: Springer-Verlag, 1986) and R. A. Martin, 'The psychology of humor: An integrative approach' (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007).

³³ For scientific studies demonstrating the negative effects of laughter see K. M. Lehman, K. L. Burke, R. Martin, J. Sultan and D. R. Czech, 'A reformulation of the moderating effects of productive humor' in *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 14, (2001), pp. 131-161.

³⁴ See Andrea C. Samson, James J. Gross, 'Humour as emotion regulation: The differential consequences of negative versus positive humour' in *Cognition & Emotion*, vol. 26, no. 2, (2012), pp. 375-384.

³⁵ One area in which this has not been the case is work on laughter and disability, which has consisted of only three major studies. See most recently the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* issue on 'Disability,

This thesis takes a theoretical approach to laughter in Dickens. Perhaps surprisingly, the theory employed here largely revolves around the work of Hegel, and the subsequent developments made on his ideas in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Gillian Rose has articulated how Hegelian philosophy can be read as a critique of the idea of ego-as-origin.³⁶ Following and developing this potentiality within Hegel, the first section of this thesis offers a theory of laughter along these lines, arguing that laughter has to do with subjectivity coming into being. Psychoanalysis, which shares much with this particular reading of Hegel, is the other major theoretical model to address questions of subject-construction. Lacanian psychoanalysis breaks not only from the psychiatry and psychology models which put the subject at the centre but also from the ego-psychology of psychoanalysts including Anna Freud, who placed a focus on the strengthening of the ego. Elements of Freud's work supported this idea; the well-known quote 'where id was, ego shall be,' has been read as implying that the task of analysis is to protect and defend the ego (SE 22:80). Other elements of Freud's work go in the opposite direction, suggesting that there is no stability or consistency in the subject.

Though it is of course impossible that Dickens could have read psychoanalysis, and almost certain that he did not significantly know Hegel, the theory of laughter in Section One argues that the work of Dickens shares with both Hegel and with this strand of psychoanalysis a common question posed in three different historical moments: that of asking not whether there is such a thing as an original ego or subject, but of asking: how does it happen that the ego or the subject comes into being as original? In all three cases, a large part of the answer is: through laughter.

Though the reading here treats the connections as indirect, there are some possible connections between Dickens and Hegel and indeed they have once been treated together in terms of the Sublime and in a completely different way to this thesis, in terms of the dialectic.³⁷ Further, there are five mentions of Hegel in *Household Words* and *All the Year*

Humour and Comedy', ed. Tom Coogan and Rebecca Mallett, Volume 7, Issue 3 (2013) which outlines the work done in the field.

³⁶ Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 85

³⁷ Jonathan Loesberg, 'Dickensian Deformed Children and the Hegelian Sublime' in *Victorian Studies*, vol. 40, No. 4 (Summer, 1997), pp. 625-654. For a very different discussion of the Hegelian dialectic in relation to *Great Expectations* see Vincent P. Pecora, 'Inheritances, Gifts, and Expectations' in *Law and Literature*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 177-196 (p. 179).

Round during the years in which Dickens was editor. Two of these make reference to new translations of German texts on Hegel, whilst somewhat surprisingly, the other three all associate Hegel with comedy. One of these is in a novel by Charles James Lever, whom Dickens took a particular interest in during his career, where Hegel appears as part of a comic narrative serialized in 1861 (*AYR*, 16/2/1861). In two other articles, both anonymously authored, Hegel appears as part of a joke. In one of these Hegel's serious philosophizing is made a joke of; when the narrator ponders the consequences of eating a bowl of soup, he slides into philosophical thoughts, and we read 'it would have cost me a tough reading of Hegel to get to the bottom of all that nice reasoning; so as I was sure they had not got Hegel on the premises to lend me, I said I would have no soup (*AYR*, 16/12/1865). Here Hegel is the figure of serious reason which is contrasted with comedy, but the other mention of Hegel in *All the Year Round* somewhat reverses this; in the article entitled 'Number Sixty-Eight,' the comic figure of the short story, described by its narrator as 'a great humourist,' accuses the more rational narrator of being the sort of man who would 'deride the irrational logic of Hegel,' interestingly connecting Hegel with the comic and irrational rather than the serious and rational (*AYR*, 26/9/1863). This is a point Lacanian psychoanalysis makes much of, calling Hegel the anti-philosopher opposed to rationality (*S17*, 23). There is no evidence to suggest Dickens was reading Hegel, and these are just speculative connections, but they do give a sense of Hegel's popular position in the nineteenth century. In a chapter on Thomas Carlyle and Hegel, Jerry Dibble says similarly of Carlyle, who references Hegel twice in *Sartor Resartus*, a text Dickens knew very well, that what we find 'points more to popular misconceptions about Hegel's philosophy than to first-hand knowledge of his work.'³⁸ Discussions of any possible chains of links between Hegel, Dickens and Lacan will be left behind at this point.³⁹ The justification for the connection between Dickens, Hegel and psychoanalysis is that they each specifically raise, from three different national and temporal contexts, the issue that laughter cannot be seen as merely a response of a pre-existing subject to pre-existing things but has to be seen as part of the subject's formation as well.

³⁸ Jerry A. Dibble, *The Pythia's Drunken Song* (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1978), p. 57.

³⁹ On the reception of Hegel in Britain see Giles Whiteley, *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death* *Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010)

I want to anticipate here the criticism that the novels in this thesis have been approached with a particular argument about comedy already in mind. In Malcolm Andrews's book *Dickensian Laughter* he specifically sets out to avoid this, privileging the text rather than approaching it 'through any prefabricated existing framework.'⁴⁰ There are several reasons for the apparent difference of approach here. The first point is that a part of the implied application of theory to text comes from the formal decision to place the theory chapter first in the thesis. In reality, the theory offered here was born out of readings of Dickens, and was stimulated at almost every turn by experiences of laughter found in Dickens that resisted subsequent theorizations of laughter and asked that they were re-read. Researching this thesis involved endlessly searching for discussions of laughter that could explain laughter in Dickens, with little or no success. Dickens's project, it is argued here, rather than having a theory of laughter of its own, is to show how existing ideas surrounding laughter are inadequate. The theorists discussed in Section One, also recognizing this, attempt to hypothesize potential answers, but Dickens's texts continue to trouble them. Both are needed in order to continually provoke new discussions of laughter and avoid simplistic or overarching conclusions which would close the possibilities of discussion down. As Lacan writes in 1951,

Novel theories prepare the ground for new discoveries [...] since such theories not only enable one to understand the facts better, but even make it possible for those facts to be observed in the first place. The facts are then less likely to be made to fit, in a more or less arbitrary way, into accepted doctrine and there pigeon-holed.⁴¹

The 'theory' in this thesis aims not to explain the laughter that we find in Dickens (the laughter Dickens provokes in us is the subject of my conclusion). Rather, it attempts to show the limitations with those existing models which have attempted to provide final hypotheses for how laughter functions, and to make some speculations about what these limitations show us. In placing Dickens's texts in conversation with attempts to theorize laughter, it hopes to open up a field of discussion around the causes and effects of laughter, and to find ways of producing new truths around laughter which can be politically useful,

⁴⁰ Malcolm Andrews, *Dickensian Laughter: Essays on Dickens and Humour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xi.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, 'Some Reflections on the Ego,' *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34 (1954), pp. 11-17 (p. 13).

involving a recognition that laughter is deeply political and culturally central; something which Dickens felt to the utmost.

Dickens opposes the idea that laughter is separate from profound concerns, apolitical, and not serious. He mocks the distinction in *Bleak House* for instance, when Skimpole remarks ‘I have a Comedy daughter, and I have a Sentiment daughter’ (*BH*, 651). Sociologist Erving Goffman has shown at length that ‘only joking,’ one of the most common phrases in the English language, is an act of dismissal that frames the material involved in a particular way and controls the effect it has.⁴² In Dickens laughter can be at its most political when it appears to be most harmless. French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky hypothesizes that we are living in a ‘humoristic society.’ For Lipovetsky, the humour disseminated in contemporary society demands that we be *light* and ‘easy,’ which can be a way to encourage consumption and consumerism.⁴³ Though such ideas can be useful, this thesis focuses on the way laughter can exercise a much more direct and tangible influence over the subject. Perhaps this suggests that there is a difference between the role of laughter in the nineteenth century and today, and this subject is picked up in the conclusion.

In summary, there are two dominant critical trends which this thesis opposes, and which are revealed to be insufficient by the uses and treatments of laughter found in Dickens. These ideas have characterized both the study of laughter in general and treatments of comedy in Dickens. The first section of the thesis is dedicated to pointing out the problems with these two trends and then in proposing an alternative.

The first of the ideas that is rejected here is that laughter is liberating and out of control, against order and structure. We learn of Mr Tupman of *Pickwick Papers* that ‘his laughter was forced—his merriment feigned,’ even when it may not be apparent to us, or those around him (*PP*, 113). Laughter often turns out not to be as free as it seems, even to those doing the laughing. The second of the ideas I want to oppose is, on the surface at least, an opposite one; the idea that laughter is in fact completely controlled. I argue here that the subjects involved are never in complete control of what their laughter produces, and that laughter always comes with insecurity and anxiety. As we hear of Maggie in *Little Dorrit*, ‘she was

⁴² See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper, 1974)

⁴³ See Gilles Lipovetsky *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 199.

very weak; indeed was so weak that when she began to laugh she couldn't stop herself — which was a great pity' (*LD*, 9). Laughter can take over its subjects and their autonomy, just as in *Our Mutual Friend* Mortimer is made to feel that 'when his laugh was out, there was something serious, if not anxious, in his face' (*OMF*, 282). Laughter is never completely in the control of those involved in it, and it has other effects than those that are intended, making it anxious.

Finally the first section of the thesis makes its argument that rather than being a response to things, laughter has a power over who we are, and over the things that we respond to with laughter. In the nineteenth century Carlyle writes 'how much lies in Laughter: the cipher-key, wherewith we decipher the whole man.'⁴⁴ Goethe wrote similarly that 'there is nothing in which people more betray their character than in what they find to laugh at.'⁴⁵ It is in many ways the reverse that is argued here; that laughter does not reveal what a person already is but that laughter produces characters and subject-positions.

The second section of the thesis then turns to Dickens, who shows us this. An initial chapter attempts to situate Dickens as the writer most suited to these discussions of laughter and out of whose work these discussions arose. His work is also used as a 'resistance to theory,' to borrow the term from Paul de Man: it is the text which moves the theory on and forces it to answer new questions.⁴⁶ The final three chapters take one major novel at a time, analysing the different implications of these arguments when reading the texts. The conclusion discusses how we can think about laughing *at* or *with* Dickens today, and the role of the critic of laughter, as well as discussing changes in laughter between the nineteenth century and today.

⁴⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 26.

⁴⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1872), p. 184.

⁴⁶ Paul de Man, 'The Resistance to Theory' in *Yale French Studies*, no. 36 (1982), pp. 3-20.

Section One: Reading Laughter

‘The origin is laughing’

Jean Luc-Nancy¹

A decision has already been made, in the title of this thesis, with the choice of ‘laughter’ over ‘comedy’ as the subject of discussion. There are two main reasons for this, the first of which is relatively straightforward. The interest of this thesis is in the laugh itself, and in comedy, jokes and comic writing as moments which are related to laughter, rather than in the tradition of Comedy as the genre which is usually opposed to Tragedy.² In his interesting and neglected book *The Sense of Humour* written in 1954, Stephen Potter writes that whilst Humour is a specific thing referring to what we call Comedy, laughter comes from everywhere: there is the laugh at something funny but there is also ‘the laugh which fills a blank in conversation, [...] the laugh to attract attention, [...] the laugh [of] the new arrival in the hall, the laugh of the lone man at the theatre, [...] the laugh of creative pleasure [and] the laugh of relief from physical danger.’³ Whilst Comedy is a specific form, laughter appears to be formless; every laugh, it seems, is different. What follows here is an attempt to theorize laughter in a new way without thinking of the diversity of laughter as reconcilable with one hypothesis. Of course, the overlap between laughter and the genre of Comedy is great, and at times the thesis will gesture towards this relationship, though there is not space to develop it in detail. The second and not unrelated reason for choosing laughter over comedy is that as a theory of laughter this chapter attempts to move away from a number of trends in what will herein be called ‘comedy studies,’ and takes a different approach to laughter, asking not what constitutes the comic or what makes something funny, but instead

¹ Nancy, Jean-Luc, ‘Elliptical Sense’ in *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 18 (1988), pp. 175-191

² Leo Salinger, *Shakespeare and the Tradition of Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974)

³ Stephen Potter, *The Sense of Humour* (London: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 25-6.

how we can think in new ways about what happens to us when we laugh. In other words, it is about the effects of laughter, rather than just the causes of it.

In current academic circles there is no great sense of a community of comedy studies. Although there are a number of books on comedy and a few more recent 'overview' books or introductions to the theory and/or history of comedy, there is little sense of discussion between these individuals. This is demonstrated by the fact that it is common to find that books on comedy and laughter are absent from each other's bibliographies. This section will attempt to make some points about what trends exist in discussions of laughter both current and historical, and about how these might be developed, in the hope that the field of 'comedy studies' can expand in new directions.

In short, the age-old question of those discussing comedy has been that of why we laugh, or of what we laugh at. As a result, discussions have focussed on laughter as an 'effect' of a 'cause' which precedes the event of the laugh itself; laughter is always caused by something which 'explains' it. Usually, this is where the discussion stops. Charles Gruner's 1997 book *The Game of Humour*, for example, carries with it the subtitle 'A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh.'⁴ This focus on what is funny and why it is funny is almost all-pervasive in discussions of laughter and most of the studies discussed in what follows are variations of this position; they have all searched for the origins or causes of laughter. This thesis is an attempt to show the limitations of this approach.

The first half of this thesis is dedicated to the theorization of laughter and takes place in three stages. The first chapter discusses a set of traditions of theorizing comedy which, although diverse in themselves, share a characteristic of connecting laughter with liberation. These arguments have often posited laughter as something shattering and destructive, either to individuals, to communities, or more abstractly to structures and ideologies. The main point of this section is that laughter never simply frees the existing subject but always plays a part in constructing subjectivity.

On the other hand, laughter has been seen as different kind of reaction to already existing ideologies and structures: one which supports or reflects those structures. These discussions

⁴ Charles Gruner, *The Game of Humour: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2000).

represent a radical break from discussions that have invested positively in laughter, but they also have limitations of their own that will be addressed. In the second chapter I want to show here that whilst laughter cannot be seen as purely liberating, neither can it ever be a straightforward reflection *of* or support *for* existing ways of thinking, as some readings have implied. In this I follow Julia Kristeva's assertion that 'every practice which produces something new is a practice of laughter.'⁵ Laughter always involves movement and production; it always changes things. This means that even when its apparent function seems to 'support' or re-inscribe an existing structure or ideology, laughter has the capacity to show that ideology to be unsecured and anxious, even desperate to assert itself and retain control, perhaps even dependant on laughter itself. The main point of this section is that laughter is never entirely on the side of ideology even when it might in some ways support it or impose it, because it also shows ideology to be insecure and in need of constant assertion.

My third and final chapter in the section is an attempt to work through the problems with these two types of theorizing laughter by positing a theory of laughter as what philosopher and psychoanalyst Alain Badiou terms 'the event.' Seeing laughter in terms of the event, I believe, offers an alternative to the shibboleths that have characterized previous discussions of laughter. The argument here comes out of noticing the major limitations with the two ideas of comedy discussed in the first two sections. Against those who have seen it as liberating, I argue that laughter always plays a role in constructing the subject, and unlike those who have seen as simply enforcing ideology, I argue that laughter always shows that ideology is insecure. In other words, laughter shows us something about ideology: that it is unsecured and produced precisely by processes like laughter. This undermines ideology's claim to be natural and secure and thus challenges the idea of laughter as the response of pre-existing subjects to pre-existing structures. Laughter is not only the product of cultural norms but the producer of norms, so that these norms cannot be seen as natural or secure; even when laughter is on the side of norms, it troubles them.

Whilst acknowledging that there are as many different laughs as there are people and occasions of laughter, a theory of 'laughter as event' offers a way of thinking about the

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 225.

causes and effects of laughter that neither reduces laughter to an overall hypothesis nor prohibits its political and cultural effects from being discussed. Ian Donaldson, in his book on comedy from Jonson to Fielding, writes that whilst 'comedy is a living and evolving form always changing a shade faster than the definitions which pursue it,' the idea that comedy 'cannot be profitably talked about' is equally problematic; clearly questions of laughter teach us important realities.⁶ Laughter can and must be theorized but can never be completely explained. Seeing laughter as event is a way to approach this difficulty. Laughter as event shows that laughter neither simply repeats and supports ideology nor shatters and liberates any essential or pre-existing subject from it. It rather shows how laughter is close to the heart of ideology; laughter repeats or rehearses aspects of ideology, but in doing so it can also reveal these mechanisms and show us how our way of thinking is put together.

⁶ Ian Donaldson, *The World Upside-Down: Comedy from Jonson to Fielding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 1.

Chapter One: Laughter as Liberation

The subject of discussion in this first chapter is the connection between laughter and liberation, and since this is often thought of as one 'type' of laughter, I want to begin with this idea of dividing laughter into 'types.' John Morreall's book *Taking Laughter Seriously* of 1983 and Simon Critchley's more recent *On Humour* have been two influential examples that have followed this tradition of 'typing' laughter, though it has a long history dating back as far as Hegel.¹ Often, there are three categories into which laughter is divided, and only one of these is the idea of laughter as 'liberation,' the subject of this section. However, I will show here that there are important cross-overs between these supposedly distinct types.

The first of the three types is 'superiority theory,' the idea that we laugh to ourselves in order to affirm our superiority over another. Thomas Hobbes's comments in *Leviathan* are the most famous to follow this line; for Hobbes, 'laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly.'² The idea has a long history and by no means originates with Hobbes; Aristotle for example commented that 'something that excites laughter is something ugly.'³ Neither is the theory confined to the older history of comedy theory; Charles Gruner staunchly defends 'superiority theory' as the key to explaining 'all' humour in his relatively recent book.⁴ Similarly, James English has argued that 'comic practice is always on some level or in some measure an assertion of group against group'.⁵

Usually opposed to this idea of laughter as an expression of superiority is the idea of laughter as a relief or release of bound or repressed energies. Superficially at least, this

¹ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983); Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 11.

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1994), p. 34.

³ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1459.

⁴ See Gruner, *The Game of Humour*, p. 1. See also the earlier Charles Gruner, *Understanding Laughter: The Workings of Wit and Humour* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1978). For an interesting alternative view see Simon Dickie's recent work which troubles the opposition between care or pity and laughter, in *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth-Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁵ James English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humour and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 9.

defines laughter as something that operates against those imposed or social structures such as hierarchy and superiority. It is possible to speak about Freud and Bakhtin's distinct theorizations of laughter in this way, though their own specific comments on comedy should not be easily reduced to the idea of release, as is discussed later in this section. It is worth noting that contrary to a general impression, this association between laughter and release was by no means born with Freud; in the eighteenth century Shaftesbury wrote that 'the natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged upon their constrainers.'⁶ The idea of laughter as release is as old as the idea of laughter as superiority, and indeed Hobbes's definition of 'sudden glory' may itself have a hint of 'release' theory about it, which is made more of in what follows, suggesting that these types may not be as clearly separate as is often thought.

The third type of laughter which often appears in discussions is the 'incongruity theory,' which claims that laughter arises from the perception of something odd or incongruous. However, it is easy to see how this could be thought of in relation to either of the other two theories; we either laugh to affirm ourselves over the incongruous (making it a self-affirming or superiority laughter) or we are forced by the incongruity to face the inadequacy of our normal ordered view of things (making it a laughter associated with some kind of release). This third 'type' seems to have entered discussions of laughter later and has not characterized the history of theorizing laughter as the other two trends have. It is the close connections between the first two seemingly opposed 'types,' superiority theory and release or liberation theory, which is the point of discussion here.

More recent work such as Simon Critchley's has moved away from these strict 'types' but has nevertheless maintained a distinction between radical and reactionary or between liberating and ideological laughter. This allows him to invest positively in the idea of a laughter that is essentially liberating or radical, a laughter which avoids the limitations and dangers of other more 'reactionary' types. This is a potentially dangerous view that ignores

⁶ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Douglas den Uyl (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 3 vols. vol. 1, p. 71.

the constructive and coercive elements that can be found in all laughter. If we consider how it is possible to 'burst' into laughter at the expense of another, or how we can laugh at another, affirming our own superiority, and then claim that we 'could not help' doing so, a language implying liberation, then it seems that each type of laughter contains elements of other types, meaning that liberating laughter cannot be kept apart from its more cruel or ideological counterparts. In fact, sometimes we need our laughter to appear liberated and freeing in order to see it as evidence of our superiority. Part of the way it asserts superiority is by seeming like a release, appearing to be a freeing expression of superiority.

Against the assumption that laughter can be radical *as such* Andy Medhurst makes the useful argument that laughter depends on conflict, and that a society without disharmony would be a society without laughter.⁷ This disassociates laughter with 'happiness' and rather than seeing laughter as inherently liberating and positive, locates it in the conflict itself. This is something Mikhail Bakhtin knew, despite usually being associated with seeing laughter as inherently radical or even liberating. Bakhtin foregrounded the problem that it is wrong to see laughter as apolitical, and that if it is overturning or disruptive, this is only so relationally; laughter's meaning is inseparable from its political context. Medhurst argues that laughter always involves change, and this is certainly true, but Bakhtin takes this further and stresses that this change is not only destructive but constructive as well. Bakhtin has often served as a theorist of laughter for those seeing laughter as a positive liberating force and as such discussions of laughter in his work have often missed this important dimension. Introducing his concept of the carnival, the usual way in which laughter is approached through his work, Bakhtin remarks:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in its scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third,

⁷ Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 25.

this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.⁸

Carnival laughter is destructive, although in the very act of destruction it has a creative quality that has often not been interrogated further; carnival laughter not only denies but *asserts*, it not only buries but *revives*. The carnival dissolves structure and organization, 'while carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it.'⁹ It is 'the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts.'¹⁰ Yet this does not mean that the subject is free or liberated in carnival laughter. Reading Dostoevsky, Bakhtin makes the important point that carnival 'absolutizes nothing, but rather proclaims the joyful relativity of everything.'¹¹ Nothing essential or absolute is liberated or released. Instead, carnival is de-essentializing because it shows that everything is relative; neither the expression of carnival nor the cultural norms it opposes are privileged or absolute, no behaviour is natural. Carnival laughter undermines norms not by releasing 'true' or 'natural' unrestrained behaviour but by showing that all behaviour is relative and that there is no essential or free impulse. Carnival does not believe in the existence of an essential subject to be freed. Carnival then, is something not far from what Judith Butler calls 'performativity,' a behaviour which establishes the appearance of a subject that exists before or underneath that behaviour.¹² If laughter is connected to liberation it is in this way; as we shall see, laughter has a *performative* quality in that it produces the idea of a natural subject who laughs.

What we ultimately see here is something like the production of an origin in laughter, which will be a major part of the argument put forward below that laughter can be seen as an 'event.' Laughter can function to establish something like a natural subjectivity, or it at least plays a part in the production of a subject who seems to have pre-existed in order to be 'released' in laughter. This means that we need to dispel the long standing idea that

⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 11-12. On this see Thomas J. Farrell ed., *Bakhtin and Medieval Voices* (Florida: University of Florida, 1995).

⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Characteristics of Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Works* in *Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2004), pp. 33-87 (p. 36).

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 174-75.

laughter is a natural characteristic of man; laughter as release has been thought of as the human subject responding to something in its outside world, making it evidence of an essential subject who responds, but in fact the appearance of this subject can be created *by* laughter. This is the major theme of chapter 5.

Reading comedy in the nineteenth-century novel, Roger Henkle writes that we can only account for the comedy 'if we can locate the writer's position in his society and discover what he is responding to.' For Henkle, we have to see the 'shibboleths and sacred assumptions' of the writer's culture, in order to see how he challenges these in 'breaking free into art and wit.'¹³ Though he thinks of laughter as nothing natural and always relative, Henkle's language of 'breaking free' implies liberation and what ultimately comes down to a belief in the primacy of the ego or a subject to be freed. His language embodies a common problem in such discussions of comedy in these terms; society is made the problem, and a subject whom we imagine to be free of social constraints in laughter is affirmed. This is a problem we also find in the language of philosophy when it has discussed laughter. Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have famously argued that laughter is a kind of breakdown or 'deterritorialization,' a splitting of the subject. Whilst their argument is complex, like many others it is couched in the language of liberation, even though in their view it is not the modern 'subject' as we know it that is liberated.¹⁴ As will be discussed in more detail later, in fact these moments of supposed freedom can be involved in the production of this 'liberated' subject. Laughter works to 'naturalize' both the laughing subject and whatever it is that the subject laughs at or in response to.

Ultimately it is untenable to maintain the position that there is a laughter that is an inherently liberating phenomenon. In his Introduction to his casebook on comedy D. J. Palmer notes this way in which the history of comedy theory has largely been interested in drawing out what he calls a 'safe laughter,' or a laughter which can be seen as positive, as opposed to dangerous or cruel comedy.¹⁵ In these terms, superiority theory would usually be thought of as on the side of a dangerous or cruel laughter, whereas relief theory puts

¹³ Roger B. Henkle, *Comedy and Culture: England 1820-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 4.

¹⁴ Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature: The Components of Expression,' trans. Marie Maclean, in *New Literary History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, On Writing Histories of Literature (Spring, 1985), pp. 591-608.

¹⁵ D. J. Palmer (ed.) *Comedy: Developments in Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 8.

laughter in the category of being positive and liberating. Indeed, we see something of this divide in Critchley. Of course, to liberate is not always 'safe' and can indeed be dangerous, but this is rather a question of terminology; the important point here is that typing allows some laughter to be 'recovered' from the aspects deemed undesirable by any context in which the theorization takes place. Further, the idea of laughter as releasing is central to the way it can function as coercive. Contrary to being a separate type of laughter, the idea of laughter as the assertion of superiority can only function if one already subscribes to the belief in laughter as release, perhaps even specifically as the release of a natural or at least pre-existing subject. Even Hobbes, for whom '*sudden* glory' arises from a '*sudden* conception' of eminency [my emphasis], demonstrates this point; it is only by seeing this reaction of laughter as the spontaneous release of something natural and instinctual that its occurrence is allowed to serve as evidence of that already existing difference which it claims to perceive and respond to: the superiority of one over another. As such, what we see here is the relief element to superiority theory; the fact that laughter is seen as a release of something already there is what allows it to be considered as evidence for the superiority of one over the other.

What is perhaps more difficult to notice is the way that apparently liberating laughter also contains elements of superiority laughter. Laughter that appears to have *only* to do with breakdown and destruction also sets up another position which is established at the moment of the laugh, a position that we may even consider to be 'superior' to the one that has been destroyed. In an essay called 'Comedy and Finitude' and then in his later book *On Humour*, Critchley argues that in radical laughter we are faced not with the 'affirmation of life' but with its 'dissipation' or 'flight.' For Critchley this laughter shows us how limited we are, how one is 'riveted to oneself' and this constitutes its radicalism, its capacity to 'annihilate identity.'¹⁶ In *On Humour* he summarises, 'if humour tells you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are not the person you would like to be.'¹⁷ Critchley's argument is complex, and is not release theory that believes in the natural subject as Hobbes or even Palmer may be said to. Even so, the claim that laughter 'annihilates identity' also implies liberation from the confines of identity.

¹⁶ Simon Critchley, 'Comedy and Finitude' in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 217-238, (p. 230, 234, 233).

¹⁷ Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 75.

Yet, if we think of what exactly it is that is 'liberated' we seem to run up against the same problem. The assertion is that laughter can be a kind of dangerous laughing at oneself which operates against identity, yet even if we laugh at ourselves, laughing at or in our own destruction, we also create another position from which we laugh that is capable of laughing in this way, as it were, *at* its former self, the thing which it now laughs at. As such, rather than showing you how limited you are, laughter moves the subject on, forming it in new ways. In laughing at oneself the subject designates how limited it was and also seems to move beyond this limitation and into a new position in relation to it. There is something of an establishment of chronology here in the laugh; something is destroyed and made history, and change occurs, but there is also something constructive, something is produced which can often be more subtle but can be seen as a position that is affirmed over the one that has become history, the position of the subject prior to the laugh. The idea of laughter as something that establishes chronology is part of the discussion of laughter and the event below and a main topic of chapter 6. For now the point is that there can be a 'superiority' or self-affirming dimension to even the most destructive laughter, and that there can be a constructive dimension to the most 'destructive' laugh. Laughter may destroy structures but it also creates new ones.

This point can be shown through Dickens's contemporary Charles Baudelaire, who in a moment of his discussion of comedy which is to some extent in line with superiority theory, comments that when we see a man fall over in the street we issue a sudden and irrepressible laugh that seems to say 'Look at me! *I* am not falling! *I* am walking upright. *I* would never be so silly as to fail to see a gap in the pavement, or a cobblestone blocking the way'.¹⁸ Much is shared with the language of Hobbes, but with an added dimension coming from the humour of Baudelaire himself. Baudelaire emphasizes the '*I*' precisely to show this new subject coming into being through his laughter, boasting in its new celebrated position. Laughing at ourselves teaches us an important truth that what appears to be destructive is constructive as well, it produces a new subject who laughs. Of course the point is that it could easily be you who fell and we do laugh at ourselves when we fall over. The assertion of superiority is coming from nowhere, it is ludicrous or even created by the act of laughing

¹⁸ Charles Baudelaire, 'On the Essence of Laughter,' in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon Press, 2006), pp. 147-165 (p. 152).

itself. In other words, when we read Baudelaire we laugh not only at the person who fell over but the person who was silly enough to laugh at them. Baudelaire shows us both subject positions coming into being through this laugh so that laughter can create superiority rather than merely reflect it.

Whether we laugh at another or ourselves we create two subject positions, one which is affirmed over the other. So laughter is never only destructive – it is always formative as well. We can think of this in terms of the familiar objection ‘how can you laugh at me?’ which never seems to carry much weight for this very reason; it is the very fact that one person *has* laughed at another which qualifies them as being able to laugh at them so that a new structure of superiority is constructed (and not just reflected) by the laugh. Laughter creates a new subject which it simultaneously naturalizes; it appears that the positions it creates were already there. If Hobbes was consciously unaware of this, Baudelaire was not.

This tension and interrelation between laughter as liberating an existing subject and constructing a new subject is found in Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Written in 1905, the text is the foundational study for theories of the comic which have argued for almost any variation of liberation theory. Principally, Freud’s treatment of laughter is in line with ideas of laughter as ‘release.’ He remarks that ‘civilization and higher education have a large influence in the development of repression’ which means that ‘primary possibilities of enjoyment [...] are lost to us.’ Freud explains that in the joke these repressions are lifted, and the work of civilization and higher education are undone; ‘we are laughing at the same thing that makes a peasant laugh at a coarse piece of smut’ (SE 8:101). In jokes we are dealing with the ‘release’ of primary or instinctual impulses, which have been repressed by social and cultural norms. In his 2005 book *Comedy* Andrew Stott follows this suggestion in Freud, speaking of Freud as ‘relief theory’ and focussing on his indebtedness to Herbert Spencer, who provided a biological explanation for laughter as ‘natural’ and originating from within the human body.¹⁹ According to Stott, Freud moves beyond Spencer’s biological explanation and explains ‘the need for energetic redirection as the circumvention of internal prohibitions put in place by the superego’ but ultimately

¹⁹ Herbert Spencer, ‘The Physiology of Laughter’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, no. 5 (March, 1860), pp. 395-402.

comes down on the same side as Spencer, asserting a concept of laughter which 'fits into an instinctual economy, a functional system that retains the equilibrium of the subject.'²⁰

This reading of Freud rehearses the trend discussed above, of seeing comedy as having a cause located inside the individual's psychic life, and indeed Stott states that 'Freud's discussion of laughter occurs within the context of laughter as a *response* to jokes only' [my emphasis].²¹ In this reading, the individual is thought of as a unified system and laughter is seen as a result of the subject's internal drives dealing with a psychological problem. As in the discussions above, the presence of internal drives pre-exists laughter in order to cause it. Laughter, as we have seen throughout this section, is seen a response, allowing it to be evidence of the pre-existing difference between the subject and its outside world. In light of the discussion given here we might want to charge Freud with the criticism made here of seeing laughter as purely liberating; it is a way of affirming the existence of the ego or an essential subjectivity. By situating laughter as response Freud lends himself to the arguments of those interested only in why we laugh, marginalizing the 'effects' of laughter and marginalizing its role in producing the very subject it appears to be the response of. However, as we shall see in the next section, as so often with Freud's work other elements of his text problematize the presiding treatment of laughter as response and insist that laughter is seen not only as caused but as a cause itself. It not so much liberates the subject but plays a role in the creation of the subject that it appears to 'free.'

²⁰ Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 138, 139.

²¹ Stott, p. 140.

Chapter Two: Laughter and Control

Contrary to conventional readings, Freud's argument in the joke book seems to suggest that whilst in some ways laughter has to be seen a response, in other ways it influences how the subject is formed. Rather than discussing the act of laughter itself, it is through jokes that Freud discusses the way that laughter can be involved in the production of something. The key passage may be the following:

We speak, it is true, of 'making' a joke; but we are aware that when we do so our behaviour is different from when we make a judgement or make an objection. A joke has quite outstandingly the characteristic of being a notion that has occurred to us 'involuntarily'. What happens is not that we know a moment beforehand what joke we are going to make, and that all it then needs is to be clothed in words. We have an indefinable feeling, rather, which I can best compare with an '*absence*,' a sudden release of intellectual tension, and then all at once the joke is there – as a rule already clothed in words. (*SE* 8: 167)

If we believe in a self-preserving internal subject we are allowed to see laughter as having a cause, as emanating from within, as if instinctual. As discussed above, laughter would serve as evidence of the pre-existence of the ego, and of the outside world to which it responds. It can even be seen as a way in which we naturalize that inside/outside divide, laughter seeming to be evidence of the boundary between the subject and their exterior. On the contrary, what I shall argue here is that laughter is involved in the change and even production of this very divide. In this quotation from Freud jokes seem not to express something already existing but to arise in and only in language; the idea of the joke having a content which pre-exists the making of the joke is troubled: Freud remarks that it 'is not that we know a moment beforehand what joke we are going to make, and that all it then needs is to be clothed in words' but rather that 'all at once the joke is there – as a rule already clothed in words.' Completely opposed to the above discussion of 'laughing at' in which the joke relies on the pre-existence of some content which we consider funny or laughable, something 'ugly' or 'inferior' which can stand as the cause of laughter, Freud posits that the

joke is not a language of representation. Instead, there is no content to the joke, nothing pre-existing for it to refer back to but something that arises only in language. Freud gives an example to demonstrate:

A. borrowed a copper kettle from B. and after he had returned it was sued by B.
because the kettle now had a big hole in it which made it unusable. His defence was:
“First, I never borrowed the kettle from B. at all; secondly, the kettle had a hole in it
already when I got it from him; and thirdly, I gave him back the kettle undamaged.”
(SE 8:62)

In the joke, each of the excuses given is valid in itself, but each one contradicts the other two. Freud explains that the key to the joke is that ‘A. was treating in isolation what had to be regarded as a connected whole’ (SE 8:62). The same process can be seen in an old Jewish joke cited by Adorno where a man catches his best friend with his wife on his sofa. As the man likes both wife and best friend so much, he cannot decide which to discard, so he comes up with the plan of selling the sofa.¹ Many jokes function this way, for instance the fake lateral thinking puzzle which answers the question ‘how do you escape a room with no windows and doors and only a table inside?’ with ‘break the table in half, put the two halves together to make a whole, climb through the hole and escape.’ Sometimes the follow on ‘shout until your voice is hoarse, jump on the horse and ride away’ is added to the end of the joke.

The point is that the unconscious will accept either or any of the answers, but the conscious demands the correct one that refers to an actual reality conceived of outside of the joke, even if that reality is imaginary. These jokes are against the idea that language refers to content, and instead the content of the joke is an absent content or an absence of a reality behind the words. It points to the fact that as long as the language is there, it will have meaning, even without content. The same point and a further one can be made using Groucho Marx’s joke from the famous scene of *Night at the Opera*; when Chico, disguised as an aviator, worries that his words will be disbelieved, Groucho remarks ‘they’ll believe you when you start

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Trying to Understand *Endgame*’ in *Notes to Literature* ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 135.

talking.’ Freud seems to reverse the idea of the joke having content, something to laugh *at*, instead showing how the joke can be based on the absence of content or on creating the appearance of content. The Groucho Marx joke embodies the function most perfectly, since it implies not only that there is no content, but that there will appear to be content once the form is present, once Chico ‘starts talking.’ Like the Baudelaire discussed above, Freud shows an awareness of how the joke can create the things it seems to be a response to.

Perhaps the imagery of the joke as ‘already clothed in words’ also contains this suggestion; whilst language appears to cover and contain meaning, in fact both are formed together, making meaning ever absent and deferred, as Jacques Derrida would argue. It indicates that the comic moment shows us not only an absent cause but the way in which there appears to be something behind words; the comic moment involves the realization that as soon as you start talking there will appear to be a subject behind the words when in fact this process is involved in producing that subject. Freud’s use of the word ‘*absence*’ then, is not an absent presence, something that we expect to find but do not, but rather a present absence, an absence which produces the appearance of presence behind it; the joke produces something that it seems to represent. We might be able to put this back in terms of laughter itself as well. Laughter, like a joke, creates a present absence; it produces the appearance of an internal subject who has issued the laugh, much as the joke produces the appearance of content to which it refers.

Jokes about nationality are a good way of demonstrating how Freud’s comments relate not only to his own specific examples but to a wider function of jokes. Nationality jokes show the way that the joke can assert or create the appearance of presence. On the surface of it, the joke appears as directed at another group to confirm one’s own. But it seems likely that we will encounter an objection that a statement asserting the superiority of one nationality over another cannot be thought of as the same as a joke which asserts one nationality over another. Usually this objection comes in defence of the joke; the joker can be ‘only joking’ and therefore ‘not mean it,’ suggesting they are not as culpable as, for example, the serious nationalist. The question hinges on whether the joke just reinforces an already existing ideology or does something more. It seems clear in light of our discussions that the joke also plays a part in *creating* that nationalistic conception of otherness which it seems merely

to reflect. In this way the 'joker' may be just as culpable as the speaker of a nationalist statement in that both create something which they appear to refer to. By using laughter the joke can even appear to naturalize the identities it asserts. Freud shows us then, that laughter is not always liberating but can also be controlling, enforcing a particular viewpoint on its subjects. Taking this as a starting point, three theorists of laughter have made significant developments in comedy studies in recent years. These are Anca Parvulescu, Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič.

In her book *Laughter*, Anca Parvulescu recognises this controlling power that laughter can have and breaks from the trend of thinking about laughter as response, commenting that these theories 'conceive of it as a response to something else, and it is this something else that they are after – the comic, jokes, humour, the grotesque, the ridiculous, the ludicrous etc.' Instead of this, Parvulescu's book is interested in what it means to be a subject of laughter, and in what effect laughter has on the individual. This is an important break, since it begins to see laughter as productive and constitutive; laughter has to do with forming subjectivity, rather than as an effect of something else that precedes it, as we see with Freud. Laughter cannot only be seen as a representation or evidence of something pre-existing and must also be seen as constitutive and as taking part in the construction of the subject, even when that subject may seem to have pre-existed. However, there is also a way in which my focus here differs significantly from Parvulescu's. Though she wishes 'not to divorce laughter from any potential trigger,' for Parvulescu 'the question of laughter's cause or origin is [often] beside the point.'² In the next section where my own theory of 'laughter as event' is put forward, it is this relationship between laughter and its causes/effects which is central; laughter, I argue, is fundamentally connected to the idea of 'origin.' For now, though, it is laughter's vast controlling power that is important; laughter can impose an ideology and make that ideology seen natural.

Like Parvulescu, Lacanian theorist Mladen Dolar has worked on this constitutive power of laughter, showing that the very appearance of laughter as something liberating which

² Parvulescu, *Laughter*, p. 3, 4.

destroys structures can be part of the way it imposes and controls its subjects. Dolar's work on comedy has made the point that:

Laughter is the condition of ideology. It provides us with the distance, the very space in which ideology can take its full swing. It is only with laughter that we become ideological subjects [...]. It is only when we laugh and breathe freely that ideology truly has a hold on us.³

Dolar's point is that the supposed distinction between liberation and ideology is a false one when it comes to laughter; in the appearance of natural spontaneity, laughter can bind its subjects; it can control and constitute the subject at the very moment when it feels free, laughing freely and feeling as if it is truly itself in the moment of laughter.⁴ Dolar points out that laughter can enforce the rules and norms of order rather than breaking them down.

As I have argued, when the subject feels it is naturally responding to something, that something itself is formed, and formed as natural, produced as content which seems to have caused the laughter and to have pre-existed it. This also reverses another common conception of comedy: the idea of comedy as a response to failure. In her theory of comedy Elder Olson writes that:

Tragedy endows with worth; comedy takes the worth away. Tragedy exhibits life as directed to important ends; comedy as either not directed to important ends, or unlikely to achieve them.⁵

Olson's take embodies a common position, but Dolar's argument stresses that not all comedy is failure, or that comedy perhaps always involves not only failure but success. Laughter can be ideology succeeding, it can produce something rather than tearing something down. Following this line, in her ground-breaking book on comedy *The Odd One In*, Alenka Zupančič remarks that 'comedy is materialistic because it sees the turning of materiality into pure spirit and of pure spirit into something material as *one and the same*

³ Mladen Dolar, 'Strel sredi koncerta' in Theodor Adorno, *Uvod v sociologijo glasbe* (Ljubljana: DZS, 1986), p. 307.

⁴ For a comparative reading see Umberto Eco, 'The Frames of Comic "Freedom"' in Thomas A Seboek (ed.) *Carnival!* (Berlin: Mouton, 1984)

⁵ Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1968), pp. 35-6.

movement.⁶ Thus, Zupančič reverses the traditional argument that comedy brings the ideal down to the material, or the high down to the low, that comedy brings down ideology, affirming a basic human state underneath as if it is some kind of equalizing force. On the contrary, comedy is as much about success as it is about failure; it can turn a material process into something which seems to signify spiritual truth. The imaginary structure of superiority is nothing more than the material violence raised to a spiritual level; it appears as if there is something behind it. Zupančič writes, ‘we could say that true comedies are not so much involved in unveiling and disclosing the nudity and emptiness behind appearances as they are involved in *constructing* emptiness.’⁷ Laughter is not a radical outside to ideology which brings ideology down, but instead it is ideology at work, creating and constructing that very appearance of substance that ideology depends upon. Zupančič’s psychoanalytic indebtedness comes through here too; it resonates with Freud’s argument discussed above that jokes construct an absence that it is produced as a present and real thing by the joke. Zupančič may take the point more directly from Jacques Lacan, who comments in his seventh seminar that anamorphosis has to do with ‘the creation of emptiness’ (S7, 140). Anamorphosis is an image which can only be read from a particular angle, such as the skull in Holbein’s famous *The Ambassadors*, a particular influence on Lacan. The image places the viewer in the position of searching for the true image behind appearances. It produces both illusion and the ‘truth’ of what lies behind this illusion. It embodies Zupančič’s argument about comedy, then; comedy does not reveal that there is nothing behind appearances, it does not as Olson argues ‘take the worth away,’ but rather it produces the appearance of truth itself: it succeeds in producing the idea that there is something behind the laughter that is taking place.

What I want to add to these discussions of laughter successfully producing something in the service of ideology is that this is not all that laughter does. My argument, which is developed in the next section, is that laughter not only produces but *shows* something being produced. This is something that can be provisionally shown by returning to nationality jokes. By virtue of being a joke, the joke seems to draw attention to its own form. The joke might reinforce a prejudice or superiority belief of one group over another, but it also

⁶ Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In* (London: MIT Press, 2008), p. 47.

⁷ Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 166.

reveals the construction of identity as based on the type of creation of otherness and the establishment of difference which is demonstrated by the joke form itself. It is the form that is important rather than the content, so that the nationalities are interchangeable; the same jokes English people tell about Scottish people are told in Scotland about people from Aberdeen, though presumably not in Aberdeen.⁸ The joke requires a double reading then; it asserts an identity, creating it, like other representational language does, but it also shows that identity for what it is, a structure created by an assertion of one thing over another, constituting both things in the process and thereby having the potential to show that the identities or subject positions do not pre-exist. This seems to have been strangely ignored by commentators on national and racist jokes, who have even considered whether it might be racist to transcribe a racist joke when analysing it.⁹ It has also been suggested that when humour becomes racist it stops being humour.¹⁰ This may be due to a foreclosure on the idea of humour as positive and an attempt to save humour from its dangerous capacity. Others have suggested that racist jokes allow racist communities to say what they really think but have repressed as a result of social sanctions.¹¹ But it is the double function of the joke which this theory is interested in. Something about laughter is shown to us in these moments: that it both creates something, by repeating a process that is fundamental to the way we present and create identity, and also shows that process for what it is; revealing how what it creates has no basis or anchor beyond such processes themselves. In other words, its ideological function and its deconstructive quality are not separate, as 'type theory' has implied, but are in fact inseparable.

Contrary to the idea of laughter as liberating, Walter Benjamin, before the theorists discussed here, writes of a laughter that imposes rather than releases identity which he associates with cruelty and terms 'the strict joke.' This laughter goes further than saying that laughter is controlling. He comments:

⁸ For a discussion of nationality jokes and their variations see Delia Chiaro, *The Language of Jokes: Analysing Verbal Play* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 7-16.

⁹ See Michael Billig, 'Humour and Hatred: The Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan' in *Discourse and Society*, vol. 12 (2001), pp. 267-89.

¹⁰ Michael Billig, 'Comic Racism and Violence' in *Beyond A Joke: The Limits of Humour*, ed. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 25-44 (p. 25).

¹¹ Dennis Howitt and Kwame Owusu-Bempah, 'Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour' in *Beyond A Joke*, pp. 45-62 (p. 48).

Comedy – or more precisely: the pure joke – is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt. Its representative is linked to the representative of mourning. [...] As in the epigram above an engraving depicting a stage on which there stand, to the left, a buffoon and, to the right, a prince: ‘When the stage is empty, fool and king will no longer count for anything.’ Rarely, if ever, have speculative aesthetics considered the affinity between the strict joke and the cruel.¹²

Here Benjamin describes a comedy that neither merely destroys something nor merely supports something, but instead shows how things are put together, revealing ‘the lining’ of the structure, like a ‘hem or lapel’ on a dress. The ‘pure joke’ discussed here is a development of the ‘strict joke.’ In Benjamin the strict joke is the imposition of repression and is enacted by the sadist; the enforced performance of identity is sadistic because it is imprisoning; identity is imposed on the subject and makes the subject frozen and locked in identity, as Foucault would argue.¹³ As this point the strict joke is on the side of ideology. Yet, Benjamin’s ‘pure joke’ may be the strict joke taken to extremes. We might say that the strict joke forces you to perform your identity to the point where you can see it coming into being. When it reaches its extreme moment, as Benjamin writes here, the pure joke makes its presence felt, ‘like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel;’ one sees the construction of identity as based upon nothing, as if identity is a product like an item of clothing, sewn together and produced. At its most intense moment, the laughter of cruelty, the laughter of superiority, which asserts identity, turns back on itself and undoes itself, by exaggerating, showing that identity to be grounded on nothing. The strict joke shows identity for what it is; something material elevated to the level of the symbolic or spiritual. It is in imposing identity and showing it coming into being that laughter undermines identity’s claim to be pre-existing, essential or stable.

Lacan is the greatest influence on both Dolar and Zupančič, and he too has this sense of comedy showing something coming into being, or showing structures for what they are. In

¹² Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans., John Osbourne (London and New York: Verso, 2009), pp. 125-6.

¹³ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin 1977) pp. 135-169.

his eighth seminar he discusses the comedy of French dramatist and poet Paul Claudel (1868-1955) and sets himself the task of getting to the heart of the nature of comedy. Lacan's theory of comedy is articulated through its connection to the object of desire and to love, a subject to which Lacan returns almost every time he mentions comedy in his work. He writes that 'love participates in what I call the comic feeling' and that 'love is a comic sentiment' (*S10*, 243). Love has to do with committing oneself to something, and defining oneself in relation to this object, structuring oneself around an object of desire in order to replace the more primary 'object' of desire that in psychoanalysis the child forgoes in the early stages of development (see page 139 on the 'object a'). In Claudel's play 'The Humiliated Father' the character Pensée de Coûfontaine occupies the position of the desired object.

Who is Pensée in this final scene? The sublime object surely, the sublime object in so far as already we have indicated its position [...] as substitute for the Thing.

Here we are in the presence of the object of desire. And what I want to show you [...] is that it is a desire which no longer has at this level of destitution anything other than castration to separate it radically from any primary desire.¹⁴

In Lacanian castration theory the subject gives up something in order to gain access to the symbolic order. Then (although chronology is not quite the right way of discussing it) the subject replaces this primary desire which it has foregone with desire for something else. This also helps to explain another more well-known Lacanian argument, the definition of the object of desire as 'the object raised to the status of the Thing.' The concept of the Thing, later referred to as the *objet petit a* and used to describe Pensée here, cannot be achieved or even represented, it is 'the impossible' which the subject wants to reach in order to eradicate a lack which is conditional to subjectivity. Articulated objects of desire can therefore only be 'a substitute for the thing,' which is the role played by Pensée de Coûfontaine in 'The Humiliated Father.' That Lacan should feel that Claudel captures something essential about comedy is surprising, since there are tragic elements both to his plays and to Lacan's

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar 8: Transference*, unofficial translation by Cormac Gallagher available at lacaninireland.com, lecture 19, pp. 260-338. For work on the connection between Lacan and Claudel see Mohammad Kowsar, 'Lacan and Claudel: Desire and "The Hostage"' in *Theatre Journal*, vol. 46, no. 1 (The John Hopkins University Press, March 1994), pp. 79-93

discussions of them. The comedy, though, comes when the subject is forced to give up the object to which all his attention has been attached; when Orso must give up Pensée de Coûfontaine. It transpires that Pensée is not what Orso had thought her; she has already been a wife to his father before his father offered her to his son. This is the moment of comedy, the moment at which one is asked to give up that to which one has bound one's whole life, and yet such a moment could also be perceived as the moment of tragedy (indeed it has Oedipal echoes.) The difference, Lacan explains, is in the relationship between the subject and that object to which it has attached itself. He writes:

We would even say that nowhere at any moment of these discourses, is love taken so seriously, or so tragically. We are exactly at the level that we moderns impute to this love, after courtly sublimation and after what I could call the romantic misinterpretation of this sublimation, namely the narcissistic overvaluing of the subject, I mean of the subject supposed in the beloved object.¹⁵

With courtly sublimation we are in the realm of the substitution for the Thing discussed above. The subject binds his whole existence to the chosen other, and makes a mistake of believing that there is something essential about himself that is reflected in the object of his desire. The object is 'narcissistically overvalued' even though in fact this object is just a substitute for an earlier one. Here we approach what we could think of as a Lacanian distinction between comedy and tragedy. The moment of tragedy remains within this illusion: it might for instance be the recognition that the subject's love is not returned, so that the subject is forced to realize that he is not what he thought himself. It is this realization that the tragic figure faces, but comedy appears somewhere else in this same scenario. In an otherwise very different discussion, the close relationship between tragedy and comedy has been commented on interestingly by René Girard, who points out that despite the disparity between the 'effects' of comedy and tragedy, they are structurally closely connected up until the moment which produces either tears or laughter.¹⁶ This is clearly so in Lacan as well. The difference is that in comedy, the structuring principles of our world are rehearsed with a

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar 8: Transference*, lecture 6, p. 8.

¹⁶ René Girard, 'A Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis', *MLN*, Vol. 87, No. 7, Comparative Literature, (Dec., 1972), pp. 811-826 (p. 812).

difference; their structures are revealed to us as structures and are therefore not allowed to retain their claim to be essential. They are shown *coming into being* and therefore cannot keep up the appearance of being original. It is for this reason, as we shall see, that Orso can 'fail' or give up Pensée without tragedy: the comic subject is not the subject of failure but the subject who cannot fail because it knows there is nothing essential about it to lose.

The difference between comedy and tragedy appears to be that whilst in tragedy the existence of the ideal is allowed to continue, so that the tragic gesture is 'I am not what I thought I was,' in comedy this is reversed so that the ideal itself is reduced to nothing. The gesture becomes instead 'there is nothing beyond what I am.' In Slavoj Žižek's book on Hegel he too makes this distinction between Claudel and the traditional tragedy of Oedipus and Antigone, remarking that '[Pensée's] tragedy is more radical than that of either Oedipus or Antigone: when mortally wounded after taking the bullet meant for her despicable and hated husband, she refuses to confer any deeper sacrificial meaning on her suicidal intention.'¹⁷ Looking at Lacan's reading of Claudel we can see that this is not 'more radical tragedy' but comedy. Comedy is against the idealism that Tragedy depends upon; there is no greater good to sacrifice oneself in the service of because that greater structure is also shown to have nothing behind it. We can now see how Lacan's theory offers an alternative to Critchley's claim that comedy shows us that 'you are not the person you would like to be.' Rather, that is the province of tragedy. Comedy, on the other hand, shows you that there is nothing beyond who you seem to be, that identity has nothing essential behind it. This is central to Lacan's reading of comedy. The comic moment shows that the subject defines itself through its attachment to the beloved object, but that since this object was just a substitute for an earlier one rather than any essential connection, there is nothing guaranteeing or anchoring it. As a result, there is nothing behind the loss which the subject suffers. The object can be discarded without tragedy, since the ideal, perfect or complete subject has already been discarded.

This argument is very close to a comment made by German Romantic Jean Paul on the subject of comedy, which we might speculate that Lacan is indebted to in his own reading:

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 80-1.

Humor [...] annihilates not the individual but the finite by contrasting it with the idea. It knows no individual foolishness, no fools, but only folly and a mad world; unlike the common joker, delivering sideswipes, it does not single out a particular folly; rather it hauls down the great, but – unlike parody – in order to put it next to the small, and raises the small, but – unlike irony – in order to put it next to the great and thus annihilate both, because in the face of infinity all is equal and nothing.¹⁸

Jean Paul recognizes that comedy is about attacking the ideal and removing any objective validity of the ideal, showing it all to be based on nothing or at least that it is nothing permanent or secure. Jean Paul is attentive to the fact that laughter may have various effects, including those linked to parody and with irony here, but it contains the potential to show ‘all is equal and nothing’ in this way. His argument shares much with that of Zupančič put forward 200 years later, seeing laughter as something that not only brings the great down to the small but also as something that raises the small up to the great. By doing both of these things it ‘annihilates both.’ In other words it returns us to carnival, which as we argued affirms the ‘joyful relativity’ of everything; allowing nothing to retain a privileged position. Perhaps we could qualify Jean Paul’s statement in this way, given what we have discussed here: comedy like other forms both annihilates and constructs, but because it reveals this process to us it allows nothing to retain hold, nothing can be seen as anchored or essential and everything is seen as *produced*. If laughter is controlling then it not only supports ideology but creates it and can show it as something that is produced and therefore subject to change.

Dolar, whose argument about the link between comedy and ideology is crucial for recognizing the constitutive and productive ‘successful’ qualities of laughter, nevertheless asks whether there is not still ‘laughter and laughter;’ two different ways in which a laugh can function.¹⁹ Such discussions have intellectual heritage behind them. For Hegel, discussed at length in the next section, there is a distinction between a mere ‘expression of self-complacent wit’ and ‘the comic as such’ which Hegel sees as having serious radical

¹⁸ Jean Paul, *Jean Paul: A Reader*, ed. Timothy J. Casey, trans. Erika Casey (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 250.

¹⁹ Mladen Dolar, ‘Comedy and its Double’ in *Schluss mit der Komodie!: Zue sch,leichenen Vorherrschaft des Tragischen in unserer Kultur/Stop that Comedy!: On the Subtle Hegemony of the Tragic in Our Culture*, ed. Robert Pfaller (Wien: Slonderzahl, 2005), pp. 181-210 (p. 199).

potential.²⁰ Baudelaire, despite his awareness of the cross-overs between types, develops a concept of 'the absolute comic' which is to be thought of in contrast to 'the ordinary comic' which he defines as 'a clearer language, and one easier for the man in the street to understand, and above all easier to analyse'.²¹ Critchley, in a section of his book entitled 'Reactionary Humour,' writes that 'it is important to recognize that not all humour is [liberating], and most of the best jokes are fairly reactionary, or at best, simply serve to reinforce social consensus.'²² He follows what is a common trend in theorizations of the comic, seeing a divide between the reactionary and the radical laugh. But something unites these two supposedly distinct forms of laughter; both presuppose a structure which the joke either destroys or supports. Ideology comes first, and the joke comes after, either re-enforcing it or challenging it. On the contrary to this, what we have seen in this section is that laughter is *performative* and *constructive*, forging new structures and ideologies.

Laughter's 'radicalism,' then, to use a term that has been tied to laughter by many of those who have discussed it, is found not in its 'liberating' or destructive power but in its constructive power. Laughter plays a part in constructing that which it responds to and the subject who responds. Laughter's effect may be to support existing ways of thinking but it is also more than this; it changes the way things are and therefore shows existing ways of thinking to be insecure and in need of assertion.

The first chapter argued that laughter is not as liberating as it seems, and is involved in controlling and coercing its subjects. The second section has argued that if laughter is ideological and productive then it also has the capacity *to show things being produced*. It is here that its radical edge is found; laughter may be coercive and controlling, but it also has the capacity to show us the structures that it supports *coming into being* and how they are put together. The final part of this section will develop these observations into a theory of laughter.

²⁰ Georg Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics, vol II*, trans T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 1200.

²¹ Charles Baudelaire, 'On the Essence of Laughter,' p. 157.

²² Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 11.

Chapter Three: Laughter as Event

As we have seen, more canonical discussions of laughter as an 'effect' have tended to neglect the constitutive and productive powers that laughter can have. On the other hand writers like Parvulescu, Dolar and Zupančič have moved into discussions of the formative effects of laughter, but in placing the focus on its effects have sometimes been inclined to divorce laughter from its causes. Despite the importance of these arguments, in leaving the discussion of causes behind there is a danger of neglecting the close relationship between the laugh and the cause, the way we always seem to laugh or imagine we are laughing at or because of something. The question asked in this final theoretical section is of the relationship between the trigger, cause or object of laughter, and the event of the laugh itself. Discussing laughter in relation to the 'event' offers a way of answering this question.

Whilst laughter cannot be reduced to a response and must also be seen as constructive and constitutive, laughter's cause never seems to be as 'beside the point' as Parvulescu has argued. It is the intention here to investigate the relationship between laughter and that which appears to produce laughter. The following section discusses a tradition of philosophy that can provide a new way of thinking about this relationship. This tradition begins with Hegel, then develops with Lacan's reading of Hegel and his assimilation of Hegel's work into psychoanalytic discourse, and finally comes to its most contemporary point with Hegelian-Lacanian philosopher Alain Badiou. This chapter argues that the two previous ways of thinking about laughter, as liberating and as constitutive, can be negotiated by a third hypothesis, the idea that laughter should be seen as what Badiou terms 'the event.' As we shall see, in speaking of laughter as the event one acknowledges that there are as many laughs as there are people and occasions of laughter, whilst still offering a new way that laughter can be approached in a more generally applicable way: 'laughter as event' provides a framework for new discussions of laughter.

Laughter is neither free of ideology (position one) or a direct support for it (position two). Laughter as event argues that laughter brings new relations and new ways of thinking into being. This means that it both destroys existing structures and imposes new ones. Of

course, as we will see in what follows, there are an infinite number and kinds of events and, in a sense, every moment can be an event. The specific quality of laughter is that it is *an event which shows itself as an event*. This argument therefore reconciles the limitations of the previous two positions on laughter. Laughter is not only liberation but also construction, the creation of a way of thinking, but it shows what it constructs in the process of coming into being.

Hegel and the Laugh as Origin

Though not well-known for it, Hegel discusses comedy at some length across his work, and reading comedy through Hegel produces a theory of laughter that complicates much of the theory of laughter discussed above. Hegel discusses comedy in a small but important section of the *Phenomenology*, and in a much more sustained discussion at the end of his last work, *Aesthetics*, which was published posthumously.¹ The first argument here is that laughter bears a close relation to the Hegelian concept of the ‘beginning,’ an idea which anticipates what Badiou would later term ‘the event,’ a development which comes via the Lacanian idea of ‘the real’. Badiou’s concept of ‘the event’, as we shall see in what follows, is a kind of break or caesura which is both beginning and end, which both ruptures and destroys and at the same time constructs and forms, which both produces and is produced. It is with Hegel’s idea of a ‘beginning’ that this idea first appears in the history of philosophy.

It may seem unusual to make Hegel a crucial part of an argument about laughter, given those who have treated the subject more directly and at more length. Yet, reading comedy through Hegel offers a new way of seeing the relationship between laughter and its causes. Here I will look at these discussions of comedy in Hegel and show how Hegel’s concern in discussing the comic is to address the relationship between cause and effect, between content and form, and between a beginning and its representation, three distinct but related divisions. Since the argument is that comedy is centrally concerned with the question of the

¹ Agnes Heller makes an interesting connection between Hegel and the comic novel, though it is by no means the focus of her reading of comedy. See *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature and Life* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), p. 93.

beginning and of origin, Hegel's discussions of comedy will be treated alongside another section of his work, the discussions of 'beginning' in *The Logic of Science*, the text in which Hegel directly asks the question of what a beginning or origin can be said to consist of.

Towards the end of the *Aesthetics*, a series of lectures given between 1820 and 1830, Hegel turns to the question of laughter. His comments address the contradiction discussed above found in both contemporary and historical discussions of laughter:

In comedy there comes before our contemplation, in the laughter in which the characters dissolve everything, including themselves, the victory of their own subjective personality which nevertheless persists self assured.²

The definition is complex; on the one hand the laugh is completely destructive, it 'dissolves everything,' including the subject. On the other hand at this same moment we are confronted with the victory of the subject's own 'self-assured' and 'subjective' personality. The two movements, the destruction of the subject and its affirmation, seem to be happening simultaneously in comedy. Later in the passage Hegel returns to the definition, remarking that as opposed to a more simple laughter which has to do with 'the things people laugh at,' the comical as such:

Implies an infinite light-heartedness and confidence felt by someone raised altogether above his own inner contradiction and not bitter or miserable in it at all: this is the bliss and ease of a man who, being sure of himself, can bear the frustration of his aims and achievements.³

At first it appears that the definition is of laughter which may be on the side of the subject, and on the side of a traditional reading of the Hegelian dialectic; laughter helps the subject overcome its contradiction and progress in some way. Yet clearly this reading is insufficient, since it has to do not only with the development of a pre-existing contradiction (a kind of thesis, antithesis, synthesis reading) but with the absolute destruction of what has gone before in the emergence of something new. Hegel returns to the definition for a third time:

² Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 1199.

³ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 1200

When what has no substance in itself has destroyed its show of existence by its own agency, the individual makes himself master of this dissolution too and remains undisturbed in himself and at ease.⁴

Something is destroyed which 'has no substance in itself' and instead only ever had 'a show of existence.' This is a key to understanding these arguments that Hegel is making about laughter. Something is destroyed and 'dissolved' which is shown never to have had any substance but to have been in the order of appearance only, and something new is produced in its place. Yet, the key here is another implication: that the thing that is produced appears to have always been there; rather than appearing new, it seems to 'remain' and to be 'undisturbed,' even though it has been produced in the place of something else which has been destroyed. This is a crucial part of the argument here: laughter starts and finishes something, but that which it starts appears to have pre-existed, it 'remains undisturbed.' What it destroys appears never to have had any substance, to have never really existed but only to have had 'a show of existence.' This is how laughter appears to bring down illusion or falsity and reveal truth. In fact the moment is one at which both previous falsity and present truth are created, as I shall go on to discuss. This process has a close relationship to the famous Hegelian concept of the *Aufhebung*, usually translated as 'sublation,' and with Hegel's contemporary and close personal friend Freidrich Hölderlin's closely related concept of the *caesura*. These concepts both look forward to the idea of 'the event,' but for now, since we are describing laughter as a kind of beginning, I want to establish what Hegel means by something which can be described as a 'beginning.'

In *The Logic of Science* Hegel comments that a whole history of philosophy has been interested in thinking about the beginning only as content; 'earlier abstract thought is at first only interested in the principle as *content*.'⁵ 'Principle' here means that which comes first or that which is primary; content has been privileged as that which comes first. Hegel then comments that subsequent thought has moved towards thinking about the beginning in terms of 'the cognitive process' and subjectivity, the process of mediation or representation, rather than content or materiality. However, for Hegel neither of these ways of thinking of

⁴ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 1202.

⁵ Georg Freidrich Hegel, *The Logic of Science*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 46.

the beginning will suffice. Instead, there is 'a need to unite the method with the content, the form with the principle.' For Hegel, if it is possible to speak of a beginning then we must find there both 'form' and 'content,' both 'principle' and 'method.' Hegel qualifies that the word principle is used to refer to the beginning here; 'thus the *principle* ought to be also the beginning.' The word contains both that which was there first, the principle as source, origin or root, and also the principle as 'united with form' to use Hegel's terms, as in the sense of having a principle or law, a form to apply to actions (OED). Thus, he is picking up on a paradox, as with the sentence which follows: 'that *which has priority* for thinking ought to be also the *first* in the process of thinking.' Here too the word priority is of interest to Hegel precisely because of its contradiction; it means both something that comes first, and also something that is in a position of power, which has priority and has therefore been established only in relation to something else, meaning that it cannot have been alone as the originary moment. The key passage may be:

There is nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain just as much immediacy as mediation, so that both these determinations prove to be unseparated and inseparable and the opposition between them nothing real.⁶

Content and form, here referred to as immediacy and mediation, are separated only falsely. This does not mean that this gap between them which is produced in order to divide them can be ignored; it is this gap that is central to Hegel's thought. These two things, form or mediation on the one hand and content or immediacy on the other, which have characterized all prior theorizations of the beginning, are for Hegel inseparable, although equally importantly, something falsely separates them. This process which divides the two is close to what we can think of as the beginning or origin in Hegel's work. The beginning does not exist at the beginning, as it were, but rather the beginning is, in Hegel's own words, 'to be made' by this division.⁷ He later goes on to explain this division, commenting that 'simple immediacy is itself an expression of reflection; it refers to the distinction from what

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

is mediated.⁸ Some divider exists, something which precedes form and content, which separates the two, producing them in relation to each other.

Being is what makes the beginning here; it is presented indeed as originating through mediation, but a mediation which at the same time sublates itself, and the presupposition is of a pure knowledge which is the result of finite knowledge, of consciousness. But if no presupposition is to be made, if the beginning is itself to be taken *immediately*, then the only determination of this beginning is that it is to be the beginning of logic, of thought as such. [...] Just as it cannot have any determination with respect to an other, so too it cannot have any within; it cannot have any content, for any content would entail distinction and the reference of distinct moments to each other, and hence a mediation.⁹

The section quoted here is one in which the traditional reading of Hegel as a philosopher of totality might find evidence for that common argument; Hegel appears to affirm 'pure being' and yet what Hegel means by 'pure being' as beginning is not a presence but a gap or absence; for Hegel, we can only say what the beginning is not.¹⁰ Put in as basic terms as possible; Hegel's argument is that the beginning, which he comes to call 'pure being', can be thought of neither as content and immediacy nor as mediation and form. Rather, the beginning is something which divides these two, and in doing so produces 'the beginning of logic, of thought as such.'

The beginning is the point at which immediacy and mediation are separated; it is difference itself. It bears resemblance to Hegel's wider view of perception and origin. In the *Phenomenology* he writes 'immediate identity with itself, which in its difference, is the certainty of immediacy, or sense-consciousness, - the beginning from which we started.'¹¹ At the beginning is a doubleness of what is perceived and that which is established as the perceiving subject through the production of a difference from that which it perceives. Hegel's comments therefore take Freud's content-less jokes to the next stage; we are able to

⁸ Hegel, *Logic*, p. 47.

⁹ Hegel, *Logic*, p. 48.

¹⁰ On this section in Hegel see Alain Badiou, 'Hegel Kant Lacan' in *Lacanian Ink*, vol 30 (Fal, 2007), pp. 64-99 (p. 68). See also the extensive treatment of this argument in Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic: From Being to Infinity* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), pp. 29-32.

¹¹ Georg Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 487-488.

see how content does not exist first but is produced by its relationship to the form which appears to represent it. It is not that the joke is empty but has the appearance of content but that content itself only exists as something produced in relation to form, by the split that Hegel calls 'a 'beginning.' This argument about Hegel is one which has been made in a different way by Giorgio Agamben in his book *The Man Without Content*, which stresses that Hegel's work can be read as affirming a 'subjectivity without content,' that it is about forming subjectivity and its appearances, not asserting that subjectivity already exists as presence or content.¹²

With the Hegelian concept of the *Aufhebung* the question of the beginning moves towards what Badiou would call later call 'the event.' For Hegel the idea of the *Aufhebung* is a way of reading the events of history. The *Aufhebung* represents the way in which we seem to move from one thing to another, and thus it is often read as evidence for Hegel's philosophy as a progress narrative which ultimately results in affirming a positive Hegelian synthesis or progressive transition. It is a process by which a certain manifestation is cancelled and yet preserved at once; what is kept of the old order is that which was radical in it that allowed the new to come about. However, if one approaches the concept of the *Aufhebung* as a development of his concept of the beginning, this reading of Hegel as a philosopher of completion or totality is complicated. Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe has argued this in his influential essay 'The Caesura of the Speculative,' which offers a re-reading of Hegel along these lines, arguing that the idea of a Hegelian synthesis should be seen as a caesura rather

¹² Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 39. As an aside it is relevant to mention Henri Bergson here, the major theorist of comedy whose work is not made significant use of as part of this thesis (see page 87). The most radical element of Bergson's thought is that which has been developed by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, and by Deleuze in *Cinema 1*. Slavoj Žižek has pointed out that Bergson and Hegel are closer than Deleuze may think. Where Deleuze stresses that in Hegel every 'thing differs with itself because it differs first from what it is not,' in Bergson 'a thing differs with itself, first, immediately.' Žižek makes a point that has been made here, that Hegel's thought is in fact concerned first with the production of a thing via its division from itself, so that 'every external difference implies self-difference.' In the section quoted above Hegel comments that each thing has 'immediate identity with itself, which is its difference.' Any determination involves not only separating the thing from everything that it is not but also from itself, through the production of form and content, neither of which are originary. It is not that the argument here is on the side of Žižek over Deleuze, or of Hegel rather than Bergson, but rather that in the sense important to this argument, the two are closer than it might seem. The decision has been made that Bergson does not significantly develop the argument made here via Hegel; Hegel's interest in the production of the division between form and content which takes place in his idea of the beginning contains Bergson's suggestion. See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 116.

than as a development of what has gone before.¹³ As with Hegel's concept of the beginning, with the *Aufhebung* we are talking about a break or cut which is formative: it is the break or caesura which destroys what has gone before. Hegel's contemporary and personal friend Freidrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) theorizes the concept of the caesura in the following way:

In the rhythmic sequence of the representations wherein transport presents itself, there becomes necessary what in poetic meter is called *caesura*, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture; namely, in order to meet the onrushing change of representations at its highest point in such a manner that very soon there does not appear the change of representation but the representation itself.¹⁴

The caesura is a break, interruption or interval, but not a break in an otherwise continuous trajectory. Lacoue-Labarthe describes the *Aufhebung* as caesura for this reason; the *Aufhebung*, like the caesura, is the imposition of a new way of thinking, but rather than a synthesis, the caesura destroys what has gone before, breaking from it and establishing something new. It is an event which comes to meet the onrushing charge of representations, says Hölderlin, so that that what happens before the caesura is already rushing towards it; anticipating it and governed by it. It is not that the caesura interrupts an otherwise stable or linear series of representations but that those representations themselves are conditioned by the caesura which is coming to meet them.

What is shown to us is not that the previous linearity has been interrupted but that it never existed in the first place. The crucial line in the Hölderlin quotation is the final one; with the caesura, we are not dealing with the change of representations, with something that simply breaks or changes a chain of events or a chain of words, but with representation as such. With the caesura, we see representation itself appear; something about representation is made apparent to us that we did not recognize before. Of this passage, Walter Benjamin remarked that 'its fundamental significance for the theory of art in general, beyond serving

¹³ Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'The Caesura of the Speculative' in *Typography: Mimesis, Phillosophy, Politics* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 208-235.

¹⁴ Friedrich Hölderlin, 'Remarks on Oedipus' in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, ed. and trans. Thomas Pfau (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 101-8 (pp. 101-2).

as the basis for a theory of tragedy, seems not yet to have been recognised.¹⁵ Jeremy Tambling glosses the concept of caesura in Hölderlin and its development in Benjamin:

The caesura may be traumatic, a radical undoing of subjectivity, perhaps even the condition of modern madness. But since the shock and caesural and traumatic may not be the same, the caesural may lead into the other scene, the power of the other, what constitutes the text, the *Gedichtete*. It turns back to ask what language it is which is at the origin.¹⁶

This idea of the caesura comes close to what I eventually want to say about laughter; laughter can be seen as a caesura, both formative and destructive, ending something and producing something. It is also more than this; that which it ends and that which it begins can only be thought of in relation to each other, and can only be thought of because of the caesura.

The caesura 'enables the reading of history,' writes Tambling: it produces the past and the present, the events which can now be read only in relation to each other, constituting both at the same time. It establishes a kind of chronology, something that is developed more below and is expanded in Chapter Six. It is perhaps the way that the caesura both separates and brings together what it produces that is important here. It is what allows sense to come into being. The separation and bringing together of things in this way is something Dickens was acutely aware of, for instance in *Great Expectations* when Joe remarks that 'life is made of ever so many partings welded together, as I may say, and one man's a blacksmith, and one's a whitesmith, and one's a goldsmith, and one's a coppersmith. Divisions among such must come, and must be met as they come' (*GE*, 224).¹⁷ Here it is the language which differentiates, between the blacksmith and the other smiths, but by dividing them it also groups them, bringing them together and establishing their meaning in relation to each other. It is also a joke, since these are the words of the blacksmith whose job it is to weld together partings, but this parting is applied to life, so that it is partings that create the

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume One: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 340.

¹⁶ Jeremy Tambling, *Hölderlin and the Poetry of Tragedy: Readings of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Nietzsche and Benjamin* (Eastbourne: Sussex University Press, 2014), p. 26.

¹⁷ This quotation has also been discussed in David E. Musselwhite, *Partings Welded Together: Politics and Desire in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 143-226

things that they part, just as a caesura does. The caesura might be compared in this way to what Foucault would call an 'epistemological shift,' a moment at which history itself is changed into something that it then seems to have always-already been.¹⁸ In other words, it is impossible to think of the way things were before the caesura. However, these are not just foundational moments in history such as famous world changing events. Rather, representation is always caesural, representing something which it also produces as the thing which pre-existed to be represented. The caesura cuts and creates a 'false' appearance of chronology in which the content is privileged as primary; it is a Hegelian beginning.

Jacques Derrida connects the *Aufhebung* to psychoanalysis, seeing the notion of the *Aufhebung* in Hegel as a concept which anticipates what Freud would later call repression.¹⁹ The process of *Aufhebung* is one of reason and rationality, since it establishes one way of thinking over others, but Derrida argues that it is also fundamentally anti-rational. Suzanne Gearhart puts it nicely when she says that for Derrida 'the process of *Aufhebung* also escapes rationality or lies beyond it, in the sense that the reason that it constitutes cannot be there from the beginning to control that process.'²⁰ For Derrida this can be brought to bear on psychoanalysis, pointing to a radical capacity of psychoanalytic thought that Derrida is often elsewhere critical of; the 're-structuring of repression can be thought of as the dialectic.'

But to say that re-strict-ure – under its name repression – remains today a confused imagination, that is perhaps only to designate, in regard to philosophy, what does not let itself be *thought* or even arraigned by a question. The question is already structuring, is already girded being.²¹

The dialectic must be thought of as repression because in the process of the *Aufhebung* reason emerges not through consciousness but through what is not known, what is unconscious. The point here is that the dialectic, and repression, cannot be 'thought,' so that what changes in the *Aufhebung* is not conscious thought but the constitution of the unconscious, or the constitution of both in relation to each other, so that rationality emerges from repression and therefore cannot have been there to govern the process in the first place:

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. R. Rand (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. 190-1.

²⁰ Suzanne Gearhart, 'The Remnants of Philosophy: Psychoanalysis after *Glas*' in *Hegel After Derrida*, ed. Stuart Barnett (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 147-170 (p. 156).

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, p. 191.

rationality arises out of nothing, or with nothing to guarantee it. Speaking of Hegel and of Derrida on Hegel, Jean-Luc Nancy puts it nicely when, speaking of laughter, he writes that 'what makes sense about meaning is that it senses itself making sense.'²² This idea is vital to what will be argued in what follows here. If we can say that all representation is a 'beginning' or 'caesura' that produces something which it appears to reflect, as we saw with Dickens's treatment of caricature before, then what is specific about laughter is that it senses its role in the production of a content which seems to have pre-existed, rather than believing in itself as the representation of already-existing substance. Laughter, with all its anxieties, knows that what it brings into being is completely unsecured and always potentially subject to the complete change that comes with a caesura or moment of *Aufhebung*.

Lacan and Laughter as the 'Discovery'

Influenced by Lacan, theorist Robert Pfaller, in an important essay on comedy and materialism, comments that 'comedy reveals the seemingly meaningful [...] to be based on chance, without any intention or understanding.' It recalls both the position of Nancy and of Derrida that I finished with above: the idea of sense or rationality coming into being and therefore simultaneously showing that this rationality cannot have been there to govern the process by which it takes hold. For Pfaller, in comedy we see how 'the impression of sense emerges from nonsense.'²³ Following this, the argument here is not that laughter is on the side of an ideology which already exists, but rather that with laughter one is close to the heart of ideology; laughter can show us ideology at work and coming into being, thereby undermining ideology's claim to be secure. Laughter is against the natural, or against the origin as natural and thus it is both ideology happening, succeeding in establishing something, and also showing what it establishes coming into being. This leads us to psychoanalysis, a model which, like laughter, is based on creating structures which it does not consider to be true or essential but which are in constant change.

²² Nancy, Jean-Luc, 'Elliptical Sense' p. 177. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death' in *MLN*, vol. 103, no. 4 (September, 1987), pp. 719-736.

²³ Robert Pfaller, 'Comedy and Materialism' in *Stop that Comedy!: On the Subtle Hegemony of the Tragic in Our Culture* (Wein: Sonderzahl Press, 2005), pp. 251-278 (p. 263).

In moving from Hegel to psychoanalysis it is first possible to think of the connection between Freud and Hegel. Much later in his work, in a very Hegelian moment, Freud himself discusses the question of beginning in similar terms. In 'Negation' (1925) he writes:

The antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist from the first. It only comes into being from the fact that thinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind once more something that has once been perceived by reducing it as a presentation without the external object having still to be there.

The first sentence here is comparable to Hegel's discussions of the beginning as a dividing force, as that which divides the subjective from the objective, the form from the content. Freud gives the term 'perception' as opposed to 'presentation' which implies the presented content and the presenting form; the two are already divided. Daniel Berthold Bond touches upon this possible connection between Hegel and Freud when he comments that 'for both Hegel and Freud the basic desire of all mind is to achieve a reconciliation and unity between inner and outer worlds, subject and object, self and other, and yet all mind is perpetually confronted with the experience of disunity and contradiction.'²⁴ It may be true that for Freud and Hegel this originary split is a problem that needs reconciling, but Lacan takes this on in a very different way, emphasising not that there is a true original unity but how this movement creates the appearance that there was.

Though there are minor connections between Freud and Hegel on this point, Freud did not consider himself much indebted to Hegel and it is Lacan who brings Hegel into psychoanalytic discourse. Lacan, influenced by Kojève's lectures on Hegel that he attended in the 1930s, criticized ideas of the ego-as-origin which may be present in Freud but are discounted by Hegel in the reading we have given above. Lacan, like Hegel, asks not what the origin of the subject is but rather how we are formed as subjects who see ourselves as originary. Following Kojève on Hegel, Lacan's psychoanalysis asks instead how it is that we are formed as subjects who see ourselves as originary.²⁵ Lacan writes that 'one should not imagine that [psychoanalysis] is something that would be the discovery of being or of the

²⁴ Daniel Berthold-Bond, 'Hegel, Nietzsche and Freud on Madness and the Unconscious' in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol 5, no. 3 (1991), pp. 193-213 (pp. 196-7).

²⁵ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H Nichols, Jr (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

soul.’²⁶ As with Hegel, the question is rather of how the subject and its being are formed in particular cultural conditions.

A Lacanian Hegel is something that has been famously emphasized by Slavoj Žižek and those surrounding him in the Slovenian School, and those ideas are discussed here, but it is important that this (in some ways against the grain) reading of Hegel was a part of Lacan’s work already. In Seminar 17 for instance, Lacan criticises traditional philosophy and makes Hegel the absolute antithesis of this (S17, 23). He uses Hegel in a way completely opposed to those who saw him as the embodiment of traditional philosophical discourse. Ian Parker, speaking of Žižek’s reading of Hegel, writes that ‘Hegel needs to be treated as a space to think, as shifting and opening up new ideas.’ This, writes Parker, ‘is more in keeping with what Hegel was trying to do than if he had been describing a positive, fully-formed system that might then pretend to solve all the problems of philosophy.’²⁷ Lacanian readings of Hegel follow this idea of his philosophy, as Lacan himself did, using Hegel as a way of opening up existing philosophical norms. Ian Parker and David Pavon-Cuellar explain that ‘Lacanian discourse analysis’ is an attempt to move away from models which ‘attempt to go back to some reality that was expressed, represented or reflected in discourse’ and instead place the emphasis is on ‘the reality of discourse itself,’ not just linguistics but the way in which real subjects are produced and constructed within those languages.²⁸

Lacanian psychoanalysis, in a certain way at least, can be thought of as a discourse that is interested in form rather than content. Without privileging form as originary, Lacan’s ‘analyst’s discourse,’ one of four major discourses which he defines in his work, attempts to reverse the long tradition of placing the importance on content. In Seminar 17 Lacan describes the ‘university discourse,’ the traditional structure of knowledge in the university and the world around it. Lacan comments on the relationship between the university discourse and the analyst’s discourse, saying:

There are even people, science fanatics, who tell me, ‘Keep on knowing. But what?
But you have to say what you know about the names of the father!!’ No, I will not

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, ‘Tokyo Discourse, 4/21/1971’, p. 3.

²⁷ Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 7.

²⁸ David Pavon-Cuellar and Ian Parker, *Lacan, Discourse, Event: New Psychoanalytic Approaches to Textual Indeterminacy* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

say what the name of the father is, precisely because I am not part of the university discourse. (*S17*, 109)

The name of the father is a well-known Lacanian function which can be thought of as something like the 'law' or the role of the law as it exists in language. Lacan here refuses to say what it is because it can be various things – it is a function or form, a part of a structure that can have various 'contents.' Whilst the university is interested in knowledge as content, psychoanalysis is interested in forms of knowledge, and stops short of specifying what the content of that knowledge is. In this way it can be seen as an appropriate discourse for reading the discussions of comedy above; its focus is on identifying the structure of jokes and structures of laughter and not on the content or what 'makes us laugh.' Whilst it is not the case that the form comes first, the form is privileged insofar as it can be occupied by various things; the idea of primary content which exists to be represented by form is reversed; form can be occupied by various contents, as we saw with nationality jokes. Yet, this is not to say that these forms or structures that psychoanalysis identifies are fixed. Lacanian psychoanalysis occupies a crucial position between structuralism and those who advocate the breakdown of structure, which is vital for this reading of laughter as something that is neither purely liberating or purely ideological. Psychoanalysis has been criticised for foreclosing on its fixed structures, and this will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Six. The key point here is that the function of analysis is neither to leave the subject confined in the structure in which it is, nor to 'liberate' the subject from structure as such. This is crucial to the way that laughter functions, and to the way in which it has been read. In Seminar 7 Lacan writes:

Marie-Claire Boons would even give us to understand that [...] in some way psychoanalysis frees us from the law.

Fat chance. I am well aware that this is the register in which a libertarian hook attaches itself to psychoanalysis. [...] The father's death [...] does not seem to me to be of a kind to liberate us from it, far from it. (*S17*, 119)

What psychoanalysis aims at, and also what it aims to reveal in discourse, is that destruction is not liberation. Liberation and release are not the field of analysis at all, contrary to many

misreadings of psychoanalysis that Lacan was aware of and which are still with us today. Lacan takes pains to stress that this feature was also part of Freud's own work (S17, 119). Psychoanalysis is not about liberation. As such, if applied to laughter this discussion in Lacan reverses the association of Freud with laughter as 'release.' Release, at least as it is traditionally understood, is not the aim of psychoanalysis, but nor is psychoanalysis interested in retaining existing structures (of which more will be said later). Rather, its interest is in the *always structured* movement from one 'discourse' to another, with the production of new subjects and discourses out of and in place of old ones. Laughter, as we shall see, plays a fundamental role in the way that subjects are thus formed and transformed in discourse. Laughter, like psychoanalysis, does not 'liberate' or enforce a pre-determined structure on the subject, but it does move the subject on in new directions, changing the structures which define subjectivity. Indeed, Lacan uses jokes to make this movement happen in the very text of his seminar. The phrase 'fat chance' above is one example. The laughter (albeit brief) that might be thought to accompany this phrase in the lecture theatre is itself a change; it turns a previous reading of psychoanalysis (that of Marie-Claire Boons) into a past that is now laughed at and shown to have only ever had 'a show of existence,' to borrow Hegel's language. The process is one of establishing something new in relation to this new past even before that new structure is articulated. In fact the new structure remains unarticulated like the 'names of the father' above because it is not pre-determined and in Lacan's control as analyst or lecturer; analysis moves things on into new structures, like laughter does. Lacan uses laughter here as something psychoanalytic at its root, showing the connection between the two.

Another way of putting this is that psychoanalysis (like laughter) is not about truths but about myths; it does not reveal the 'truth' but shows us the truth of discourse itself, as Ian Parker argues in the discussion above. Lacan makes more jokes to make this point:

Bullshitting, as I have always said, is truth. They are identical. [...] Why is this privilege given to myth in psychoanalysis? [...] Claude Levi-Strauss states the complete myth of Oedipus [but] one can see that it concerns something quite different from whether or not one is going to fuck one's mummy. (S17, 111)

This is far more than the point often made by Lacanians that the Oedipus myth is not to be taken literally but metaphorically. Rather than being a myth which shows us something true, it is the mythic status of Oedipus which makes it important. Here, the joke about fucking one's mummy actually does what Lacan describes. The joke shows that we are wrong to see psychoanalysis as something which reaches back into childhood to find 'truths,' indicating instead that it is the myths we tell ourselves (about childhood for example) which are important. These myths, in being shown for the myths that they are (or 'bullshit' - another joke) are shown to have never had anything but a 'show of existence,' to borrow Hegel's phrase once more. What happens with the joke also happens with analysis; something new is produced in relation to what has now been shown to be a narrative with no relation to 'truth.' In this moment something new emerges from the recognition of the myth as myth; analysis forms a new structure, changing everything that has gone before. It doesn't reveal truth or liberate, but it produces new myth in place of the old. The joke, then, creates a past and a present in relation to each other.

Speaking of moments such as parapraxis, dreams and jokes, Lacan describes an 'impediment, failure, split' which makes its presence felt. 'In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles' writes Lacan, 'what occurs, what is *produced* in this gap, is presented as *the discovery*' (S11, 25). The discovery, as Jeremy Tambling explains, is linked to the work of Surrealist writer Andre Breton, whom Freud met in 1921.²⁹ Lacan writes elsewhere that 'analysis is a judgement,' and here he speaks of the 'discovery' that arises from the relationship between analyst and analysand. Such language may appear to imply the pre-existence of something to be discovered or to have judgement passed upon, privileging the analyst as the subject-supposed-to-know. Yet the peculiar conception of time in Lacanian psychoanalysis answers a potential charge against psychoanalysis of having an essentializing quality affirming the subject's hidden underlying structure that analysis can bring to light. This conception of time is something Lacan takes in part from Freud himself, and in part from his reading of Hegel. The idea originates in Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, sometimes translated as 'afterwardsness.' *Nachträglichkeit* is deferred action, or perhaps better, retroactive action. Rather than a later reaction to an earlier event, as it is

²⁹ Jeremy Tambling, *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 111-2.

sometimes read, it is a recognition that when the second event occurs the first event is invested with a new significance which turns it into that which it will then always-already have been.

The concept is central to what Lacan means by 'the discovery.' It means that what is 'discovered' was not there 'first.' As Lacan says, the discovery is '*of a strange temporality.*' Something is produced as a kind of effect which appears to have already been there to function as a cause of what was to come. As Lacan writes, 'what occurs, what is *produced*, in this gap, is presented as *the discovery* (S11, 25). What is 'presented' as a finding, is in fact 'produced.' The cause and effect relationship is called into question in psychoanalysis. If there is *effectivity* in psychoanalytic practice then it encompasses at once the future anterior of the to-come, before the subject speaks ('it will *effectively* have been said...'), and the *taking effect* of the subject's speech, which is then split between the *effective* moment of its being said (when *it* speaks); the *effect* on future manifestations of its having been said; and the retroactive *effectivity* of interpretation that links up the signifiers in the chain of the speech act. It is argued here that it is in exactly this way that we can say that the laugh is 'effective.' In laughter the past is re-written and constructed in relation to the newly emerging present, just as it is in Lacan's joke about Marie-Claire Boons discussed earlier. The newly emergent present however is also subject to retroactive transformation in the future meaning that these moments show us the insecurity of chronology.

Lacan's idea of the discovery takes on the idea discussed earlier, Hölderlin's concept of the 'caesura.' In his remarks on Antigone Hölderlin describes the difference between Antigone and Oedipus using two small diagrams:

The rule, the calculable law of 'Antigone' compares to that of 'Oedipus like
 ____/____ ____ to _____ \ ____ so that the balance inclines more from the
 beginning toward the end than from the end toward the beginning.³⁰

Hölderlin explains that the slash represents the caesura, which he also calls 'the counterhythmic rupture.' It is a kind of event which interrupts, and which controls not only what follows it but what comes before as well. Hölderlin says that in the case of

³⁰ Hölderlin, 'Remarks on Oedipus,' pp. 101-2.

Antigone, it makes it seem as though 'the first half were protected from the second' whereas in *Oedipus*, it appears as if the first half is attacking the second half that needs protecting. The point is that the interruption is needed to constitute either side. This caesural break can easily be thought in Hegelian terms of the 'beginning.' Like Hegel's suggestion that the beginning is 'to be *made*,' it suggests that there is no origin here but the production of an origin. This also connects it to Foucault's concept of the 'epistemological shift;' a kind of unconscious break which changes everything past and present but which is also the result of social and political factors. After citing Hölderlin, Benjamin adds:

the caesura, in which, along with harmony, every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign to an expressionless power inside all artistic media. ... One could not characterise this rhythm any more aptly than by asserting that something beyond the poet interrupts the language of the poetry...³¹

In this split, something interrupts the language of the poetry which is beyond the poet. This is 'an expressionless power inside all artistic media' which is beyond the conscious control of the subjects involved. This force is of course productive as well as destructive; it is not that something interrupts the poet's control of the text to divert or destroy its already present and stable meaning, but rather that a productive and constitutive force beyond the poet is responsible for the creation of that meaning.

This is a moment of psychoanalytic 'discovery.' Psychoanalysis *produces* a 'discovery' of how things have been and in doing so produces new structures in relation to the old ones. Neither of these structures are 'truths' to be found (the language of science) but both are mythic and although they appear to be 'discovered' are in fact produced. Laughter likewise operates in the realm of myth, producing a past and showing it to be a constructed narrative and by doing so moving the subject into new structures. In this way it simultaneously *discovers* and *produces* a new subjectivity. Discovery and production are one, so that a new subject is produced at the moment the old subject is discovered (and the old subject is itself produced, as a new way of expressing it is created). The laugh is like the caesura in that neither the past nor the present exist without it. Both these spaces are created by laughter itself, so that there is no outside to the world that is produced by laughter. This is the final

³¹ Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume One*, p. 341.

part of the argument to be put forward here in the next chapter in terms of ‘the event.’

Badiou: Laughter and ‘the Event’

The connection between laughter and the event is one that has been made in various anticipatory ways throughout this chapter. The ‘event,’ a concept developed in the most sustained way by Alain Badiou, is closely related to the Hegelian conception of a beginning and of *Aufhebung*. It is the moment at which something happens, at which as we discussed in relation to the caesura above, history becomes readable, or is constituted; representation appears. It is likewise connected to the other major concept discussed above, the Lacanian idea of the ‘discovery,’ a moment which produces something that seems to have always been there waiting to be found, negotiating and redefining the past and present in relation to each other. Of course, laughter is not the only discourse that functions like this and it may be that all representation operates in this way, modifying and constructing that which it presents whilst appearing to discover or represent it. Likewise, any truth-claim produces a truth which it pretends to discover. In what follows I hope to consolidate the argument that laughter bears a special and specific relationship to the idea of the event. Laughter involves a repetition of this ‘eventual’ process found in our everyday discourse which draws attention to the process happening, undoing it. I will be using the terms ‘eventual’ and ‘eventually’ in what follows in this technical sense. ‘Eventual’ has a double meaning: it is used in its traditional sense of having to do with the future, and also as an adjective for something which pertains to an event. The full significance of this will be developed in Section Two, Chapter One.

The concept of the event perhaps begins from Freud’s idea of *Nachträglichkeit* discussed above. Ian Parker and David Pavon-Cuellar make a connection between *Nachträglichkeit* and the ‘event’ in their book on the *Lacan, Discourse, Event*:

The event is something that takes form for us within the symbolic ‘after the event’ according to the logic of ‘deferred action’, ‘*apres coup*’, what Freud originally spoke about as ‘*Nachträglich*’. This is a peculiarly psychoanalytic conception of time, a

looping back and activation of what has already occurred, and the investment of that first event with a significance that turns it into what it will later always already be.³²

All representation has a relationship to the event and so we are not talking solely about major world events or historical revolutions but a relationship between occurrences and their representation in a broader sense. Lacan himself noted the prevalence of this in all representation, commenting that 'language has, if you care to put it like that, a sort of retrospective effect in determining what is ultimately decided to be real.'³³ It might be easier and indeed useful to read the event in terms of major world events; the events of the Holocaust, for example, have changed the entire history of reading Fascism, bringing its qualities into being and turning previous manifestations of Fascism into the structures that led to its ultimate realization. Lacan's point, though, is that all language operates in this eventual way; every utterance changes previous ones into what they then seem to have already been.

Deriving much from Hegel and the *Aufhebung*, Badiou's concept of the event takes it out of the idea of a causal chain; one cannot think only about the causes of the event, or the factors which make up the event; the event is not just an effect of a cause. For Badiou, 'a site is only eventual insofar as it is retroactively qualified as such by the occurrence of an event' and 'there is no event save relative to an historical situation'³⁴ All events exist only in relation to other events. In a sense, a second event is needed to turn the first event into an event. In causality, event A, for example, seems to contain within it, as a future, the possibility of event B. This means that whatever event occurs must contain within it all the possible 'future' events which may or may not occur subsequently. On its most basic level something like big bang theory would fit this structure. For Badiou, though, as for Hegel, event A only becomes an event in relation to event B, which it is thought of in relation to. The moment of 'the event,' then, is a caesura, it is neither event A nor event B, but the moment which divides them, creating the relationship between them and constituting both. The event is the moment where things come into being in relation to each other.

³² Ian Parker and David Pavon-Cuellar, 'Lacanian domains of practice and forms of event in analysis' in *Lacan, Discourse, Event*, pp. 338-46 (p. 338).

³³ Lacan, 'Some Reflections on the Ego', p. 3.

³⁴ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 179.

The event creates both A and B, both cause and effect, but it is itself not a visible or articulable event but rather a void or divider, a differentiator which separates form from content, cause from effect, subject from representation, and in doing so it is productive of both sides of this void. As such the idea of the event is also connected to the discussions of a caesura or split, which as we have seen through Hegel and Hölderlin and through Lacan, needs to be seen as constitutive. Badiou reminds us of this point that 'it is essential to remember that no term within a situation designates the void.'³⁵ For Badiou the event is neither 'the one,' the thing which is symbolized, nor 'the multiple,' everything which it is not. Rather it is the gap between the two, which constitutes both in relation to each other. This, I hope to have suggested here and to demonstrate in what follows, is the way in which laughter must be seen in relation to the *event*. In his latest book, entitled *Event*, Slavoj Žižek defines the event as '*the effect that seems to exceed its causes*.'³⁶ An event is that which exceeds its causes, so that whilst it has political causes, it also establishes new causes for itself, retroactively re-structuring the past into a new structure and bringing the subject within this re-ordered world. He further writes that 'the *space* of an event is that which opens up the gap that separates an effect from its causes.'³⁷ Laughter operates in this way, between cause and effect, separating and constituting the two. When we laugh our laughter is never divorced from its cause because it is a kind of divider between cause and (often largely unknown) effects. Laughter always has causes, but it also always has the capacity to exceed its causes, modifying chronologies and structures around the subject.

The event is ideological; it does not come from without but from within, the result of social and political conditions, something that erupts from our own discourses like the 'discovery.' As such, it cannot be seen as purely liberating, as it recognizes no essential structure outside of ideology that the subject can be freed from. On the other hand, if laughter exceeds its causes then it cannot simply be supporting a pre-existing ideology, it is not just ideology imposing itself but something beyond that. As Žižek says, it is 'the surprising emergence of something new which undermines every stable scheme.'³⁸ Despite Žižek's tone here, the event is not something to be invested in positively as such, a vital point when making the

³⁵ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 56.

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 3.

³⁷ Žižek, *Event*, p. 4.

³⁸ Žižek, *Event*, pp. 5-6.

connection between the event and laughter. A whole history of discussion has defended and celebrated laughter as positive, but if it is to be connected to the event then it cannot be seen in this way. Instead, its effects can be completely various depending on the conditions of its event. As Badiou stresses, the event is always biased; as we have said about laughter above, it is not just shattering but structuring as well; 'there are no natural events, nor are their neutral events.'³⁹ Likewise, there is no natural or neutral laughter. Events always condition the past and the present; they are deeply ideological. Laughter as event is an argument that laughter is also deeply ideological. Like the event it is productive of ideology, making it like repression in Derrida's understanding of it discussed above, as the production of a way of thinking which excludes other thought.

But if all representational discourse is like this, or if being eventual is a function of all language, then the question is what laughter brings to this structure. As I've suggested over the course of this section, what laughter does is show representation as eventual: it is the excess of the event in that it shows us what is happening. With laughter, as in an event, ideology is being produced, an entire past and present is being restructured and recreated, but in making this process apparent to us the whole system becomes unsecured, provisional. It can show that the reality we are brought within by the event is mythical and produced rather than essential and fixed. As we discussed above, Jean-Luc Nancy describes the same process in Hegel and Derrida as 'sense sensing itself coming into being.' Elsewhere Nancy describes laughter, which can now be thought of in these terms:

The origin is laughing. [...] It laughs at the peal of its laughter, we might say. Which is not to say that it is unserious or that it is painless. It is beyond all opposition of serious and nonserious, of pain and pleasure. Or rather, it is at the juncture of these oppositions, at the limit which they share and which itself is only the limit of each of these terms, the limit of their signification, the limit to which these significations, as such, are exposed. One could say that such a limit [...] is the place of the sublime. I prefer to say [...] that it is the place of exposition.⁴⁰

³⁹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 178.

⁴⁰ Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense,' p. 180.

Laughter is an origin, it is prior to its cause and its effect, and it is 'the juncture of these oppositions': it creates them. And here we can see the double function of laughter which this chapter has been driving at throughout. It is both ideological, and the moment where ideology can be undone, or shown for what it is, at which its lack of control can be revealed. Badiou's theory is to do with the way 'the event' produces truths. As Peter Hallward writes, his work is interested in 'the process by which a [...] truth may eventually produce verifiable components of a new knowledge, a new way of understanding the parts of a situation.'⁴¹ With laughter we are right at the heart of ideology; laughter is an instance of ideology coming into being; it creates a cause and effect, and it establishes them as already having been there. And yet with laughter we are shown this happening, we sense it coming into being, or at least we can do. In this way laughter is the event, the place of exposition, meaning the opening out or abandonment to chance (OED). It is productive, and what it produces will control us and dictate our thoughts, but it can recognize itself as this moment of juncture which forms thought, showing that no ideology is in charge, that nothing is there to control it. Žižek asks; 'is an event a change in the way reality appears to us, or is it a shattering transformation of reality itself?'⁴² The point we have arrived at through Lacan and Badiou is that the two are one and the same; it is the representation that is important and not any underlying reality. Laughter as an event transforms the way we see reality and transforms that reality itself. Discussing Saint Paul, Badiou emphasizes that 'the Christian subject does not pre-exist the event he declares (the resurrection); what he was before is of no importance.'⁴³ Likewise, it is argued here that laughter is an event in that it bears this relationship to subjectivity; every laugh transforms and produces the subject in new ways, like an event it brings the subject into new structures by changing the way it perceives its reality. What the subject was before the laugh is also created by the laugh so that there is no outside of the world it forges. Yet unlike many other events, laughter senses the sense it produces coming into being, giving it the potential to unsecure the very anchor of ideology at the same moment. In other words, *laughter is an event that shows itself as an event*.

⁴¹ Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 109.

⁴² Žižek, *Event*, p. 5.

⁴³ Hallward, p. 110.

Section Two: Dickens and Laughter

‘Every practice which produces something new is a practice of laughter’

Julia Kristeva¹

What I am arguing in this thesis is that although Dickens could never have read Badiou, his treatment of laughter is as an event, in Badiou’s sense of the word, and further, that his writing is characterized by this sense of an abandonment to chance that comes with this way of seeing the world in ‘eventual’ terms. Dominic Hoens argues that we must consider psychoanalysis as the event, with the meaning and significance that Badiou has given the word.² For Hoens, Lacan’s return to Freud is a kind of event; it is a coming together which constitutes both Freud and Lacan in new ways, opening up new possibilities in the space between them and making something emerge in both positions. In a similar way, it is the belief here that this theory of comedy, which has come out of reading Dickens and could not have existed without his work just as Lacan comes out of reading Freud, can also have an eventual relationship with Dickens’s texts. In the four chapters which follow, Dickens is read in conversation with this theory and it is the hope that between them they will illuminate each other, constituting new possibilities for speaking about Dickens and about laughter. The thesis, then, hopes to be an event, not in the sense of anything grand or spectacular but in the sense that as Dickens knew, the everyday is an event, continually retroactively changing what it reads but also being changed by that which it reads. When the discussions of laughter here are placed alongside Dickens it is hoped that this is the result that will emerge, creating new implications and ways of reading both.

It is also hoped that in the course of this thesis it will be shown that the nineteenth century was an event for laughter in the sense that the status and role of laughter not only changed

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 225.

² Dominiek Hoens, ‘Towards a New Perversion: Psychoanalysis’ in *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, eds. Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 88-103 (p. 88).

then, but as happens with events, the whole history of laughter was also changed. That which laughter had previously been was re-formed and re-written: in the nineteenth century laughter gets not only a new present but also a new past.

Chapter Four: Dickens's Events

This chapter demonstrates that Dickens responds through laughter to various features of bourgeois society and culture in the nineteenth century. These can be thought of broadly as its production of subjectivity, its reliance on instrumental reason, and its advocacy of realism in fiction. These three things are all closely connected and cannot always be separated. Producing subjects, producing 'reason' or 'rationality' and producing an appearance of realism are all 'events' that occur and re-occur in different ways. Laughter in Dickens is something which can show us these events happening, undermining their claim to be permanent features of life and showing them to be things produced by the time and its politics.

In *David Copperfield*, in chapter 55, when the narrative begins to turn towards its conclusion, the writing gives us its clearest 'event' when David writes:

I now approach an event in my life, so indelible, so awful, so bound by an infinite variety of ties to all that has preceded it, in these pages, that, from the beginning of my narrative, I have seen it growing larger and larger as I advanced, like a great tower in a plain, and throwing its fore-cast shadow even on the incidents of my childish days. (*DC*, 790)

Copperfield is writing his autobiography here in the light of an event, Steerforth's drowning, which we now see has been fore-cast in the previous pages because of the frequent references to drowning which begin on page one of the novel (*DC*, 1). 'Fore-cast' is a pun since the event has been fore-cast in the sense of being predicted in the *future* but also the 'fore-cast shadow' reaches *backwards* from this future conditioning what has come before. Therefore, the event in question has been caesural and eventual for Copperfield; there is no past or future outside of this event because events construct both. Copperfield's life, even the years before it happens, is transformed by Steerforth's death. In the novel Steerforth is a kind of guide to Copperfield, as his name suggests, and this moment involves the breaking

of a narrative path which has been created by the name Steerforth.¹ The moment of reading is an event for the reader also; what has gone before in the novel is modified, shown to have the traces of trauma within it. This is trauma associated with *Nachträglichkeit*, a retroactive transformation of what has gone before, an 'event,' as discussed above. It might be significant that *Copperfield* is evasive about what 'event' is relayed here and it is the reader who must assume that it is Steerforth's drowning that is referred to. This may be because, as Freud says, one can never know when the trauma occurred or because in fact every moment is an event, transforming all that has gone before. Autobiography, like a joke with its punchline, appears to be a linear narrative but these moments show us the impossibility of seeing it this way. Lacan comments that history is not a real sequence of past events but 'the present synthesis of the past' or 'the past in so far as it is historicised in the present' (*SI*, 36,12). Here too the event denies linear narrative, showing that the future interrupts and transforms the past.

This shows us the significance of what can be understood by the eventual. David *Copperfield* here is a pure example of how Maurice Blanchot describes the nature of narrative. For Blanchot:

The tale is not the narration of an event, but that event itself, the approach to that event, the place where that event is made to happen – an event which is yet to come and through whose power of attraction the tale can hope to come into being too.

This is a very delicate relationship, undoubtedly a kind of extravagance, but it is the secret law of the tale. The tale is a movement towards a point, a point which is not only unknown, obscure, foreign, but such that apart from this movement it does not seem to have any sort of real prior existence, and yet it is so imperious that the tale derives its power of attraction only from this point, so that it cannot even 'begin' before reaching it – and yet only the tale and the unpredictable movement of the tale create the space where the point becomes real, powerful, and alluring.²

¹ The original name for Steerforth was Steerford, showing how Dickens refined the name to include a suggestion of guiding (see *DC*, 947).

² Maurice Blanchot, 'The Song of the Sirens: Encountering the Imaginary' in *The Gaze of Orpheus and other literary essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Station Hill Press, 1981), pp. 105-114 (p. 109).

Whilst the term 'future' implies a continuity between the present and what follows, with the term 'eventual' we find a doubleness. The word, in the technical sense in which it is being used in this thesis, not only means what is to come but also something that cannot be predicted or foreseen in terms of the present but which erupts into that present and changes it heterogeneously. The word 'future' implies homogeneity. We can see this from the Latin root of the word *futūrus*, which comes from the future participle of *esse* meaning 'to be.' The future is almost deterministic; it implies a continuity between the present and what will be. On the other hand 'eventual' is heterogeneous and other to what is present. The Latin *ēventus* means 'occurrence' or 'issue' and comes from *ēvenīre* meaning 'to come out' or 'to happen' (OED). The word does not insist on a linear relationship between present and future but instead makes this impossible, showing that the event doesn't come out of the present but changes it and makes it into something new, just as this event in Copperfield's life changes everything that has 'approached' it, to use the term of both Dickens and Blanchot. There may already be a link to comedy and jokes here, as this suggests a new relevance of a 'punchline;' something that retroactively transforms the meaning of what came before.

I will now turn to the comic dimensions of this in Dickens leading up to a discussion of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. This novel is exceptional in that it was serialized weekly, putting a huge onus on improvisation and making it a text that is continually interrupting itself, as with the abrupt change of narrator after three chapters, which is part of a writing which recognizes itself as 'eventual' and discontinuous (OCS, 35). But Dickens sees all writing as an event. As such he anticipates the radicalism of the arguments discussed here, noticing, although he did not have the language to express it in these terms, that the function of the event governs every moment of representation and is not limited to major definable historic moments.

We see this clearly in *Pickwick Papers* when Mr Jingle claims that he wrote a poem at the 'revolution of July – composed it on the spot.' The July revolution happened in 1830, yet the novel is set in 1827, so Jingle's comment is an impossibility (PP, 26). The point Dickens makes is an eventual one; by the time *Pickwick Papers* is written in 1836, one cannot speak of 1827, when the novel is set, except in relation to the revolution of 1830, because the event reconstructs the past into something new and access to how it 'was' is forever changed.

Dickens added a joke about this later, as a footnote to the 1847 Cheap Edition of the novel, which read, 'a remarkable instance of the prophetic force of Mr Jingle's imagination; this dialogue occurring in the year 1827, and the Revolution in 1830.' The editor of the old Penguin edition, Robert Patten, interprets the moment as Dickens correcting himself for not realizing this anachronism, but either way Dickens has made a joke out of the fact that the future is in the present, realising consciously or unconsciously that he had made the future construct the present, and that seeing this was something that causes laughter.³ Further, the writing of the novel itself transforms its fictional 1827 into the events that led up to what later happens, so that 'The Posthumous Papers' of the Pickwick Club, the novel's full title, show that all writing is posthumous in that it retroactively transforms and fixes the past after its 'death.'⁴ The past becomes the past of the present that represents and determines it, making it what Lacan calls 'the present synthesis of the past.'

For now it is Dickens's sense of every utterance, every word and even every letter as an event which I want to establish. As with Jingle's claim here, it is when this becomes apparent to us that laughter happens. Whilst all writing may be said to be eventual, it usually depends on the repression of this fact; instead aiming at realism, truth and representation, which all imply the pre-existence (even if fictional) of what the writing articulates. With laughter, writing is shown for what it is; the eventual transformation of past and present. As such it shows us that there is nothing in complete control of this process, nothing anchored or permanent; it shows meaning coming into being and retroactively changing what has gone before, unsecuring any idea of origin or stable reality to which writing refers. Dickens resists, then, an increasing emphasis on realism in the nineteenth century which held that writing represented real conditions of life.

Further, what we see here is that the nineteenth century was a kind of crisis point for laughter. In the nineteenth century there was prevalent support for both the major trends of discussing laughter, as liberating the subject from social constraints and as enforcing the rules of the social order. As the previous section demonstrated, these trends date way before the nineteenth century and they still characterize discussions of comedy today.

³ Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. Robert Patten (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 933.

⁴ On this see Jeremy Tambling, *Becoming Posthumous* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), pp. 59-87.

Thackeray, for example, belongs in the second of these categories. In *Vanity Fair* the narrator comments that 'some there are, and very successful too, mere quacks and fools: and it was to combat and expose such as those no doubt that Laughter was made.'⁵ The view seems to be one shared by Thackeray when he discusses his own comedy, as I will show below. On the other hand, large amounts of Victorian nonsense poetry may be said to belong in the first camp, seeing laughter as the result of a liberating breakdown of rules and order. In Dickens, as in some other nineteenth century traditions that he taps into, laughter is shown to be eventual, a force that transforms and produces meaning and order rather than supporting it or merely breaking it down.

Though his illustration of the complex roles that laughter played in the nineteenth century is unique and ingenious, Dickens's comedy is also very much part of a set of traditions. In the mid-nineteenth century there is much evidence that laughter was increasingly troubling to the existing order; to religion, to class structure and to political order. Its radicalism here was not, as is usually thought, that it attempted to break down that order but that it began to show itself as playing a role in the creation of order itself. This is what has been meant in the previous section by seeing laughter as ideology and then as an event. In other words, laughter showed itself as capable of providing an order of its own. Dickens's drawing on other traditions shows, more than the work of any other author, how laughter played the role of showing us an event happening, showing the production of order that is therefore simultaneously shown to be insecure and subject to change.

Dickens saw writing as having the potential to produce order and reality. From the earliest age, he betrays a remarkable interest in letters, not just in the sense of a passion for literature, though that is no doubt part of it; but in a stranger and more unusual way, he demonstrates a fascination with the complex powers of individual words and characters. In this interest we can see that the emphasis is not on nonsense but on accidental or ungoverned sense, that writing does not destroy but produces. In a fragment from *David Copperfield*, which Forster tells us is closely autobiographical, Dickens describes the experience of learning shorthand as a teenager (*Life*, 1:33):

⁵ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1983), p. 96.

The changes that were rung upon dots, which in such a position meant such a thing, and in such another position something else, entirely different; the wonderful vagaries that were played by circles; the unaccountable consequences that resulted from marks like flies' legs; the tremendous effects of a curve in a wrong place; not only troubled my waking hours, but reappeared before me in my sleep. When I had groped my way, blindly, through these difficulties, and had mastered the alphabet, which was an Egyptian temple in itself, there then appeared a procession of new horrors, called arbitrary characters – the most despotic characters I have ever known; who insisted, for instance, that a thing like the beginning of a cobweb meant expectation, and that a pen-and-ink skyrocket stood for disadvantageous. [...] In short, it was almost heart-breaking (DC, 550).⁶

The shorthand that Dickens knew is that of Thomas and Joseph Gurney, whose book Dickens purchased and taught himself from in the late 1820s. Here, as in a modern shorthand system, letters or combinations of letters, represented by various stokes of the pen, stand in for words determined by the system. In the Gurney system, for example, the symbol 'p' symbolises 'people'.⁷ Dickens describes these as the 'arbitrary characters' of shorthand, and he calls them 'horrors'. These are characters 'who insisted, for instance, that a thing like the beginning of a cobweb meant expectation, and that a pen-and-ink skyrocket stood for disadvantageous'. The letter's 'despotic' 'insistence' on a particular meaning makes it horrific and 'almost heartbreaking,' because of its demand to be read in a particular way. The young Copperfield, surely standing in for a young Dickens at this point, feels that the meaning which demands to be read, although singular, is hidden; the alphabet is 'an Egyptian temple in itself,' suggesting that it is a rebus or puzzle; what the signifier intends to signify is insisted upon, yet remains out of reach, meaning the reading subject is faced with a seemingly impossible task. Further, the despotic insistence of the shape drawn on the page to signify only a particular meaning is not entirely successful. The stokes of the pen designed to express 'expectation' also bring to mind cobwebs, and the mark signifying 'disadvantageous' also suggests a skyrocket. There are 'unaccountable consequences that

⁶ In 1855 Dickens wrote to Forster, repudiating the latter's suggestion that these remarks were exaggerated. Here he states that 'this began when I was Charley's age,' making Dickens eighteen at the time referred to. See (*Life*, 2:34). Sections of these thoughts on shorthand are quoted in Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 235.

⁷ Thomas Gurney, *An easy and compendious system of shorthand; adapted to the arts and sciences, and to the learned professions* (Philadelphia: Dobson & Lang, 1789), p. 17.

result from marks' of the pen, which signify other than the intended signification, and perhaps even go against the intended meaning; 'expectations' may be the opposite to cobwebs, like those in Miss Havisham's rooms indicating the destruction of expectations, and the word 'disadvantageous' counteracts the progress that narratives of technological advancement associated with the skyrocket (GE, 84).

If we laugh here, it is not so much at Copperfield or a young Dickens's failure to read the sign correctly, but because we see Copperfield/Dickens coming into being as a subject in this very moment. The letter constitutes or 'insists,' establishing the subject in relation to it, making it a kind of interpellation. It complicates discussions of the relationship between laughter and meaning, suggesting that laughter cannot be seen as the breakdown of meaning nor as a support for already existing meaning.

Forster writes that Dickens could never endure 'the interval between the accomplishment of anything, and its "first motion"' (Life, 87). The quotation comes from *Julius Caesar*, where Brutus comments that 'Between the acting of a dreadful thing / And the first motion, all the interim is / Like a phantasm, or a hideous dream' (*Julius Caesar*, II.i.667). Whatever writing intends, its 'first motion,' that meaning which the writer sets out to convey, is not the extent of what that instance of writing signifies. Rosemarie Bodenheimer comments on the quotation from Forster, remarking that 'Dickens's sense of outrage was fed by any discernable gap between language and feelings or intention, the more so, perhaps, because he sensed that gap in himself.'⁸ Bodenheimer notices the implications in Forster's observation of Dickens, and acknowledges Dickens's radicalism in perceiving the gap between intention and signification, though she reads this as something to which Dickens was averse. The quotation above from *David Copperfield* suggests the opposite, that the despotism in language is its insistence on single meaning, rather than its failure to achieve that meaning.

What happens in this quotation is close to what Lacan calls the 'instance of the letter,' the title of one of his *Ecrits*. The French 'L'instance' has many implications, including a trial or legal process, but it can also mean authority, and can imply agency; an earlier translation of

⁸ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 30.

Lacan's seminar translated the title as 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious'.⁹ 'L'instance' also implies insistence, and persistence, and this is crucial for Lacan's argument. For Lacan, the letter stands inside writing, in its unconscious, but persistently making its presence felt; it has an agency which constitutes difference within writing. It is important to see that for Lacan the letter insists within speech just as much it does within writing, modifying the contrast Derrida forces between himself and Lacan. For Derrida, writing is the repressed within speech and he accuses Lacan of being logocentric, thinking Lacan has missed this point.¹⁰ Regardless of what writing might attempt to signify consciously, the letter persists, making its presence felt and signifying something which is other. Lacan remarks: 'we can say that it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning insists, but that none of the chain's elements *consists* in the signification it can provide at that very moment (*Ecrits*, 419).¹¹ For Lacan, all language asserts itself as complete, it is subject-asserting, despotic in its insistence on a particular meaning. In this way we may say that it is 'eventual' since it claims the concrete pre-existence of something which it refers to whilst this referent itself is dependent on its relationship to language for its creation. However, this is not its only feature. There is something else occurring in every utterance or written sign, a potentiality which can stand out against single-signification. Lacan speaks of the

possibility I have [...] insofar as this language exists – to use it to signify *something altogether different* from what it says. This is a function of speech that is more worthy of being pointed out than that of disguising the subject's thought (which is usually indefinable) – namely, the function of indicating the place of this subject in the search for truth. (*Ecrits*, 421)

Language has the ability to signify something altogether different from what it says. The relevance of this to Dickens can be seen from the quotation on shorthand above, which shows Dickens's sense of a language which attempts to signify a single meaning, but in fact signifies something altogether different, with its supposed meaning absent and hidden. Further, both the quotation from *David Copperfield* and the quotation from Lacan raise the

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London : Routledge, 1989), pp. 161-198.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Style*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 61.

¹¹ On Dickens and Lacan see Jeremy Tambling, 'Dickens and the Persistence of the Letter in the Unconscious: Reading', *Etudes Anglaises* 65 (2012), p. 54-64

question of the way that language indicates 'the place of the subject in the search for truth,' since *Copperfield* is established as the reading subject faced with the puzzle of shorthand which insists on a truth of signification. Language constitutes the subject as a subject searching for the hidden truth that language refers to. Something funny occurs here too, when the subject passionately searches for the truth it can never find and the reader at least chuckles at *Copperfield* at this moment. This laughter accompanies seeing an event happening, i.e. seeing a subjectivity coming into being. Our relation to truth forms who we are, as it may be said to do in the quotation from *Copperfield*. Perhaps we can say that in Dickens, at least, when it is shown to us that the subject is set on a particular path, when sense and order come into being and we realize this, we laugh. *Copperfield*, who doesn't realize what is happening, certainly does not laugh; for him the moment is an event that he is blind to. Comic writing, then, is not the breakdown of sense, but *sense coming into being*. Or rather if all writing is sense coming into being then comic writing shows us this reality.

One of the few critics to discuss Lacan and comedy is R. D. V. Glasgow, who comments that whilst 'functional discourse can work by provisionally nailing down words onto meanings, giving an illusion of stability (as if a particular word 'belonged' to its meaning),' comic moments can show us 'the radical separation of signifier and signified' which forces us to recognize the dynamic potentiality for language to undermine our sense of order.

Glasgow's focus is on Lacan's work as undermining or destroying order. Indeed, Lacan's argument that language always has the capacity 'to say something altogether different from what it says' does support this approach. Yet, it is significant that Lacan's own statement of intent in that essay is to discuss the role of 'the letter in the *creation* of signification' [my emphasis], rather than in the destruction of signification. Lacan, like Dickens, is interested not only in the way writing fragments order and identity but in the way it produces both identity and fragmentation. This makes the emphasis of this thesis a different one to many existing trends that have dominated discussions of Dickens. Jeremy Tambling's extensive project on Dickens, discussed more in what follows, has been to emphasize Dickens as a writer who is against all order and structure, a writer of breakdown. On the other hand critics like Michael Hollington have stressed the opposite, perhaps in response to these readings, that Dickens still ultimately 'retains a concept of the unity of personality,' that he

sees identity as somehow essentially unified and ordered.¹² Different from both these views, the focus in this thesis is on Dickens as a writer examining identity coming into being, a writer who seeks to reveal the structures that underlie our existence. This connects Dickens to psychoanalysis and, in light of the reading given above, to comedy as the form which can show us in Benjamin's words 'the lining of the dress at the hem,' the way the fabric of our identity is put together. Laura Salisbury may notice something of this in her discussion of Becket's *Ill Seen Ill Said*:

because a flickering of comic embers persists within this etiolated scene where so much affect has been faded out, because a funny kind of funniness remains despite the comic timing seeming all wrong, slowed, anachronistic and wound down, it might not be unreasonable to suggest that this peculiarly resistant comedy could determine and trace a profound structuring principle.¹³

A certain function of comedy is not the breakdown of sense but a kind of recognition, revelation or 'tracing' of the 'profound structuring principles' of our existence. Tracing means 'to follow the path of' but also implies going over and outlining or bringing into visibility.

This type of nineteenth century comedy, if we can locate it here, would differ from many discussions of Victorian nonsense literature, since the argument here is that it is not so much that language cannot help turning to nonsense (though this may be true in some ways) but that language cannot help producing sense.¹⁴ As such, Dickens's nonsense shows that this is all sense is; something which comes into being through language and therefore not something that was there to govern the process from the start; as was argued above, it is a product of moments of *Aufhebung* or of event. We could suggest that sense appears out of nonsense, or as Lacan writes, that 'meaning is produced in nonmeaning,' since what we see

¹² See a clear articulation of his position in Michael Hollington, "'To the Droodstone,'" or, from *The Moonstone* to *Edwin Drood* via *No Thoroughfare*' in *Q/W/E/R/T/Y: arts literatures & civilisations du monde Anglophone* (1995), pp. 141-149 (p.148).

¹³ Laura Salisbury, "SO THE UNREASONING GOES": The Comic Timing of Trembling' in *Ill Seen Ill Said* in *Samuel Beckett Today*, vol. 11 (2001), pp. 373-381.

¹⁴ For the definitive study of Victorian Nonsense see Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994)

here is the production of sense which simultaneously shows that sense cannot have been there to govern its own production (*Ecrits*, 427).

The idea of language insisting on a particular meaning extends to the way in which it can call the subject into a particular position. This is combined with a freedom which Dickens seems to afford his language. In the opening chapter of *Bleak House* the signifier has the freedom to dictate what words come next, challenging the idea that language has a solid fixed referent outside of the material words, that it has 'content,' to use the Hegelian terms discussed above (page 55). Once again, though, it is not the breakdown of sense that is the issue here but the production of it, so that once more every utterance becomes an 'event':

In trickery, evasion, procrastination, spoilation, botheration, under false pretences of all sorts, there are influences that can never come to good. The very solicitors' boys who have kept the wretched suitors at bay, by protesting time out of mind that Mr Chizzle, Mizzle, or otherwise, was particularly engaged and had appointments until dinner, may have got an extra moral twist and shuffle into themselves out of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The receiver in the cause has received a goodly sum of money by it, but has acquired too a distrust of his own mother, and a contempt for his own kind. Chizzle, Mizzle, and otherwise, have lapsed into a habit of vaguely promising themselves that they will look into that outstanding little matter, and see what can be done for Drizzle – who was not well used – when Jarndyce and Jarndyce shall be got out of the office. Shirking and sharking, in all their many varieties, have been sown broadcast by the ill-fated cause, and even those whose who have contemplated its history from the outermost circle of such evil, have been insensibly tempted into a loose way of letting bad things alone to take their own bad course, and a loose belief that if the world go wrong, it was, in some off hand manner, never meant to go right. (*BH*, 17-18)

The language of the passage shares a characteristic nonsense literature; 'shirking' slides to 'sharking' and 'evasion' becomes 'procrastination' and then 'spoilation' and 'botheration'. The words insist on coming out of one another. There is a comedy here in treating the word as material, like 'Chizzle,' each word implying other words, free from the demand to refer to a stable reality outside language, free from the 'despotic insistence' on single meaning

discussed earlier. Where shorthand as presented in *Copperfield* is characterized by the despotic insistence on one particular meaning, nonsense privileges the power of the sign to signify otherness. It seems, ostensibly at least, to be on the side of R.D.V. Glasgow's argument that the rational meanings of language are broken down, or on the side of laughter as liberation, 'freed' from the usual rules.

However, once again, it is not adequate to speak about this comedy in these terms of freedom or liberation from the constraints of rational language. This may be as far as other Victorian nonsense literature such as that of Edward Lear and even Lewis Carroll goes, but here something else is in play. In this passage the law, which Dickens usually treats as a body which enforces and regulates rigid identity, is treated differently. Jeremy Tambling's book *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* is interested in the restricting and imprisoning nature of names and identities in Dickens.¹⁵ Likewise D. A. Miller's reading of *Bleak House* speaks of the Court of Chancery as an extension of the increased modern policing systems of surveillance which impose rigid and restricting identity.¹⁶ Miller's argument is that the novel is a document attesting to the increased centralizing authority of the state. These readings of the novel, which have usually made use of Foucault and his reading of Bentham's panopticism as a force for imposing strict regulation, are relevant here, since in this passage from *Bleak House* the law dishes out names, imprinting identity.¹⁷ Yet in this case the action of the law is 'loose' and 'off hand,' decidedly disorganized. In creating its identities the law is strangely careless; it names by making a distinction of one letter only, 'Chizzle' and 'Mizzle,' or perhaps it differentiates by two letters, as with 'Drizzle', a joke referring back to the London fog of the novel's opening and suggesting something as arbitrary as the weather can affect the identities dished out. The names may also recall that of Grizzle, the nag of Dr Syntax in the 1809 *Dr Syntax in Search of the Picturesque*, a series of comic plates and poems at the heart of which are syntactic and linguistic jokes.¹⁸ There is a slipperiness to the language that makes it seem free, but it still has confining effects on those it names.

¹⁵ Jeremy Tambling, *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), pp. 17-47.

¹⁶ D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (London: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁷ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin 1977).

¹⁸ William Coombe, *The Tour of Dr Syntax in Search of the Picturesque* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2011)

Here though, rather than celebrating an imagined 'freedom' from the constraints of rationality, Dickens emphasizes that rationality itself, with all its power to impose identity and order, is careless and governed by instability. The law dishes out identities haphazardly, and it recalls the blackly humorous tragedy of Mr Bumble naming the orphans alphabetically in *Oliver Twist* (OT, 10).¹⁹ The state is dishing out identity, but it is careless about doing so. There is a comedy in the idea that since we attach so much value to our names, they should be given out so carelessly. In his recent book *Dickens's Novels as Verse*, Joseph P. Jordan, discussing particularly alliterative passages in Dickens, of which this is surely one of the most significant (though Jordan does not discuss it), argues that Dickens's writing is characterized by 'patterns of repetition that give casual coherence to sprawling narratives without compromising one's sense of their sprawl.'²⁰ Jordan's reading may notice that where nonsense literature is usually concerned with the breakdown of sense, Dickens emphasizes its production. Just because the language is sprawling and careless it does not stop it having serious effects and imposing on its recipients. Here Dickens warns of the dangers of instrumental reason and the power to name and impose order, and the comedy here is found in making this visible to us, showing us the disorganized and arbitrary nature of this instrumental reason.

The idea of naming brings to mind the theorist of comedy Henri Bergson, who proposed that we can recognize the well-known distinction between tragedy as the genre of individuality and comedy as the genre of universality. He argues that this can be shown even in the titles of plays: 'many comedies have a common noun as their title: *l'Avare*, *le Joueur*, etc. Were you asked to think of a play capable of being called *le Jaloux*, for instance, you would find that *Sganarelle* or *George Dandin* would occur to your mind, but not *Othello*: *le Jaloux* could only be the title of a comedy.'²¹ For Bergson, whilst tragedy allows you to believe in your unique individuality, comedy tells you that all you are is a type, a product of social discourse. This is sustainable, but the focus in Dickens is on how this imposition of identity has various effects. Bergson's point only applies if the subject in question is standing outside and looking in. For the subject inside the comedy and not safe

¹⁹ On Dickens and black humour see Michael Irwin, 'The Bright Side of Death: Dickens and Black Humour' in *The Dickensian*, no. 474, vol. 104 part 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 22-31.

²⁰ Joseph P. Jordan, *Dickens's Novels as Verse* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), p. 1, 113.

²¹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008), p. 15.

from its effects, the naming produces material consequences, and the subjects become consequences of their names. Oliver Twist for example, after being alphabetically named by Bumble, has the threat of 'twisting' on a rope looming over him from then on: the official gentleman in a white waistcoat proclaims 'that boy will be hung. I know that boy will be hung' (*OT*, 15). The dishing out of names is no joke at all, and comedy shows this.

This point can be illustrated by one of Dickens's finest comic characters, Daniel Quilp of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Quilp is a figure of sadism: malicious, grotesque and hateful, but also strikingly humorous. Humour and sadism are linked, and in the novel Sampson Brass remarks that Quilp 'has the richest humour [...] the most amazing vein of comicality,' and asks 'but isn't it rather *injudicious*?' (*OCS*, 462). Humour and sadism combine in Quilp, as when he hides outside the room of his parlour, eavesdropping on his wife and her friends who think he is dead, only to comically burst in and lash out, to the horror of his tormented wife (*OCS*, 373). In the novel Quilp is often described as having '*burst* into a shriek of laughter' while in the act of harming others [my emphasis] (*OCS*, 462). The emphasis is on the spontaneity of his laughter, the way that it seems to 'release' or 'liberate' his impulses. The extent to which Dickens is thinking about the implications of different forms of laughter here cannot be exaggerated; it shows us the sadistic and even 'superior' element of a seemingly liberating spontaneous laughter (see pages 28-36). As Quilp furiously attacks the figurehead of a ship because he thinks it resembles Kit:

Although this might have been a very comical thing to look at from a secure gallery, as a bull-fight is found to be a comfortable spectacle by those who are not in the arena, and a house on fire is better than a play to people who don't live near it, there was something in the earnestness of Mr Quilp's manner which made his legal adviser feel that the counting-house was a little too small, and a great deal too lonely, for the due enjoyment of these humors. (*OCS*, 463)

The 'secure gallery' is important here, as it suggests that laughter, rather than being essentially one way or another, depends entirely on context and the subject's relationship to it. The phrase 'better than a play' does something similar and chimes with another, in *Oliver Twist*, where a mother lamenting her child's death remarks, 'it's as good as play,' drawing

attention to the importance of subjective position; what is comical to one can be tragic to another (*OT*, 42). What we have here is the recognition that laughter has nothing essential defining it but is rather a structural thing completely dependent on the relationship between the subject and what it perceives. The focus in Quilp's laughter, though, is on how it appears to come from within, as if natural and released. For the subjects watching from a 'secure gallery' the scene simply shows that all you are is a product of your social discourses; Quilp and those subjected to his laughter (here his legal adviser Sampson Brass and elsewhere his wife) are constructed as subjects by these scenes and the assertion of one over the other. For those inside, though, the positions appear completely natural, like Quilp's madness.

To show how laughter creates the idea of the natural Dickens plays with the word 'humour' here, deliberately making reference to the 'humours' in the sense of Galen, who argued that the 'humours' of the body dictate human experience.²² 'Humour' is also a Ben Jonson word, in whose *Everyman in His Humour* Dickens played the part of Bobadill when he produced the play in 1845 (*Letters* 4: 15/7/1845). The link between humours and the natural can be established through Jonson's definition given in *Everyman Out of His Humour*, itself in line with Galen's humoral theory. Humours are defined as competing fluids in the body, and danger occurs 'when some particular quality / Doth so possesse a man that it doth draw / All his affects, his spirits, and his powers' in one direction (*Everyman Out* I.i. 105-8). Humours dictate behaviour and create characteristics, thereby explaining identity by the hypothesis of natural phenomena. OED retains a distinction between 'humour' and 'wit' which goes back to this 'humoural' meaning of the word; whilst 'wit' is purely intellectual, 'humour' is more physical and bodily, as if coming from within. Dickens shares something with Jonson in posing a challenge to this.²³ The characters in the Jonson play become consequences of their names; Brayne-Worme worms his way into everyone's mind and Kno'well can only act as if he knows all. Since naming is a social process, humours must be read as discursively produced, and indeed Jonson's definition allows for this, with a humour described as something which 'doth so possesse a man,' indicating a possession from the outside rather

²² For a detailed discussion of this humoral theory see E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), pp. 55-65.

²³ On Dickens and Jonson see Evelyn Simpson, 'Dickens and Jonson' in *Essays and Studies*, vol. XXIX (1943) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944), pp. 82-92.

than a part of interior identity. Kafka noticed Dickens's similarity to this in writing of 'these rude characterizations which are artificially stamped on everyone and without which Dickens would not be able to get on with his story even for a moment.'²⁴ In Dickens it is as if characters can be bound to their humours, forced to perform in accordance with them, but also made to feel as though these actions are being released, as if they are natural to the subject in question. Dickens's comedy realizes the artificiality of this and shows it to us; the idea of laughter as coming from within is artificial in the sense of being false but also political and full of artifice, imposing order and allowing Quilp to tyrannize.

When Quilp is asked why he has been so cruel, he replies, 'because I was in the humor. I am in the humor now,' so that the idea of an internal subjectivity becomes dangerous, justifying or even creating the desire to act with cruelty (OCS, 375). Whilst letters as 'arbitrary characters' were discussed above, here Quilp is an arbitrary character in the traditional sense of character (=identity.) Letters and characters together place their demands without authority, as a joke does. Quilp's act of justifying violence by internal drives, like a burst of laughing spontaneity, is shown by Dickens to reveal that spontaneity and liberation can be crucial to the way laughter operates as cruelty and not a separate type of laughter at all. In light of this we can make sense of a famous reading of Quilp given by Theodor Adorno. Adorno argues that Quilp 'bursts the structure of bourgeois emotions.'²⁵ The usual reading of this has been that Quilp blasts through the regulation of bourgeois emotions and releases or liberates drives that should be repressed according to bourgeois norms. But also, Quilp shows that the structure of internality that bourgeois logic relies upon is something cruel and violent.²⁶ It is not only that Quilp exceeds or shatters bourgeois emotions but that he copies them, repeating them, and in doing so shows up their arbitrariness as in the naming of Oliver 'Twist.'

Other elements of nineteenth century comedy demonstrated this *bringing into being of identities and structures* that laughter can be part of. This element of laughter which combines both liberation and sadistic superiority is embodied brilliantly in the puppet show

²⁴ Franz Kafka, entry of 8 October 1917 in *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, vol. 2, trans. Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p. 189

²⁵ Theodor Adorno, 'On Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*: A Lecture' in *Notes to Literature*, p. 172.

²⁶ See for example Helen Small's association of Quilp with the 'savage' as opposed to the bourgeois in 'The Bounded Life: Adorno, Dickens, and Metaphysics' in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2004), pp. 547-563 (pp. 558-9).

of Mr Punch, which Dickens considered very important (see *Life*, 1:87, 2:33). Dickens worked closely with the show and although performances greatly varied, the most widely known nineteenth century script was written by John Payne Collier and was illustrated by George Cruikshank, one of Dickens's illustrators.²⁷ George Speight has noted that performances of Punch declined in the early-nineteenth century, basing his figures on performances at Bartholomew Fair, where Dickens spent much time.²⁸ However, writing of Dickens's own interest in Punch in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Rachel Bennett suggests that this official decline resulted in increased street performances of the show.²⁹ It seems that by the middle of the nineteenth century the show had become a more middle class phenomenon; as Rosalind Crone has shown, middle- and upper-class drawing room performances of the show had tried to turn it into something of a moral tale to instruct children, and this divorced it from its working-class roots.³⁰ Though this is true, at its most radical Punch is a pre-bourgeois figure of the Italian *commedia dell' arte* recovered by a nineteenth century working-class culture to challenge bourgeois life.³¹ The show reveals the double capacity of 'laughing at' others; that it is both an assertion of superiority and a use of ideas of 'release' and liberation. An appearance of liberation is shown to be at the heart of establishing the very structures of hierarchy themselves; they are something that comes into being through laughter rather than something pre-existing that is merely reflected by laughter; laughter is the cause of hierarchy as much as it is the effect of it.

In the show, Mr Punch batters the other characters to death. The first victims are Punch's family, his baby and his wife Judy, whom he beats to death with his stick, making the family unit the initial target for an attack on bourgeois society. Punch is then visited by a number of other characters, each of whom he murders. He kills a doctor, presented as the middle class attempt to 'cure' Punch's working-class madness, a servant who wants to protect his gentlemen from the racket Punch is making, and then three figures of the police and legal

²⁷ John Payne Collier, *Punch and Judy : A Short History with the Original Dialogue* (Nineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006). See also Robert L. Patten, *George Cruikshanks Life, Times and Art vol 1* (London: The Lutterworth Press, 1992), pp. 320-22.

²⁸ George Speight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre* (London: George G. Harrap & Co, 1955) p. 175.

²⁹ Rachel Bennett, 'Punch and Christian in *The Old Curiosity Shop*' in *The Review of English Studies*, new series, vol. 22, no. 88 (November, 1971), pp. 423-434 (p. 427).

³⁰ Rosalind Crone, 'Mr and Mrs Punch in Nineteenth-Century England' in *The Historical Journal*, 49, 4 (2006), pp. 1055-82.

³¹ See also a brief discussion of Punch in Andrews, p. 157.

system, a constable, an officer and a hangman, all those who enforce the rules of the bourgeois state. Punch's final victim is the devil. When the devil appears, a first time viewer of the show must assume that Mr Punch is about to receive his comeuppance. However, Punch kills the devil, figuring him as the ultimate expression of bourgeois ideology. The devil is seen as one step up from the hangman, who is in turn one step up from the officer, who is one step up from the constable, and so on. The devil is a part of the police state, a part of the bourgeois order that restricts and controls the possibility of revolution. The word diabolical etymologically means overturning or overthrowing, when in fact the devil still ultimately enforces the rule of the state (OED). For Punch then, the devil is not diabolical enough. On the contrary, the devil takes its place in the supposed 'natural' order or hierarchy of things and affirms the identity of things in this natural order. By killing the devil, Punch destroys a structure of superiority. If such existed, the devil's victory would symbolize ultimate judgement, but instead we have merely the sadistic assertion of one over the other; structure is shown to be material, and imposed, rather than natural and reflected; there is nothing to stop Punch taking his place at the top of the hierarchy. First, he shows that the laughter of liberated desire and the laughter of cruel superiority can be one and the same. Second, he shows that new positions of hierarchy and superiority are constructed by laughter, even when that laughter might appear to be against those norms.

In further support of this point, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens makes a specific point of letting Punch have 'the last laugh' as it were. An illustration of Polichinelle, the French incarnation of Punch, drawn by famous cartoonist Honoré Daumier and printed in *Le Charivari* shows Punch about to get his comeuppance and is accompanied by the subtitle, 'Polichinelle, Polichinelle, you have cudgelled the others long enough... now it's your turn. We'll bring you to reason...' ³² In this image the order of the state is re-asserted, or there is at least a possibility of that hierarchal structure regaining order. Dickens knew Daumier well and had his work in mind regularly. ³³ In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dickens seems to

³² Honoré Daumier, 'The New Neapolitan Buffoon'. Plate 221 from *Actualités*, 1855. Held at the Art Institute Chicago.

³³ See references to Daumier in the letters (*Letters*, 8: 29n). See also my own article, 'Caricature in Paris and London: Dickens, Daumier and Grandville' in *Charles Dickens and Europe*, ed. Maxime Leroy (Newcastle:

deliberately point to the breakdown of that possibility found in Daumier. When the figure of Punch appears in the novel it is on the top of a tombstone. The passage tells us that he 'seemed to be pointing with the tip of his cap to a most flourishing epitaph, and to be chuckling over it with all his heart;' Punch has the last laugh (OCS, 130). To have a 'flourishing epitaph' implies what Derrida calls 'living on,' since to flourish means to flower or blossom. We find, predictably, a Punchian resonance at the death of Quilp, a figure much indebted to Punch, when we read that his 'hair, stirred by the damp breeze, played in a kind of mockery of death—such a mockery as the dead man himself would have delighted in' (OCS, 512). The spirit of Punch and Quilp cannot be destroyed. In Dickens the spirit of Punch and Quilp continues because they are figures who establish new order and there is nothing to guarantee the return of older or fixed structures.

Punch can be linked to caricature. In his essay 'On the Essence of Laughter', nineteenth century theorist of caricature Charles Baudelaire writes that it is not difficult to 'find a certain unconscious pride at the core of the laughter's thought.'³⁴ But in the category of the grotesque, which Baudelaire also calls 'the absolute comic', he sees another potential in laughter. Whilst for Baudelaire 'the comic is an imitation,' 'the grotesque' or 'absolute comic' is 'a creation.' This absolute comic, writes Baudelaire, 'comes much closer to nature [and] emerges as a unity which calls for the intuition to grasp it.'³⁵ Dickens shares something with his contemporary here in that he sees a comedy in caricature, associated with the grotesque, as not 'imitating' something which already exists (as if it were realism) but instead as 'creating' something just as 'nature' does; something which appears to be 'natural' and pre-existing. Whilst Baudelaire keeps the two laughs separate, as those later proponents of 'type' theory have, Dickens, as in the discussion of the doubleness of nationalist jokes, sees them as inseparable.

Dickens and caricature is a familiar topic, since his work has been associated with caricature from the time of his writing onwards. By the early 1840s Dickens had developed what one

Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013), pp. 168-182. On Daumier as an influence on Phiz see J. R. Harvey, *Victorian Novelists and their Illustrators* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1970), pp. 131-134.

³⁴ Charles Baudelaire, 'On the Essence of Laughter', p. 152.

³⁵ Charles Baudelaire, 'On the Essence of Laughter', p. 157.

critic described as 'a reputation for a kind of moral caricature.'³⁶ Later Henry James criticized Dickens's caricature, accusing him of assigning sentiment to 'a troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and precocious children.'³⁷ On the other hand Virginia Woolf called Dickens the most wonderful of all caricaturists.³⁸ G.K. Chesterton wrote that 'the essence of the Dickens genius was exaggeration'.³⁹ As the title demonstrates, from the earliest work in *Sketches by Boz* Dickens was thinking of writing as related to images or 'sketches,' and *Pickwick Papers*, his first full-length novel, was originally conceived as a narrative to accompany illustrations; those of Robert Seymour, who had drawn a series of sketches about a cockney 'NIMROD Club' which were to be published by Chapman and Hall.⁴⁰ Dickens took over the project following Seymour's death, increasing the amount of narrative but maintaining central caricatural images by employing Hablot Browne to produce the illustrations that Seymour had not been able to complete. As such Dickens's name is lent to the start of a new tradition of writing which connects images and words, associating him with caricature from the early stages of the genre's popularity in the nineteenth century.⁴¹ Speaking of the caricature of the period in general David Kunzle characterizes it as a 'hodgepodge of inchoate miscellanies and whimsical ephemera' which actually left the caricaturist 'free to say anything – or nothing in particular.'⁴² The suggestion is of caricature as a triviality, which has been a commonly held conception since the eighteenth century. Brian Maidment's recent book *Comedy, caricature and the social order* has re-opened discussion of caricature between 1820 and 1840. Maidment's book acknowledges how connections to Dickens seem to be behind the subsequent attention given to caricaturists of the period, such

³⁶ John Wilson Croker, from a review for *Quarterly Review* in 1843, reprinted in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 137.

³⁷ Henry James, from a review for *The Nation* in 1865, reprinted in *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 469-473.

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past' in *Moments of Being and Other Autobiographical Writings*, ed. J. Schuilkind (London: Grafton Books, 1989).

³⁹ G.K. Chesterton, *Chesterton on Dickens*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ See the introduction to *Pickwick Papers*, ed. Mark Wormald (Penguin: London, 1999) p. xi-xii.

⁴¹ Discussions of Dickens and caricature have largely made their focus this relationship between illustration and text, and significant work on the relationship between Dickens and his illustrators has been done. See Q. D. Leavis, 'The Dickens Illustrations: Their Function' in F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 429-479; Michael Steig, *Dickens and Phiz* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978); Jane R. Cohen, *Charles Dickens and His Original Illustrators* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1980); Robert Patten, *George Cruikshank's Life, Times and Art, II vols.* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1992); Frank Palmeri, 'Cruikshank, Thackeray, and the Victorian Eclipse of Satire' in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 753-777; Sambudha Sen, 'Hogarth, Egan, Dickens, and the Making of an Urban Aesthetic' in *Representations*, vol. 103, no. 1 (Summer, 2008) pp. 84-106. On the illustrations to *The Old Curiosity Shop* see Joan Stevens, '"Woodcuts Dropped into the Text": The Illustrations in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*' in *Studies in Bibliography*, vol. 20 (1967), pp. 113-134.

⁴² David Kunzle, *The History of the Comic Strip – The Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 20.

as Cruikshank, Phiz, Robert Seymour and Thomas Hood.⁴³ Maidment is interested in more neglected caricaturists, but his comments nonetheless testify to the close connection between Dickens and the caricature of the period, and his project of acknowledging the complexity of nineteenth century caricature is shared by the argument here. Far from seeing it as a triviality, Dickens treats caricature as a radical form which has the capacity to challenge normative representational attitudes of the period.

Other writers of the nineteenth century, such as Thackeray, accepted the label of caricaturist and described their own work as caricatural.⁴⁴ In 1831, for example, Thackeray wrote to G. H. Lewes, stating that he had 'delighted in making caricatures' from an early stage of his life.⁴⁵ Dickens, like Thackeray, was interested in the form of caricature as a mode of illustration, both for his own novels and otherwise, and he was also interested in caricature as a way of describing literature. However, where Thackeray accepts the term, Dickens seems much less comfortable with it.⁴⁶ Forster writes of Dickens's 'nervous dread of caricature' in relation to the illustrations for *Dombey & Son* (*Life*, 1.19). In a review written for *The Examiner*, Dickens describes John Leech's drawings as caricatural, but he includes the disclaimer that he uses that word 'for want of a better.'⁴⁷ It is likely that Dickens often spoke of a difficulty with the term, since Forster also remarks of himself that he uses 'that word [caricature], as [Dickens] did, only for want of a better' (*Life*, 2:33). Dickens wanted to make use of caricature, and of the term, but he perhaps felt that what it generally conveyed did not match what he wanted to use it to say.

Describing Dickens in 1849, reviewer Edwin Whipples writes, 'such caricature as this is to character what epigram is to fact – a mode of conveying truth more distinctly by suggesting

⁴³ Brian Maidment, *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order, 1820-50* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 17-8.

⁴⁴ See, for example, a letter of 18 January 1831 in *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray* vol. 1. ed. Gordon N. Ray (New York: Octagon Books, 1980), p. 141.

⁴⁵ Thackeray quoted in G.H. Lewes, *Life of Goethe* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1864), pp. 554-5.

⁴⁶ See also my own article on Dickens and caricature, 'Caricature in Dickens and Thackeray' in *Comedy Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2012), pp. 75-82.

⁴⁷ Charles Dickens, 'Review: *The Rising Generation, a series of twelve Drawings on Stone by John Leech*' for *The Examiner*, reprinted in *The Amusements of the People and Other Papers: Reports, Essays and Reviews 1834-51*, ed. Michael Slater (London: Dent, 1996), pp. 142-7 (p. 144).

it through a brilliant exaggeration.’⁴⁸ Dickens may have shared this sense of what was meant by caricature with his contemporaries, that it was a form of art based upon the exaggeration of characteristics present in reality, allowing reality to be seen as something exterior to representation and in that sense aligning it with the realism to which I am opposing it here. Indeed, realist writers of the nineteenth century also noticed Dickens’s difference to their own projects. George Eliot felt that Dickens failed in an attempt to write realism, commenting that he could not portray ‘psychological character’ and ‘emotions’ with as much accuracy as ‘idioms and manners.’⁴⁹ Dickens’s emphasis was always on the outside rather than the inside. G.H. Lewes similarly criticised Dickens, remarking that ‘thought is strangely absent from his works.’ By thought Lewes is thinking in terms of representation, criticising Dickens for not making insightful remarks ‘on life and character,’ so that life and character pre-exist and literature is charged with the task of representing them.⁵⁰ These criticisms imply that Dickens was not *realistic*, while Dickens himself, in the preface to *The Old Curiosity Shop*, speaks of the grotesque in relation to questions of realism, commenting that the novel is ‘grotesque and wild but not impossible’ (Preface to OCS, 8). Dickens’s caricature marks a point at which Dickens’s writing departs from other more representational writing of the nineteenth century; whilst many nineteenth century writers might have been happy with the idea of their caricature as a form that played with but affirmed the concrete existence of the identities they were writing, Dickens was not. His work is not *unrealistic* but against realism, since his texts are formational of reality as well as reflective of it.

Psychoanalyst Ernst Kris remarks that ‘where caricature is concerned, the belief [that the image is identical to what it represents] no longer holds good in consciousness or in the preconscious,’ meaning that the failure of representation to denote reality is revealed and the natural harmony of appearance is destroyed.⁵¹ For Kris, in wit, the matter is known but the manner is secret, whereas caricature reverses this so that the manner is known but the

⁴⁸ Edwin P. Whipples, from ‘Novels and Novelists: Charles Dickens’ in *North American Review* (October 1849), ixix, pp. 383-407.

⁴⁹ George Eliot, ‘The Natural History of German Life’ in Collins (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, p. 343.

⁵⁰ G.H. Lewes, a review of Forster’s *Life* in Collins (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, p. 576.

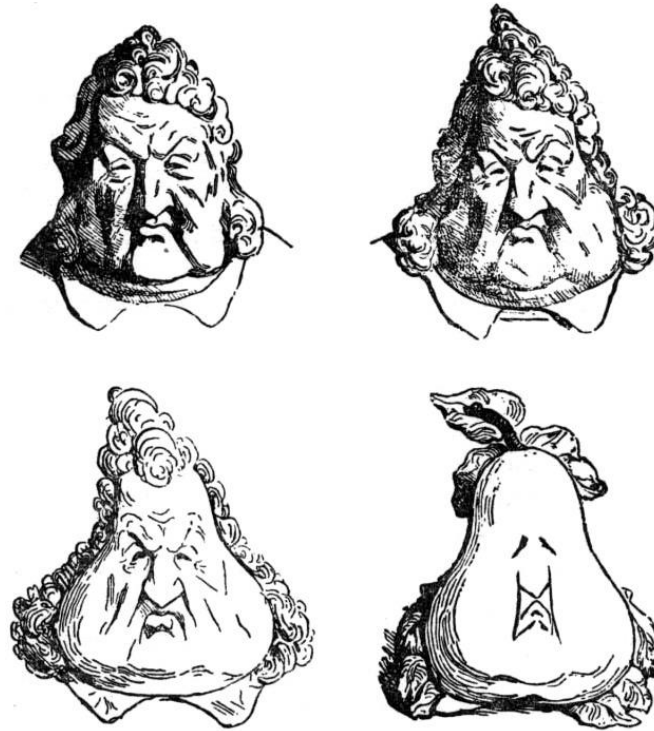
⁵¹ Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1953), p. 183.

matter is secret.⁵² Caricature privileges the form, and hides the content; it challenges a structure of representation which sees the content as pre-existing and representation as the form which subsequently represents this content. Caricature, then, brings forward the question of laughing directly at something, as if it existed previously, and at the same time reveals its own part in the construction of that which it laughs at. It is, like a joke about nationality, double; since caricature implicates itself in producing an identity but therefore also shows that identity is unstable and shown to lack any permanent anchorage. As such identity comes into representation in a moment of anxiety. Laughing 'at' the caricature is unsettling because of what it shows us about identity: it suggests that the laughing subject is characterized by the same anxiety as the target of the laughter; the laughter of caricature asserts one over the other, but in showing that there is nothing secure behind this assertion, it unsettles the idea of identity existing prior to its representation. Adorno, in *Aesthetic Theory*, also addresses the complex relationship between caricature and content. He writes that 'artworks are like picture puzzles in that what they hide – like Poe's letter – is visible and is, by being visible, hidden. [...] they are hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost, a loss that plays into their content.'⁵³ Here art creates something as hidden in being presented as visible, thus developing the suggestion in Freud. This 'hidden' thing might be thought of in terms of the original, but that original 'code has been lost' so that we are faced only with hieroglyphs, referring backwards to something we have lost, something indecipherable. It is important here that Adorno is speaking of all artwork, of representation as such. The argument here is that whilst all representation functions in this way, it is caricature that forces the viewer to see this truth about representation. Caricature, then, can be a kind of meta-representation; it adopts other structures but shows them for what they are. This revelation of the way representation creates the world around it is comic.

This is something that is raised in nineteenth century traditions of caricature. In Daumier one can see this process very clearly.

⁵² Kris, p 176.

⁵³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p. 121, 124.



Louis Philippe's face continually signifies something other; it is not that the face simply looks like a pear, since without the middle two images the connection would be tenuous. Rather, its signification of otherness is a continuous process; one image signifies another, which signifies another, *ad infinitum*. The pear with which we end here bears little relation to the face with which we begin, so that caricature is not a process of embellishing an original but of effacing the concept of an original human prior to its representation. Furthermore, the pears became a regular feature of the caricatures in Charles Phillipon's publications; indeed Phillipon had drawn them before Daumier, so that they also take on an afterlife, disassociated from their own original. Needless to say, any subsequent look at the head of Louis Philippe after we have seen this caricature will imply a pear, meaning that the original is now completely lost. The later pear changes the person and then it makes the person what it now has always been, so that future changes the present rather than being a continuation of it. The first image of Louis Phillippe in this drawing is already a caricature. Caricature is not an art form that turns reality or the original into caricature, but one that shows that reality is caricatural, always eventually transforming originals into new things.

In a wonderful exchange in *The Old Curiosity Shop* Mrs Jarley comments in favour of the

realism and representation of the wax-works over the caricatural Punch:

'Never go into the company of a filthy Punch any more,' said Mrs Jarley, 'after this.'

'I never saw any wax-work, ma'am,' said Nell. 'Is it funnier than Punch?'

'Funnier!' said Mrs Jarley in a shrill voice. 'It is not funny at all.'

'Oh!' said Nell, with all possible humility.

'It isn't funny at all,' repeated Mrs Jarley. 'It's calm and — what's that word again — critical? — no — classical, that's it — it's calm and classical. No low beatings and knockings about, no jokings and squeakings like your precious Punches, but always the same, with a constantly unchanging air of coldness and gentility; and so like life, that if wax-work only spoke and walked about, you'd hardly know the difference. I won't go so far as to say, that, as it is, I've seen wax-work quite like life, but I've certainly seen some life that was exactly like wax-work.' (OCS, 208)

The wax-work is 'true to life,' it represents realism and the idea of art as that which renders life accurately, though it never quite succeeds; it is not 'quite like life.' Mrs Jarley terms it the 'classical,' the stable and 'constantly unchanging' form of representation on the side of 'gentility' and against the 'low' art of Punch; it is that which sees art as a replica of an original. Mrs Jarley's slippage between classical and critical makes the classical a mode that stands outside and looks in, maintaining a belief in art as reflection, as something which comments *on* life, making it a criticism of G. H. Lewes's criticism of Dickens. As such the wax-works are opposed to Punch, which shows the constantly changing form of the grotesque and caricatural where the original itself is changing, the space in which Mrs Jarley locates humour. But Mrs Jarley notices a strangeness too, that whilst the wax-work cannot recreate life perfectly, life can be perfectly wax-work, perfectly realist. Writing of the nineteenth century wax-work in his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin quotes Mrs Jarley: 'in *The Old*

Curiosity Shop Dickens speaks of the “unchanging air of coldness and gentility” about the waxwork.⁵⁴ Elsewhere on the wax-work, Benjamin writes that:

The figure of wax is properly the setting wherein the appearance of humanity outdoes itself. In the wax figure, that is, the surface area, complexion, and coloration of the human being are all rendered with such perfect and unsurpassable exactitude that this reproduction of human appearance itself is outdone, and now the mannequin incarnates nothing but the hideous, cunning mediation between costume and viscera.⁵⁵

Benjamin draws attention to the smooth front of realism, at epitomized by the wax figure. Complexion and coloration are made perfect, so that the human appears idealized, with an absolute absence of the ‘abject,’ to borrow a term from Julia Kristeva to mean the attempted throwing off of the other as that which disturbs the concept of ideal identity.⁵⁶ The wax-work is not ‘quite like life,’ to use Mrs Jarley’s terms, because it is life perfected, so that it ‘outdoes itself,’ employing a ‘cunning mediation’ between inside and outside, between ‘costume and viscera.’ The wax-work instils an idea of internality by stressing a division between original and appearance, and by appearing as the image without content it re-inscribes a difference between the reproduction or representation and reality, cunningly establishing an idea of the original whilst appearing to fail in its representation of it. The wax-work lacks viscera: it has no internal organs, as Punch does not, as we read in the novel when Codlin curses ‘the hollow things of earth (but Punch especially)’ (OCS, 130). What is involved here is absent internality produced by realism but shown to us by caricature. To return to the analogy between this and nationalist jokes; the nationalist statement is like realism; it asserts the pre-existence of something it laughs ‘at’. On the other hand caricature in Dickens contains the doubleness found in jokes about nationality: it both produces something which it refers to and shows that production for what it is. Caricature undermines the idea that its subject pre-exists representation and instead shows how representation is a continual process of forming and changing the represented ‘original.’

⁵⁴ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 532.

⁵⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 409.

⁵⁶ Jeannie B. Thomas has discussed laughter in terms of abjection in *Featherless Chicken, Laughing Women and Serious Stories* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1997), p. 59.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Sampson Brass articulates this idea that comedy involves seeing that there is no original subject to destroy:

'A man,' says Sampson, 'who loses forty-seven pound ten in one morning by his honesty, is a man to be envied. If it had been eighty pound, the luxuriousness of feeling would have been increased. Every pound lost, would have been a hundredweight of happiness gained. The still small voice, Christopher,' cries Brass, smiling, and tapping himself on the bosom, 'is a-singing comic songs within me, and all is happiness and joy!' (OCS, 428)

The 'still small voice' [I. Kings 20.12] which sings comic songs 'within' Brass may be that of Punch or the devil rather than of God as it is in Kings. Certainly it is that of the comic character of invulnerability. The contrast of registers here is significant, as Bakhtin would note, and shows something of what has happened to carnival in the nineteenth century. Here the carnival is interruption and the event at the same time. The characters laugh, not because they 'avoid deformity or misfortune,' as is the case in 'superiority theory' but precisely because they have not avoided misfortune, and yet have survived. The comic figure is thus invulnerable to tragic defeat. In an article for *Household Words* entitled 'A Curious Dance' Dickens stresses the invulnerability of Punch, commenting that his world is one in which 'workmen may fall from the top of a house to the bottom, or even from the bottom of the house to the top, and sustain no injury to the brain, need no hospital.' For Dickens the fact that Punch is 'so superior to all the accidents of life, though encountering them at every turn' holds the key to the comedy. Dickens writes; 'I suspect this to be the secret (though many persons may not present it to themselves) of the general enjoyment which [is found] in this class of entertainment' (HW, 17/1/1852). In a letter of November 6 Dickens reiterates this sense that the heart of the comedy is 'secret,' commenting 'it is possible, I think, that one secret source of pleasure very generally derived from this performance is the satisfaction the spectator feels in the circumstances that likenesses of men and women can be so knocked about without any pain or suffering' (*Letters* 5: 640). These two commentaries on Punch provide a key to Dickens's comedy, and each reference to

Punch in Dickens seems to come back to this invulnerability; Dombey comments, for instance, 'Mr Punch, that model of connubial bliss' (*DS*, 486). Punch does not avoid pain and sorrow, he continually encounters it, but it does not affect him; he continues nevertheless. The spirit of comedy, as the theoretical section discussed in relation to Lacan, involves recognising that the subject is nothing beyond its representation, so it cannot be taken down in the way the subject of traditional caricature can be. Whilst Louis Phillipe may believe he has an original identity to destroy, Sampson Brass does not.

The novel's other main comic character, Dick Swiveller, in many ways different to Quilp, shares a Punchian characteristic of being like 'a clown in a pantomime' (*OCS*, 260).

Swiveller 'whistles cheerfully,' another Punchian trait. In Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* an interviewed Punchman comments that 'the great difficulty in performing Punch consists in the speaking, which is done by a call or whistle, in the mouth.' Such 'calls' are frequent in the John Payne Collier script of Punch, so Dickens knew of this characteristic well.⁵⁷ Swiveller also draws caricatures, the only character in Dickens to do so (unless one counts Miss La Creevy accidentally doing so), associating him with the genre (*OCS*, 260). And Swiveller's laughter embodies the spirit of laughter as success. Faced with a comical disappointment in marriage he says: 'it was ever thus—from childhood's hour I've seen my fondest hopes decay.' 'Overpowered by these reflections' he bursts into a laughter: 'ha ha ha!' As with Punch, laughter comes in the moment of misfortune, not in avoiding it. This laugh is commented on:

Mr Swiveller did not wind up with a cheerful hilarious laugh, which would have been undoubtedly at variance with his solemn reflections, but that, being in a theatrical mood, he merely achieved that performance which is designated in melodramas 'laughing like a fiend,'—for it seems that your fiends always laugh in syllables, and always in three syllables, never more nor less, which is a remarkable property in such gentry, and one worthy of remembrance. (*OCS*, 420)

If laughter is diabolical and 'like a fiend' then laughing in threes may be a mockery of the trinity. Swiveller's laugh is performance-like but also real, arising in and from his own failure. Yet, it does not involve tragedy for Swiveller, who revels in his own misfortune.

⁵⁷ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol 3 (London: W. Clowes & Sons, nd), p. 45.

Rather, in the way discussed earlier, it seems to set up another position from which the laugh comes, asserting a self-assured identity somehow in on what is going on. Identity here is continually changing, always involving the production of new positions and leaving old positions behind. Swiveller starts the novel as one person and finishes it as another, literally 'swivelling,' which is the essence of the comedy found here.

These discussions have linked caricature, Punch and naming as three forms of interruption that are all also comic. They interrupt the narrative unity which appears to exist before their arrival, suddenly transforming the world they appear in. Punch, for instance, is not part of *The Old Curiosity Shop's* 'future,' if what is meant by future is a logical and foreseeable continuation of the present. Rather, he enters the text *eventually*, disrupting and changing the present itself. Caricature in the nineteenth century and in Dickens likewise shows itself as a form that can interrupt and eventually construct the subject that it acts upon. Naming may be said to play this role in comedy as well, if one accepts that naming is used in comedy to embody the idea of social discourses; in Dickens we see that names, rather than representing subjects, impose identities and force subjects to live up to their names. The subject does not come before the name but is transformed by it, becoming the thing that was named by it. The event denies linear narrative, showing that the future interrupts and transforms the past, as this chapter began by noting. All of these show that there is no original to be represented but only a continual modification of everything that has gone before. When events are funny they are involved in showing us how the event works to change the world around it.

Laughter is an event that produces a new subject position and it can appear that there is a natural place from which the laugh is issued. However, it also shows us this trick being played and bringing an idea of identity into being. This will take us into Chapter Five, the first of three chapters on single Dickens novels. The subject of the chapter is nineteenth century clowning, which Dickens shows us, does just this.

Chapter Five: *Pickwick Papers* and Natural Laughter

'Imitation of laughter and (the devil's) original laughter are both called by the same name'

Milan Kundera¹

As the first half of this thesis discussed in detail, theories of comedy have tended to privilege a 'radical' laughter over one that is perceived to be controlling its subjects in the name of bourgeois discourse. This chapter interrogates this putative distinction between the two, arguing that in Dickens's first full length novel *The Pickwick Papers*, the radicalism of laughter is found not in its ability to destroy ideology or to liberate the subject from it but in how it shows ideology coming into being. In *Pickwick Papers* Dickens shows us one aspect of what has been discussed above; that laughter works to *naturalize*, creating the origins and subject positions to which laughter appears to be an effect or a response. These subject positions are particularly nineteenth century ones. The novel shows how laughter plays a role in establishing nineteenth century ideas of progress and of 'natural' and 'civilized' man.

With this in mind, the chapter will look at several 'types' of character found in the novel, all of whom are thought of as being 'natural' or as having some connection to the natural world. It will first look at the figures of the clown and the fool, and then at the role of children and animals, arguing that these figures are linked on account of their relationship to the natural. All of these figures are closely associated with laughter, and each in their own way interrogates the assumptions surrounding the relationship between laughter and nature. Ultimately the chapter argues that *Pickwick Papers* demonstrates an increasing regulation of laughter taking place in the nineteenth century. There is tightening up of laughter happening here which may be connected to a regulatory power which exercised increasing control over 'carnival' aspects of society after the 1832 Reform Bill with its desire

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Alan Asher (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 87.

to control the nascent working class.² The Reform Bill shows the division between middle class ideology and the working class and the top-down middle class imposition of values. This bill dampened a moment that E.P. Thompson called 'within an ace of a revolution' from the working class and led to an increased stress on rational amusements and local government control which, I argue, was accompanied by an increased control over laughter. It has long been considered that the effects of the 1832 reform bill were seismic in shifting concentration onto the bourgeois and away from the aristocracy and this chapter looks at this in light of its effects on practices of laughter.³ Despite this domination over laughter on the part of middle class ideology, there is also resistance to this from a new working class humour that realizes that it is the victim of middle class ideology. The text shows a double truth about comedy in nineteenth century culture: that it was at once increasingly invested in figures who appear natural and ungoverned, and that at the same time it increasingly exercised control and governance over those figures, determining and controlling what is thought of as 'natural.' In this chapter I shall argue that Jingle is an example of this and is a manipulative figure of bourgeois laughter, and that Weller is an opposite example of a figure whose jokes win success out of his working class status and against this middle class attempt to contain and control laughter.

Pickwick Papers is often thought of as comic, and even as defining a particular type or intensity of comedy found in the nineteenth century. Michael North, for instance, writes that 'Victorian novels are full of famous comic turns, but it is hard to think of a novel after *Pickwick Papers* in which the comedy is not significantly diluted by uplift or sentiment.'⁴ The novel launched Dickens's writing career, and its success was owed principally to its comedy. Some details of the production of the novel have been discussed above in relation to caricature, and it is worth repeating that the idea for the novel came from a series of comic plates; it was always intended to be a principally comic text. The reception that the novel received mirrors this; Dickens quickly became a popular writer celebrated for his comedy, so much so that later novels were often criticised as lacking in the comic talent of the first. The

² E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 898.

³ The whole of Raymond Williams's work is dedicated to this 'long revolution' and the social effects of this reform. See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), and *The Long Revolution* (Swansea: Parthian Books, 2011).

⁴ North, Michael. *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 6.

publishers Chapman and Hall raised the print run from 1000 to 40000 in the course of serialization and its reputation as comedy really boosted sales and discussions of Dickens as a comic genius. The first word associated with *Pickwick Papers* was comedy.

Alongside comedy, the main idea to be associated with the text is that of the city. Written between April and November 1837, much has been made of the circumstances of the novel's publication, and its status as a novel that was intended to illustrate 'manners and life in the country' but which became a novel about the 'specimen of London life' (*Letters* 1: 154).⁵ The text is very much a London text, as Jeremy Tambling has established at length, and although he does not develop an argument about the novel's comedy, he suggests that the novel's main characters, suffer from a kind of 'comic madness' that may be related to the city.⁶ Readers compared *Pickwick Papers* to Hogarth for its treatment of city life, but also made comments that suggested a comic dimension. Mary Russell Mitford wrote that Dickens 'greatly resembles' Hogarth, but that 'he takes a much more cheerful view' and that *Pickwick Papers* 'is as complete and perfect as any bit of comic writing in the English language.'⁷ This 'more cheerful view' implies less ferocity or even more censorship in the comedy. In this chapter I follow this connection between comedy and London and argue that the novel should be read as a kind of nineteenth century 'city-comedy.'

Evelyn Simpson has argued that Dickens shares much with the city-comedy of Ben Jonson, and more is made of this connection in the final chapter of the thesis.⁸ Absolutely grounded within the city of London and its modernity, *Pickwick Papers* strangely turns to figures who may be thought of as existing outside the city limits. Michael Hollington has made much of the fact that the circus in *Hard Times* is situated outside of the new industrial centre of Coketown. In *Pickwick Papers* it is similarly the case that, perhaps with the exception of Sam Weller, those characters in which humour is invested (children, clowns, fools and animals), all seem to elude the modern city and its effects in various ways. Thus, if the novel is to be thought of as a city-comedy then it is one that locates comedy not necessarily in and of the city but in the relationship between the city and its outside world, or perhaps in the

⁵ See the introduction by Robert Patten in the old Penguin edition of 1971: Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. Robert Patten (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 13.

⁶ Jeremy Tambling, *Going Astray: Dickens and London* (London: Pearson Longman, 2009), pp. 45-50.

⁷ Collins (ed.), *The Critical Heritage*, p. 36.

⁸ Evelyn Simpson, 'Dickens and Jonson' in *Essays and Studies*, vol. XXIX (1943) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944), pp. 82-92.

relationship between regulation and escaping that regulation; laughter is associated not only with the city but with how the city invests in a particular set of characters who are imagined to escape its effects. Far from seeing laughter as a liberating force in an increasingly regulatory state, Dickens shows how the nineteenth century city has an increasing tendency to invest in only apparently liberated and 'free' figures; and how it is the regulation of this seemingly liberated space that constitutes the control that can be exercised over its subjects. Dickens's fiction, in its turn to the city, evinces a need for its natural others, showing that the city constructs its identity through these 'natural' figures it invests in. Against these regulated figures, Weller offers a modern comedy that resists these constraints.

On top of this, *Pickwick Papers* has a reputation for being Dickens's most spontaneous novel. Mildred Newcombe has written for example that 'the novel can be accurately accounted for as the spontaneous creation of a young genius yet learning to control his craft.'⁹ As we shall see in what follows, the argument shares something with the more famous discussion of the language of the novel by Steven Marcus. What is argued here is that *Pickwick Papers* is better characterized as being *about* spontaneity; it takes ideas of spontaneity, and in particular its relationship to laughter, and offers a very complex questioning of the association between comedy and spontaneity. In *Pickwick Papers* laughter can either serve reaction or revolution, but it demonstrates that 'spontaneous' laughter is never free.

Clowns and Fools

The question of whether there are types of laughter or differences in the effects of laughter is raised in the role of clowns and fools in Dickens. Michael Hollington has done the major work on Dickens and clowning, and has argued that the popularity of the circus in modern times, even after the First World War, in fact owes a lot of debt to Dickens because he was the first to put forward the idea of the circus 'as a utopian alternative to modernity.'¹⁰ Hollington observes that 'the circus is a means of travelling back in time to childhood and

⁹ Mildred Newcombe, *The Imagined World of Charles Dickens* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1993) p. 230. For an alternative view quite different to the one put forward here see Garrett Stewart, *Dickens and the Trials of Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: University of Harvard Press, 1974).

¹⁰ Hollington, 'Dickens and the Circus of Modernity,' p. 134.

beyond;' the increased regulation of the city leads to an imaginary investment in its figures. This connects the clown to childhood, suggesting a laughter which is 'natural' and unlearned. Writing in the piece 'Mr Barlow' in *All The Year Round* in 1869 Dickens describes his first experience of attending a pantomime as a child.¹¹ The story surrounds the detestable Mr Barlow, who 'never made or took a joke.' Speaking of reading a sixpenny jest book, Dickens writes, 'I could not choose but ask myself in a whisper when tickled by a printed jest, 'What would *he* think of it? What would *he* see in it? The point of the jest immediately became a sting, and stung my conscience.' Dickens feared even at the youngest age that there was another response to comedy than his, that it was not only enjoyed 'innocently' but that it had the capacity to do something in the service of Mr Barlow too. Of the pantomime itself Dickens writes:

In the Clown I perceived two persons; one, a fascinating unaccountable creature of hectic complexion, joyous in spirits though feeble in intellect with flashes of brilliancy: the other, a pupil for Mr Barlow. I thought how Mr Barlow would secretly rise early in the morning, and butter the pavement for him, and, when he had brought him down, would look severely out of his study window, and ask him how he enjoyed the fun. (AYR, 16/1/1869)

Here two forms of laughter are present, not in two different moments or 'types' of comedy but in the same event. The divide problematizes a distinction between 'innocent' spontaneous laughter and a calculated and learned laughter. Mr Barlow is framed as a teacher, looking out of his 'study window' and thinking of the clown as 'his pupil'; his laughter is calculated, self-affirming, and ideological. On the other hand the spontaneous outburst of laughter that is 'hectic and unaccountable' comes first; it is imagined as the child's primary response, just as Dickens's seemingly innocent response to the jest book came first, and was followed by an anxiety that Mr Barlow would see something else in it. Laura Peters, in her recent book *Dickens and Race*, notes that this treatment of Mr Barlow is a familiar theme in Dickens: 'the strangling of childhood fancy by repressive teaching

¹¹ As Michael Slater notices, Dickens had a specific interest in how one read things as a child and writes in a letter to Forster of 'recalling how one read [...] as a child' and how one 'gradually grew into a different knowledge of them' (*Letters*, 5:158). See Slater's comments, *Journalism*, 3:372.

practices or repressive adult rationality.’¹² This would make Barlow like Gradgrind of *Hard Times*, a Benthamite teacher who rejects imagination in place of rationality. This connects the discussion of clowning with a very common position about Dickens’s wider work; the idea that he celebrated ‘fancy’ and imagination over the increasing emphasis on rationality in the nineteenth century. The reading probably dates from the humanism of F. R. Leavis’s reading of *Hard Times* as a novel in which the humanity of the circus-influenced figures such as Sissy Jupe is a resistance of the rules and impositions of Benthamite and utilitarian culture.¹³ Yet, there is a little more here in the quotation from Mr Barlow which complicates Peters’s reading: it is not only that adult rationality destroys childhood freedom but that childhood ‘freedom’ may contain more adult rationality than was first supposed. Dickens recalled that even as a child he had an ‘intense anxiety’ about what clowns did outside of pantomime time.¹⁴ The problem is not that this clowning culture is being squeezed out by rational urban developments, but that this newly created space of the ‘free’ clown, perhaps created in response to the regulatory city, is in fact not as ‘free’ as it first appears. Dickens knew that seeing the clown off stage would reveal its non-spontaneity, that it would show spontaneity to be something itself learned, controlled and performed.

The idea that there is learnedness within spontaneity might be thought of as something of a development of an idea central to Freud’s theory of laughter. As discussed earlier, Freud writes that in the joke we return to ‘primary possibilities of enjoyment’ which have been lost to us in the development of ‘civilization and education.’ Freud writes that ‘when we laugh at a refined obscene joke, we are laughing at the same thing which causes a peasant to laugh at a coarse piece of smut.’ For Freud, ‘in both cases the pleasure springs from the same source’ (SE 8:101). The point is that the joke returns us to primary forms of enjoyment, releasing us from the developments and restrictions that civilization has imposed. In Dickens the sense that in both cases the pleasure springs from the same source is retained, linking two ‘types’ of laughter, but the question is reversed. Rather than seemingly complex jokes being structurally the same as a peasant’s coarse piece of smut, as if the underlying but hidden smut is the base of all jokes, Dickens puts the question this way; do I not need to worry that

¹² Laura Peters, *Dickens and Race*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 126-7.

¹³ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (New York: George W. Stewart, 1950), pp. 227-248.

¹⁴ See Matthew Bevis, ‘Dickens by the Clock’ in *Dickens’s Style*, ed. Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 46-72 (p. 62).

my seemingly innocent spontaneous response is in fact related to what I can see is a more developed, calculated and ideological laughter, a more problematic laughter? It is not that civilized jokes contain uncivilization at their heart, but that 'uncivilized' laughter contains civilization and is therefore never free and innocent.

Margaret Oliphant commented that 'the atmosphere of *Pickwick* is more like that of a pantomime than any other region.'¹⁵ Pantomime involves traditions with European lineages, from the Italian *Commedia dell' Arte*, which Dickens thought about in detail when he visited Italy (*PI*, 51), through to the puppetry and street performance of the nineteenth century that Dickens knew well and commented on in his novels, journalism and letters.¹⁶ He often wrote on the subject in his novels and journalism, and in 1838 he edited and in large parts re-wrote the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, the autobiography of a famous clown of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.¹⁷ Dickens's relationship to all this has been discussed by Paul Schlicke, Michael Hollington and Natalie McKnight.¹⁸ John Bowen comments on Dickens's use of pantomime, a subject only discussed in detail by Edwin Eigner.¹⁹ These discussions have seen the role of the clown or fool as liberated.²⁰ For example, Natalie McKnight embodies this when she writes that 'the idiot and the fool are the absolute antithesis of the Victorian work ethic and strict norms of behaviour.' By celebrating the idiot, McKnight argues, Dickens criticizes these standards.²¹ The reading of *Pickwick Papers* given here shows how the novel has a different interest, focussing not on celebrating freedom against oppression but on interrogating these appearances and

¹⁵ Margaret Oliphant, review in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1871, reprinted in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 561.

¹⁶ For the influence of popular Victorian theatre on Dickens's writing see William F. Axton, *Circle of Fire: Dickens' Vision and Style and the Popular Victorian Theatre* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1966). For a history of the *Commedia dell' Arte* see Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell' Arte: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

¹⁷ See the recent biography of Grimaldi, Andrew McConnell Stott, *The Pantomime Life of Joseph Grimaldi* (London: Canongate, 2010) and also Richard Findlater, *Joe Grimaldi: His Life and Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). See also some comments on the link between Grimaldi and Cavaletto of *Little Dorrit* in David Parker, 'Dickens and the Italian Diaspora' in *Dickens and Italy: Little Dorrit and Pictures from Italy*, eds. Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), pp.218-227 (p. 223-4).

¹⁸ Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 2003); Natalie McKnight, pp. 35-47.

¹⁹ John Bowen, *Other Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 198-200. See also Edwin Eigner, *The Dickens Pantomime* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

²⁰ On this history of clowns and fools see Enid Wellsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Doubleday, 1961).

²¹ Natalie McKnight, p. 38.

constructions of freedom, showing how 'freedom' itself is regulated and part of state repression.

A related position has been to see Dickens's view of the circus in terms of nostalgia. Reviewer Robert Browning made this comment about the representation of the circus in *Sketches by Boz*, linking it with the 'joy' and 'freedom' of childhood.²² More recent work has opposed the circus to the city. For Hollington, 'the circus is less an image of a lost past than a dislocated realm of 'culture' surviving on the edges of society.'²³ All these readings make the circus a space of liberation. The novel itself anticipates this reading when depressed clown Dismal Jemmy remarks 'God! what would I forfeit to have the days of my childhood restored,' pointing to the nostalgia for a freer lost past and to the clown's failure to achieve it (*PP*, 71). But, this thesis argues that the treatment of clowns and fools in *Pickwick Papers* teaches us that laughter is dangerously employed as an ideological tool, and can in fact create ideology when it appears to be liberating the subject from it. Paul Schlicke notes that Dickens remarked on the repetitive nature of clowns and the jokes they made on stage in the nineteenth century.²⁴ Dickens's main interest is that underneath the appearance of spontaneity, as in 'Mr Barlow,' there are repetitious structures which are not as innocent as they seem.

Foucault's work has shown the marginalization of madness in its relationship to the activities of the fool between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries.²⁵ Walter Kaiser's 1963 book *Praisers of Folly*, in his chapter 'The Wisdom of the Fool,' charts the development of 'the natural fool.' Kaiser notes the paradox of the fool in his relationship to stupidity, since 'on the one hand [fool] remained a term of opprobrium or condescension, [but] on the other hand it had become a term of praise and aspiration.' Kaiser points out that 'one could say of an idiot that he was only a fool because he was not wise; but one could also say of a wise man that he would be wiser if he were a fool.'²⁶ Alongside the simplicity of the fool is

²² Robert Browning, 'Sketches by Boz' in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, eds. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 25

²³ Michael Hollington, *Charles Dickens: Critical Assessments since 1870* (Helm Information, 1995), p. 347.

²⁴ Schlicke, p. 167.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 3-43.

²⁶ Walter Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly: Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 11.

another characterisation, one of precision and intelligence.²⁷ What we see here is something that matches up to Foucault's argument: that by the nineteenth century the madness of the fool, which is what constitutes its 'freedom,' has been removed. The fool is no longer a figure of madness but one who carefully performs folly. In *Pickwick Papers*, as we shall see, the performance of natural simplicity is one of precision and intelligence. The clown figure performs as unintelligent, or as one whose intelligence is natural rather than learned. In the 1855 short story 'The Holly-Tree Inn' Dickens writes:

The novel feature of our entertainment was, that our host was a chairmaker, and that the chairs assigned to us were mere frames, altogether without bottoms of any sort; so that we passed the evening on perches. Nor was this the absurdest consequence; for when we unbent at supper, and any one of us gave way to laughter, he forgot the peculiarity of his position, and instantly disappeared. I myself, doubled up into an attitude from which self-extrication was impossible, was taken out of my frame, like a Clown in a comic pantomime. (*HTI*, 22-3)

In *Pickwick Papers* it is this ideology of the clown as unintelligent that is challenged.

Steven Marcus offers the most sustained reading of the novel in relation to comedy. He bases his argument around the claim that the *Pickwick Papers* are 'edited' rather than 'written.' For Marcus, 'the agent behind this publication is, as it were, not yet the novelist; he exists in a kind of negative or not-yet-appeared or absent state. He is not writing the work; he does not even own or possess it.'²⁸ Marcus is therefore on the side of those critics who see the novel as somehow 'spontaneous,' flowing out of Dickens's control. The reading recalls Forster's suggestion that Dickens's humour was his master and not his servant. Marcus's primary example of this argument about Dickens's writing is a comic one; that of Mr Jingle. Jingle's speech is a form of shorthand, which was discussed earlier in relation to *David Copperfield*. As Earle R. Davis has established, the use of this stenographic form of speech has something of a comic tradition behind it, as it was used by various comic writers

²⁷ On the history of the fool see also Emmanuel Sampath Nelson, *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art and History: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook* (Connecticut Greenwood Publishing, 1998).

²⁸ Steven Marcus, 'Language into Structure: Pickwick Revisited' in *Daedalus*, vol. 101, no. 1, Myth, Symbol and Culture (Winter, 1972), pp. 183-202 (p. 189).

and performing comedians throughout both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁹ Marcus writes that with *Pickwick Papers*: 'Dickens had committed himself at the outset to something like pure writing, to language itself,' that he 'was undertaking [...] to let the writing write the book.'³⁰ *Pickwick Papers* was not, in this sense, 'authored' by Dickens, but it was 'edited' by the fictional Boz; the words come from elsewhere, their meaning not regulated by authorial intention.³¹ Agnes Heller, in *Immortal Comedy*, shares something with Marcus's argument, suggesting that this is a particular feature of the comic novel; the author disappears and language takes over.³² There may be a connection between Dickens and Laurence Sterne here too, through this conception of digression as linguistic. In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne, whom Dickens considered one of the three great English novelists, writes characteristically: 'for in this long digression which I was accidentally led into, as in all my digressions (one only excepted) there is a master-stroke of digressive skill.'³³ Writing can appear to digress outside of authorial control (I will take issue with this argument below). Jingle's speech would seem to be, and is for Marcus, a perfect illustration of this facet of Dickens's writing.³⁴ The passage below is a prime example:

'Heads, heads – take care of your heads!' cried the loquacious stranger, as they came under the low archway, which in those days formed the entrance to the coach-yard.
'Terrible place – dangerous work – other day – five children – mother – tall lady, eating sandwiches – forgot the arch – crash – knock – children look round – mother's head off – sandwich in her hand – no mouth to put it in – head of a family off – shocking, shocking! Looking at Whitehall, sir? – fine place – little window –

²⁹ Earle R. Davis has traced the possible influences of Mr Jingle's shorthand-style speech, giving examples from Fielding and Smollett's comic work as possible ancestors. Davis also notes this 'staccato' speech used as a device used for comic purposes in eighteenth century playwrights, Holcroft and Thomas Morton among others, and that it was also used by many early nineteenth century writers. See Earle R. Davis, 'Dickens and the Evolution of Caricature' in *PMLA* (vol. 55, no 1, March 1940), pp. 231-240. See also Peter Wilson, 'The Corpus of Jinglese: A Syntactic Profile of an Idiolectal "System of Stenography"' in *Critical Survey*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2004), pp.78-93.

³⁰ Steven Marcus, 'Language into Structure: Pickwick Revisited,' p. 189. See also his chapter on *Pickwick Papers* in Steven Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), pp. 13-53.

³¹ Marcus, 'Language into Structure: Pickwick Revisited', pp. 183-4.

³² Agnes Heller, *Immortal Comedy*, p. 77.

³³ Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, ed. Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 57.

³⁴ On Dickens's willingness to give up control of language see also Rosemarie Bodenheimer, pp. 20-54.

somebody else's head off there, eh, sir? – he didn't keep a sharp look-out enough either – eh, sir, eh?' (*PP*, 25-26)

Jingle's language seems to be 'unrepressed;' his language is allowed to follow its own significations rather than undergoing any regulation, the perfect example of language which escapes control and organization. This process, which as Marcus argues becomes central to all of Dickens's writing, is clearly a comic one. Indeed, it must recall Freud's comments about jokes arising 'already clothed in words' as discussed previously (*SE* 8: 176). In this reading, the comedy of the passage may superficially suggest that there is nothing behind the language. Marcus reads Jingle in Freudian terms:

He brings us into closer touch with the primary process. He is, moreover, the first expression of the 'constant succession' that Dickens mentions in his preface to the first edition; but the constant succession, as it first appears here and will persist throughout the novel, is the constant succession of writing, of characters rising up to speak in printing unending torrents of words, of language in incessant motion, of writing apparently and extraordinarily writing itself.³⁵

In any speech act or use of language, there are other meanings, connections between words, suggestions and allusions that are inadvertently indicated by the language used, though not intentionally signified, and in Jingle's language, we have something of this process demonstrated to us. It recalls the discussions of the Lacanian 'instance of the letter;' instead of maintaining the pretence of single signification, Jingle's language follows its own unconscious. Instead of being controlled and telling the tragic story of a mother's death, the mother's head becomes the phrase 'head of a family,' and then Charles the First's head. The 'sandwich in her hand' and yet 'no mouth to put it in' rises through non-repressed language.

Marcus's reading of Jingle may seem vital and others have agreed with it; the view is also held by David Gervais for example.³⁶ However, we soon see that the novel anticipates and rejects this reading. It shows instead that if language has an unconscious then that is not free but also has something controlling and governing it. In the third chapter we learn that

³⁵ Marcus, p. 191.

³⁶ David Gervais, 'Dickens's Comic Speech: Inventing the Self' in *The Yearbook of English Studies* vol. 25, Non-Standard Englishes and the New Media Special Number (1995), pp. 128-140 (p. 139)

Jingle is 'connected with the theatre [...] but not generally desirous to have it known' (*PP*, 49). Tempted by his own arrogance into revealing his profession, Jingle describes Jemmy disparagingly as 'no actor' compared to himself. Sam Weller later unveils Jingle's disguise, remarking, 'he's a strolling actor, he is, and his name's Jingle' (*PP*, 334). We learn retrospectively that Jingle is a 'Fantastic' (compare Shakespeare's Lucio), an actor in control of what he is doing, manipulating those around him. Jingle can be seen using his apparent spontaneity to influence others:

'We must purchase our tickets,' said Mr Tupman

'Not worth splitting a guinea,' said the stranger, 'toss who shall pay for both – I call; you spin – first time – woman – woman – bewitching woman,' and down came the sovereign, with the Dragon (called by courtesy a woman) uppermost.

Mr Tupman rang the bell, purchased the tickets, and ordered chamber-candlesticks.
(*PP*, 33)

If Jingle is in control of what he is doing then his language is an act rather than a freedom, and this illusion of spontaneity allows him to control and manipulate others. A quite deliberate pace and erratic jumping from one phrase to the other, an appearance of uncontrollable spontaneity, allows him to exercise a tyranny over others. Tupman and Jingle hate each other and operate in a rivalrous way, though Jingle always comes out on top. At first, as in Marcus's reading, it seems that Jingle's laughter is opposed to Tupman's, of whom we read 'his laughter was forced—his merriment feigned; and when at last he laid his aching temples between the sheets, he thought, with horrid delight, on the satisfaction it would afford him to have Jingle's head at that moment between the feather bed and the mattress' (*PP*, 113). But we see that this opposition between the forced laughter of Tupman and the spontaneous laughter of Jingle is not as clear as it seems: Jingle is an actor equally in charge of his performance; spontaneous laughter is never as spontaneous as it seems.

As such, something more than Marcus's argument is needed. In the joke about the woman losing her head Jingle ends with the image of Whitehall; 'looking at Whitehall – sir? - fine place – little window – somebody else's head off there, eh, sir?' Only at the end of Jingle's stream of comments do we realize that it could have been constructed by Whitehall from the

start. Jingle has seen Whitehall, known that Charles I was decapitated there in 1649, and so the start of the joke he has told is *eventually* constituted by the end. Jingle has set up the whole conversation, he has been in complete control of his seemingly chaotic language. In this sense he shares something with Dickens's image of Mr Barlow, who gets up early and butters the pavement and then is there to witness his opponents fall; the whole thing has been planned from the start. Similarly, Jingle's 'head of a family off' modifies the earlier 'mother's head off,' punning on 'head' and making it about her loss of power and the family's lack of a parental figure rather than the literal decapitation. Likewise, 'no mouth to put it in' refers to the feeding of the children sandwiches and the five 'mouths to feed.' 'Little window' modifies the statement again, implying not that the mouth has signified a window in a chain of wild and uncontrolled associations but that the window of Whitehall was seen first and brought the mouths into Jingle's speech, again demonstrating the level of control that is in play. Each dash between Jingle's speech operates as a kind of caesura, a break that not so much threatens the stability of his speech but creates the meaning of it all, governing the meaning of the phrase either side of that break. Later statements retroactively and comically construct earlier ones, showing us one of the arguments made about comedy above: while it can seem to be about the breakdown of meaning, comedy can in fact be the production of it. It is also an event at the level of language in that the future interrupts and challenges the present and past.

Laughter is appropriated by discourses of the natural or instinctive; Jingle, who wants to keep the fact that he is an actor quiet, uses the apparent spontaneity of his language and its comedy to control its effects. Indeed, the performance is specifically for Pickwick since Jingle ends the speech as he often does with 'eh, sir, eh?'. In his chapter on Dickens's comedy John Carey picks up on the importance of the performance element:

Dickens's main comic characters are magnificent performers, but have no emotions, they provided him with no way of bringing within the scope of his comedy real suffering or real cruelty. But it is clear that he wanted his comedy to confront and

embrace the cruelty of life and that he at times felt this cruelty, even – or perhaps especially – in trivial incidents, deeply.³⁷

Jingle is an instance of something like this, an actor or performer who shows the cruelty inherent in everyday speech. He is an actor performing clowning, selling an image of the clown that appears spontaneous. Anny Sadrin argues that Dickens is making a 'private joke' with Jingle's speech. She links Jingle to the clown, commenting that he has 'a clown's verbal playfulness and telegraphic style' which Dickens uses for satiric purposes.³⁸ Peter Wilson reads this same aspect of Jingle as a mockery of journalism, saying that 'in this way Jinglese mocks the breathless journalese of his day.'³⁹ Robert Patten discusses Jingle's comedy as something which shows the 'terrors, suffering, and sorrow' of Pickwick's limited understanding.⁴⁰ Though the characters are 'taken in' by Jingle and the reader may be too, there is a doubleness to this process; Dickens shows us that language can be used to produce something which fools others. Jingle's comic performance produces an appearance of the natural spontaneous self.

As if to push this point Dickens follows Jingle's introduction with chapter three of the novel, entitled 'The Stroller's Tale,' an interpolated story told by Dismal Jemmy, the friend of Jingle. The story is about another actor, 'a low pantomime actor,' and we are informed that the theatre in question is Rochester Theatre, which as Valerie Gager observes, is where Dickens first saw *Richard III* (PP, 49).⁴¹ Gager links Weller to Richard the Third on account of the Wellerism 'Business first, pleasure arterwards, as King Richard the Third said when he stabbed the t'other king in the Tower, afore he smothered the babbies' (PP, 329, *Richard III*, I.iii.352-3). But Weller distances himself from the tyranny of these actors and describes Jingle as a 'strolling actor,' while the earlier 'Stroller's Tale' tells of a suffering clown on his deathbed who develops a paranoia that his wife is going to murder him because of the years of abuse that he has dealt out to her. Jingle and the 'strolling actor' are tyrannical figures where Weller is not; both Jingle and the actor are linked to Richard the Third and both

³⁷ John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens's Imagination* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p.68.

³⁸ Anny Sadrin, 'Fragmentation in The Pickwick Papers' in *Dickens Studies Annual*, 22 (1993), pp. 21-34 (p. 28).

³⁹ Wilson, p. 90.

⁴⁰ Patten, Robert L., 'The Art of Pickwick's Interpolated Tales' in *ELH* 34:3 (September 1967), 349-366 (p. 358).

⁴¹ Gager, p. 102. For other discussions of the possible Shakespearean influence for Weller see James Kinsley, introduction, *The Pickwick Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. xlii.

exercise violence and control over others. They play upon the potential madness and spontaneity inside themselves, on their potential for violent outburst from a natural or internal source. In other words, they create an image of an internal self which appears free but is performed. This 'madness' that they display is not against the nineteenth century norms but scripted by them.

Another way of putting this may be to link it to Jacques Derrida's concept of the scriptable. If Jingle is thought of as a performer, then his language is to be taken as spoken. This is part of its perceived or illusory spontaneity. However, Dickens's presentation of it draws our attention to the scriptable nature of all speech. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida writes that:

a certain sort of instituted signifiers may then appear, "graphic" in the narrow and derivative sense of the word, ordered by a certain relationship with other instituted — hence "written," even if they are "phonic" — signifiers. The very idea of institution — hence of the arbitrariness of the sign — is unthinkable before the possibility of writing and outside of its horizon. Quite simply, that is, outside of the horizon itself, outside the world as space of inscription, as the opening to the emission and to the spatial distribution of signs, to the *regulated play* of their differences, even if they are "phonic."⁴²

Derrida's point is that even apparently instinctive and phonic speech is 'regulated' and controlled. Dickens shows us just this, that Jingle's spontaneity is scriptable even when it seems to be the most spontaneous of speech-acts. Jingle's apparently spontaneous performance, then, gives us a model for reading the novel itself. Far from being a spontaneous novel arising as if instinctually from its moment, it is a novel which is carefully constructed as spontaneous. The opening of *Pickwick Papers* prepares us for this:

The first ray of light which illumines the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliancy that obscurity in which the earlier history of the public career of the immortal Pickwick would appear to be involved, is derived from the perusal of the following entry in the Transactions of the Pickwick Club, which the editor of these papers feels the highest pleasure in laying before his readers, as a proof of the careful

⁴² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 44.

attention, indefatigable assiduity, and nice discrimination, with which his search among the multifarious documents confided to him has been conducted. (PP, 15)

This parody of 'literary' writing shows that rather than coming spontaneously, to produce the 'dazzling brilliancy' of a 'ray of illuminating light' we need 'careful attention,' 'indefatigable assiduity' and 'nice discrimination.' This serves a more central point of the thesis and brings us close to the idea of the 'event,' where something becomes apparent to us anew but is not an origin. It is rather a shift in representation which inscribes a new present, past and future, much like the discussions of Hölderlin's caesura in the theoretical section above and the function of the dash in Jingle's speech. Here too we are close to the discussion of Lacan, for whom the 'discovery' is something produced by the moment of representation but which seems to have already been there awaiting to be 'discovered,' establishing an appearance of chronology. The novel here recognizes its own involvement in this process. It produces a beginning, an origin or a cause which it seems to have 'discovered' or made visible and it shows that all representation is involved in this process.

A central point to come out of this discussion is that clowns perform and construct the idea of 'the natural,' which can be thought of as the principal origin, beginning or 'cause' of behaviour. Michael Hollington reads Signore Jupe, the clown figure of *Hard Times*, as a Pierrot figure, and in these *commedia dell arte* terms Jingle is not the Pierrot but the Zanni.⁴³ Whereas the Pierrot is a buffoon, the Zanni is well-known as a figure who is invested with natural inner energy but who is also an astute trickster.⁴⁴ This idea of the clown as containing a kind of internal natural energy seems to be a particular feature of his treatment in the nineteenth century. The appeal of the clown seems to be an investment in behaviour stimulated by energy from within. Perhaps the most famous clown of the nineteenth century was Joseph Grimaldi, but this next example comes from his grandfather. The grandfather Grimaldi, also a clown, was famous for jumping spontaneously around the stage. He came to particular fame when he jumped so high in front of the French Court that he knocked a chandelier off the ceiling before landing safely. The Turkish Ambassador, who

⁴³ Hollington, 'Dickens's *Hard Times*: The Father as Tragic Clown,' pp. 35-6.

⁴⁴ On the figure of Pierrot see Frances Haskell, 'The Sad Clown: Some Notes on a 19th Century Myth,' in Ulrich Finke, ed., *French 19th Century Painting and Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), p. 2-16.

was present at the performance, was furious because a piece of glass from the chandelier broke off and hit him on the face. The French court insisted that Grimaldi apologize, but it was only the Turkish Ambassador who didn't see the funny side. The story gained popularity in the nineteenth century, and was probably embellished and edited. It appears in numerous documents including the biography of Grimaldi that Dickens edited in 1836. The incident made Grimaldi well-known, and saw him acquire the nickname 'Iron-Legs'; there was for instance, a squib about him, which appears in various forms, one of which Dickens quotes:

*Hail, Iron Legs! Immortal pair,
Agile, firm knit, and peerless,
That skin the earth, or vault in air,
Aspiring high and fearless.
Glory of Paris! Outdoing compeers,
Brave pair! May nothing hurt ye;
Scatter at will over chandeliers,
And tweak the nose of Turkey.
And should a too presumptuous foe
But dare these shores to land on,
His well-kicked men shall quickly know
We've Iron Legs to stand on.*⁴⁵

Part of the clown's appeal comes from his indestructability, as does the name 'Iron-Legs.' In a letter Dickens makes a similar comment about Mr Punch, remarking that the 'source of pleasure' in these figures can be in seeing that 'men and women can be so knocked about without any pain or suffering' (*Letters* 5: 640). The idea of being indestructible is accompanied by another force invested in the clown which is important here; not his being protected from external forces but his being invested with an energy within, a force that can propel the clown into jumps beyond human capabilities. The clown is a figure who appears

⁴⁵ Popular squib, quoted in Charles Dickens (ed.), *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (London: Pushkin Press, 2008), pp. 9-10.

spontaneous, leaping in any direction; he shows that impulse and spontaneity are concepts on the side of internal subjectivity. As we have seen, in combining the astute and intelligent actor with the natural fool, Dickens shows that the spontaneous nature and instinct, whilst they may appear 'free,' are constructed by precise and astute acting. This idea of comedy performing and creating the natural leads to another set comic figures in the novel, the animalistic and childlike.

Animals and Children

In *Hard Times* Dickens calls the circus dog 'Merrylegs' which is likely to be a reference to Iron-Legs, especially since Sissy Jupe's father, the novel's clown and Merrylegs's owner, has another trick, the 'astounding feat of throwing seventy-five hundred-weight in rapid succession backhanded over his head, thus forming a fountain of solid iron in mid-air' (*HT*, 18). It links animals to the circus, and iron here may be connected to nature rather than opposed to it as a 'man made' material. Ruskin's essay 'The Work of Iron in Nature, Art and Policy', published in 1859, focuses on the connection between iron and nature, commenting that 'iron is invariably joined with the oxygen, and would be capable of no service or beauty whatever without it.' For Ruskin these are 'metals with breath put into them [...] metals which have [...] been rendered fit for the service of man by permanent unity with the purest air which he himself breathes.' Iron, as part of the nineteenth century's narrative of progress, is imbued with the power of life. In the section on 'Iron and Art,' Ruskin comments that 'all art worthy the name is the energy—neither of the human body alone, nor of the human soul alone, but of both united, one guiding the other: good craftsmanship and work of the fingers, joined with good emotion and work of the heart.'⁴⁶ In speaking of the art of 'iron works' Ruskin is not thinking of the likes of Jupe's clowning or Iron-Legs, but there may be an important connection insofar as Ruskin frames the developments of iron in the nineteenth century as part of the natural development of man, as part of its soul and its body developing and literally and metaphorically extending outwards. Iron allowed higher structures than ever before such as (eventually) the Eiffel Tower, just as Grimaldi jumped

⁴⁶ John Ruskin, 'The Work of Iron in Nature, Art and Policy' in *Library Edition of The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1902-1909), vol. 16, pp. 376-7.

higher than ever before, and Signor Jupe's throwing of the iron in *Hard Times* is 'a feat never before attempted in this or any other country' (*HT*, 18). Perhaps the connection between clowning and the 'iron works' is that they both contain the idea of energy extending outwards powerfully and driving things, dictating and justifying behaviour.

Animals are another key site for the naturalizing of nineteenth century ideology. At the heart of Jingle is the desire to naturalize behaviour, as when he discusses dogs:

'Ah! you should keep dogs—fine animals—sagacious creatures—dog of my own once—pointer—surprising instinct—out shooting one day—entering inclosure—whistled—dog stopped—whistled again—Ponto—no go; stock still—called him—Ponto, Ponto—wouldn't move—dog transfixed—staring at a board—looked up, saw an inscription—"Gamekeeper has orders to shoot all dogs found in this inclosure"—wouldn't pass it—wonderful dog—valuable dog that—very.' (*PP*, 26)

The first idea we might apply to the phenomena of laughing at animals is the 'superiority theory' discussed in the first chapter: laughter at animals can celebrate humans' superior refinement. But this becomes a less than comprehensive answer since animals become funny precisely when they are being most 'human': wearing clothes, cracking jokes, or pulling uncannily human facial expressions, or here in *Pickwick Papers*, reading a signpost informing the dog that the 'gamekeeper has order to shoot all dogs found in this inclosure' (*PP*, 26).⁴⁷ For Hegel it is the mouth that marks out the animal from the human: 'in the formation of the animal head the predominant thing is the mouth, as the tool for chewing.'⁴⁸ Georges Bataille agrees with Hegel that 'the mouth is the beginning or, if one prefers, the prow of animals.' For both philosophers this is not so for humans, in whom 'it is the eyes that play the meaningful role.'⁴⁹ We conceive of the mouth as the central part of the animal because we like to think of animals as driven only by the needs and impulses to eat and drink, whereas humans are more refined, but as Hegel points out, we also think of each human as containing an 'animal,' as containing repressed animal drives. This is something that Jingle especially wants to believe in with his language and performance of 'instinct' and

⁴⁷ See Alfie Bown and Daniel Bristow (eds.), *Why Are Animals Funny? Everyday Analysis Volume One* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

⁴⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 729.

⁴⁹ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, trans. Alan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 59.

spontaneity. They are the marker of culture, and of trained, learned behaviour rising above the animal.⁵⁰ With eyes come surveillance, recognition, and the ability to regulate one's behaviour. On the one hand it is in Jingle's interest to present human actions as instinctual and natural, describing the 'wonderful dog' with 'surprising instinct.' On the other hand, the joke cannot be contained. The dog has self-interest and decides not to go into the enclosure (compare Pickwick going into prison) and Weller-like, is conscious of what the law means, obeying the sign for its own self-interest. The joke is that the dog is a critic of the law because in fact the law wants to shoot a few dogs, thinking that they cannot read the sign and will enter the enclosure, always claiming that ignorance of the law is no defence. The dog therefore criticises Jingle's ideology of the natural, acting against the instinct that supposedly defines it.

This question of producing a civilized subject is also the issue at another one of the novel's most comic moments, another animal moment, which occurs when the Pickwickians attend a society party with Mr and Mrs Leo Hunter. Mrs Leo Hunter has written a poem which has been well received in society, and Mr Leo Hunter proudly recites it to the guests at the party:

Can I view thee panting, lying

On thy stomach, without sighing;

Can I unmoved see thee dying

On a log

Expiring frog!

The characters respond in admiration for the poem. 'Beautiful' says Mr Pickwick, 'Fine' says Mr Leo Hunter. Then he recites the second verse, in a tone 'even more grave':

Say, have fiends in shape of boys

With wild halloo, and brutal noise,

⁵⁰ See also Oxana Timofeeva, *History of Animals: An Essay on Negativity, Immanence and Freedom* (Maastricht: Jan van Eyke Academie Press, 2012), pp. 60-70.

Hunted thee from marshy joys,

With a dog,

Expiring frog! (*PP*, 199)

'Ode to an Expiring Frog' is a poem without meaningful content. It is completely opposed to Jingle's 'epic poem' produced on the spot in representation of the July Revolution, which relies on representing reality. The poem may be about boys killing a frog, but it appears unlikely that it refers to a pre-existing historical event and seems rather that the content has accidentally arose from the language (compare Costard on pages 171-2). Of course the poem is very funny, but its humour is not simply found in showing that there is nothing behind this celebrated, pretentious poetry. Further than this, it is the idea of the natural as existing outside representation that is being criticised. The poem opposes itself to the concept of poetry discussed earlier that Jingle provides, since this poem is meditative and inquiring and so is against spontaneity. Instead, we see how form produces the appearance of content. Hegel's terms of *immediacy* and *mediation* discussed in chapter three are useful here; whilst Jingle wants his listeners to believe in the natural and immediate as separate from the mediation and representation, Dickens's writing, like Hegel, shows that mediation constructs content. We see in Dickens's terms the radicalism of Hegel's statement about the false separation between form and content. The poem creates a meaningful reality that it claims to refer to but is in fact autonomous and self-referential so that there is no Derridean 'outside text.' The humour is in showing exactly this.

In these terms, if the moment is a Hegelian beginning then it is not, as we have seen, the origin as content, but instead, in Hegel's own words, the making of a beginning, after which there appears to be originary content which pre-existed. As such it is ideology at work, producing itself as natural and pre-existing. The point of 'Ode to an Expiring Frog' is that what there is behind the poem is mediated, produced by representation. Mr Weller, Sam's father, comments in opposition to Jingle that 'poetrys unnat'ral' (*PP*, 435) and as we shall see, the Wellers offer a completely opposed view of writing and of comedy to Jingle.⁵¹

⁵¹ For some discussion of this comment by Mr Weller in relation to Shakespearean comedy see Marshall Walker, 'Shakespeare's Comedy (or Much Ado About Bergson)' in *Interpretations*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1971), pp. 1-12.

Dickens agrees with the Wellers and sides with artifice and with the city in the same way as Baudelaire does when he praises women wearing make-up.⁵² *Pickwick Papers* can be seen as a city-comedy in the sense that it sees the city as a space in which nothing is natural.

As such, Jingle is a figure of the workings of ideology and its deceptiveness. Whilst Jingle attempts to get away with this imposing of ideology, Weller attempts to show it for what it is. The first words of Weller are a response to the demand 'Number twenty-two wants his boots!' Weller remarks 'Ask number twenty-two vether he'll have 'em now, or vait till he gets 'em' (PP, 109). Weller de-naturalizes the human by numbering and by reducing people to their boots which he shines. 'Shining' is the word used by Freud to characterize the fetish (SE 21: 152). Boots are the classic fetish object in Freud's terms, and what Dickens, Marx, Freud and the city all show is that there is nothing other than the fetish nature of reality which here constructs the gentleman as no more than 'boots.' Weller is working class and will not be wearing the boots on which he comments, focussing the joke onto bourgeois culture. The joke is Freudian in another way too, as it is a joke without content (see page 37-9).

A discussion of Sam in relation to comedy must address his Wellerisms (the numerous similar quips that Weller makes to the other characters), a subject which has been of interest both inside and outside of Dickens studies.⁵³ Perhaps J. Hillis Miller's discussion is the most important:

We glimpse the performative role forms of language can have when those forms are inserted arbitrarily in a given context. The Wellerism gives the one who uses it or hears it a brief control over language, a sense of language's power, and a momentary escape from its coercions. The understanding a Wellerism gives by no means, however, prevents anyone from being the victim of unintentional performatives, as *Pickwick Papers* abundantly demonstrates. A performative, like a Wellerism, is a form

⁵² Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life' in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 424-428.

⁵³ See for example Kathleen Tillotson and John Butt, *Dickens at Work* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009), p. 57-9. See also the discussions of Wellerisms by J. Hillis Miller in *Speech Acts in Literature* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 107. See also the suggestion that the Wellerism relates to effacing the narrator in Robert L. Patten, *Charles Dickens and 'Boz'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 64. R. C. Churchill comments briefly on the relationship between Wellerisms and Mrs Gamp, preferring Mrs Gamp, in *Scrutiny* X: 4 (April, 1942), p. 361.

of language that works, but it works differently in different contexts. Any form of words can function as a performative if the context is right.⁵⁴

The Wellerism offers a kind of power to its user; the Wellerism 'works.' This aligns Wellerisms with a comedy that is to do with success rather than failure. Wellerisms are an example of an apophantic phrase. (Apophantic statements use a self-evident truth to ground a statement, or they are self-evident truths which ground or prove other truths.) In apophantics one reaches a conclusion simply because of the proposition's nature, and not because any evidence or examples have been consulted. It is this way of thinking, which is central to a history of phenomenology, that Wellerisms comment on. They show ideology coming into being. They are funny not because they are failed attempts to use a conventional apophantic phrase to justify an action, but because they are not failed attempt. They work just as they would do if they were well-evidenced truths; not once in the novel is a Wellerism queried. The Wellerism works, it is a performative, as Miller argues; it produces an effect of truth even though there is nothing behind it. As such it shares something with our discussion of Jingle's comedy: just as Jingle's performance of spontaneity creates the appearance of the natural, so too do Wellerisms demonstrate something self-evident coming into being.

Yet there is a distinction between the comedy of Weller and the comedy of Jingle. The Wellerism indicates the violence that this production of truth entails. Almost all the 'innocent' maxims that Weller uses are followed by an illustration of violence. An example is, 'it's over, and can't be helped, and that's one consolation, as they always says in Turkey, ven they cuts the wrong man's head off' (*PP*, 307). The message is: one must commit an act of severe violence (the second half of the Wellerism) in order to establish the seemingly innocent maxim or truth (the first part of the Wellerism). The Wellerism, then, shows up ideology for what it is, like the dog not going into Jingle's enclosure. The Wellerism and the joke, like the dog staying on the threshold, remain liminal. The dog was 'transfixed' by the sign, which means to say that it anticipates its own death in the face of the law (the sign) because it considers what will happen if it does go inside. It is both inside and outside at once. The joke positions itself both inside and outside ideology because it is able to question

⁵⁴ J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 129.

ideology and therefore must stand outside it, but it also must have seen inside it, just as the dog is in that impossible position. In the same way the joke is transgressively inside and outside class. This explains why the Wellerism cannot be queried or answered. The point is that the working class knows the middle class but the middle class cannot know the working class. This is key to Dickens's own radical social positioning and to the importance of his fiction as a set of texts that show us that ideology is always middle class.

Where Jingle is an actor who exercises control over the language he uses and can be thought of as a tyrant out for his own gain at the expense of others, Weller cannot be said to be acting or controlling his speech in the same way. Much of Weller's speech wanders off into death and violence, much like the Wellerisms do. The subject of Chapter 30 is the law and the lawyers Dodson and Fogg, who like their names dodge and make cloudy the visibility of the law. The law doesn't want to be read, but both Weller and the dog reading the sign have seen it for what it is. Weller tells the story of a man who is ground to death by a sausage-making machine. This man is described: 'wery proud o' that machine he was, as it was nat'ral he should be, and he'd stand down in the celler a-lookin' at it wen it was in full play, till he got quite melancholy with joy.' The man is driven mad by his wife so he kills himself by diving into the sausage grinder. Sam reports the widow's realization of what has happened after one of his coat buttons is found inside a sausage; 'I see it all," says the widder; "in a fit of temporary insanity he rashly converted hisself into sassages!" And so he had, Sir,' said Mr. Weller, looking steadily into Mr. Pickwick's horror-stricken countenance' (PP, 407). 'Sassages' may refer back the 'sagacious dog' which Dickens further plays with in the 1850 short story *A Christmas Tree*, in which he creates the portmanteau word 'sassigacity,' a combination of 'saucy' and 'sagacious' (PP, 248).⁵⁵ Sam's language tends towards fainting with death, and moments such as these can perhaps be compared with the equally black humour of Jingle, such as the 'mother's head off' with which we began the chapter. Yet they differ greatly in their effects. While Jingle aims to put on a convincing act, Weller attempts to show the violence of such performances to the other characters.

While Jingle enacts this violence of creating a natural rule, Weller exposes it for what it is. Jingle is an actor who does not wish to 'have it known' that he is an actor, but Sam

⁵⁵ Charles Dickens, 'A Christmas Tree' in *The Christmas Stories*, ed. Ruth Clancy (London: Everyman, 1997), p. 10.

deliberately shows the acting for what it is (*PP*, 49). Whereas Jingle hides the fact that he is acting because his act relies on the idea of natural spontaneity, Sam wants to draw attention to the performative nature of his own 'act', as when he declines to take the arm of Mr Smauker, remarking, 'I've rayther a way o' putting my hands in my pockets, if it's all the same to you.' As Sam said this, he suited the action to the word, and whistled far louder than before' (*PP*, 496). Sam realizes that his tendencies and instincts, such as the habit of putting his hands in his pockets, is all performance. This is part of Sam's working class spirit, whereas Smauker is the perfect example of the petit bourgeois which Sam resists. The whistling too may be deliberately objectionable to the middle class as it is in *Punch*, discussed above. Indeed, it is Sam who tries to uncover Jingle's actual acting when he pretends to be Fitz-Marshall, remarking 'don't call him a cap'en, nor Fitz-Marshall neither; he ain't neither one nor t'other. He's a strolling actor, he is, and his name's Jingle' (*PP*, 334). The name 'Fitz-Marshall' is significant since 'Fitz' implies the illegitimate son, usually of an aristocrat. Jingle is doing what Weller never does and pretends to be aristocratic, and Sam uncovers this act. We know from reports that Dickens himself enjoyed acting Sam in a hyperbolic manner.⁵⁶ Dickens is on the side of Sam in revealing the improvisatory nature of everything, in uncovering the way that even the 'natural' is produced by an act.

Weller also returns us to the issue of childhood and adulthood. He is a young figure whose age is not given but who is both childlike and an adult. He recalls Young Bailey of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, an adult in a child's body. 'Young Bailey' is a name that makes a joke about the law and the 'Old Bailey' and also about enclosures, since a 'bailey' is an enclosure (OED). He, like Sam and the dog, is a figure with a liminal relationship to the law, aware of it but just outside it and self-fashioning himself with a name to show this (since it is not his real name.) As with the discussions of Mr Barlow with which this chapter began, we see here a reading of what might be thought of as childhood spontaneity, the kind that Dismal Jemmy wants to return to but cannot. This nostalgic look back to childhood is shown to be a projection, something produced retroactively as a response to the increasing regulation in the historical moment of the novel's writing. Adult-children bring into question the ideology of children within the nineteenth century by showing that the child-adult chronology is a construction. Weller sees everything as performance and nothing as

⁵⁶ See Gager, pp. 45-6.

‘natural.’ Thus he reverses the common position that Dickens demonstrates the tragic destruction of childhood by adult rationality. As with ‘Mr Barlow,’ it is rather that childhood, like madness, animality and the actions of the clowns and fools, is scripted and controlled.

Quoted as an epigraph to this chapter is Milan Kundera’s comment that ‘imitation of laughter and (the devil’s) original laughter are both called by the same name.’⁵⁷ Kundera raises the issue discussed here, but thinks the inability to separate the two is the issue, commenting, ‘there are two kinds of laughter, and we lack the words to distinguish them.’ On the contrary, Jonathan Hall, in an important chapter on the comic text, notes that to define the different types can only be a reductive simplification, and it is the unanswerability of this problem that makes laughter important and interesting.⁵⁸ What *Pickwick Papers* shows us is that if there are two kinds of laughter then this is not the right divide. It is not that there is scripted and unscripted laughter but that there laughter which is scripted and a laughter which can challenge this pre-scripting. A final example will serve to show that while Jingle is the absolutely scripted even when he appears not to be, Weller is the figure who shows this scripting for what it is and challenges it. When called into court to give evidence for Pickwick Weller has an exchange with Sergeant Buzfuz:

‘Now, Mr Weller,’ said Sergeant Buzfuz.

‘Now, Sir,’ replied Sam.

‘I believe you are in the service of Mr Pickwick, the defendant in this case. Speak up, if you please, Mr Weller.’

‘I mean to speak up, Sir,’ replied Sam, ‘I am in the service o’ that ‘ere gen’l’man, and a wery good service it is.’

‘Little to do, and plenty to get I suppose?’ said Sergeant Buzfuz, with jocularly.

‘Oh, quite enough to get, Sir, as the soldier said ven they ordered him three hundred and fifty lashes,’ replied Sam.

‘You must not tell us what the soldier, or any other man, said, Sir,’ interposed the Judge, ‘it’s not evidence.’ (PP, 463)

⁵⁷ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, p. 87.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Hall, *Anxious Pleasures* (London: Associated University Press, 1995), p. 18.

The joke shows what part of this chapter has argued, that there is a working class humour that is completely inaccessible to the middle class figure. Buzfuz assumes that to be working class involves doing little work and making a lot of money but by feigning misunderstanding of the word 'get' Weller betrays what being working class is more likely to be about, the receipt of three hundred and fifty lashes. Buzfuz's language is a joke scripted to trap Weller into a damaging admission, showing us how jokes can be intended to trap like a much more dangerous version of Jingle's humour. The number here may recall the earlier joke about 'number twenty two' and suggests the arbitrariness with which the working class are treated by the law. Sam's paradoxical position is important here as well; he knows what it is like on both sides of the class divide, understanding Buzfuz's misconception and also his own position in relationship to it. There are several puns in the joke, each of which invert the middle class meaning ascribed to 'speak up,' 'service,' and 'get.' Sam understands the language of the law and the 'jocular' it attempts to use to trick him, and he overturns these attempts, showing it for what it is. On the contrary, the figures of the law have no way of understanding or subverting Sam's language, as typified by the Judge's myopic reply. The Judge is the ultimate arbiter of ideology and Sam shows that ideology for what it is. Comedy then, is both inside and outside ideology, inside because like a Wellerism it repeats and rehearses ideology, knowing it, and outside because it shows it for what it is.

The next chapter turns to *Barnaby Rudge* and to the subject of anxiety, arguing that figures without anxiety such as Weller cannot ultimately survive and the comic mode of *Pickwick Papers* cannot be sustained. In *Barnaby Rudge*, the atmosphere is much more revolutionary and the reaction is much more extreme

Chapter Six: *Barnaby Rudge* and Anxiety

'It would be extremely interesting to write the history of laughter'

Alexander Herzen / Mikhail Bakhtin¹

Like *The Old Curiosity Shop*, whose publication was discussed earlier, *Barnaby Rudge* was serialized in *Master Humphrey's Clock* from February to November 1841. However, the novel was not initially intended for publication there, and was in fact Dickens's first projected novel, which was deferred by the writing and success of *Pickwick Papers*.² After first conceiving of the novel in 1836 (initially to be titled *Gabriel Vardon: The Locksmith of London*) Dickens made several false starts on the manuscript, before returning to it in 1841, and after several publication delays, the novel finally came out as Dickens's fifth.³ It was initially taken up by John Macrone, the publisher of *Sketches by Boz*, so although it is usually thought of as an attempt at a serious historical novel, influenced by Dickens's admiration for Sir Walter Scott, its roots are in Dickens's early success as a writer of comic sketches.⁴ When serialization began, *Barnaby Rudge* received surprisingly little attention, and the attention it did receive was less positive than it had been for all of Dickens's previous novels. The sales of the novel fell dramatically from the first instalment to the last, and were considerably lower throughout than those of *The Old Curiosity Shop*.⁵ Even subsequently, the novel has not been recovered by critics as much as other novels of his that were less popular at the

¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 59.

² See John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, 'Barnaby Rudge: The First Projected Novel' in *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1957), pp. 76-89.

³ Robert L Patten, *Charles Dickens and His Publishers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 84.

⁴ See the introduction by Jon Mee in the Oxford edition, Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. ix, and the Appendix there, p. 674. See also Jack Lindsay, 'Barnaby Rudge' in John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (eds.), *Dickens and the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 105; S. J. Newman, 'Barnaby Rudge: Dickens and Scott' in R. T. Davies and B. G. Beatty (eds.) *Literature of the Romantic Period, 1750-1850* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1976). For a summary of others who have read the novel as an attempt to emulate Scott see John Bowen, *Other Dickens*, p. 162-3n.

⁵ See Kathryn Chittick, *Dickens in the 1830s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. x; Paul Schilke, *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 33.

time of publication, such as *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit*.⁶ Its comedy has almost never been treated.

The thesis of this chapter is that *Barnaby Rudge*, though not as obviously comic as other Dickens novels, is centrally concerned with anxiety, a point which has also not been sufficiently treated by critics. Since the argument here is that laughter is deeply connected to anxiety, this makes the novel a vital one for this thesis. The novel brings together anxiety, history, and laughter, and it demands that the relationship between these three things is addressed in new terms. The novel offers an address to a vital question raised by the quotation given as an epigraph above, originally from the influential Russian critic Alexander Herzen, who shares both his year of birth and his year of death with Dickens. The question of a history of laughter foregrounds the problem that is easy to regard laughter as apolitical, as outside history, as if natural. This problem has intellectual heritage behind it; even Hegel sees comedy as outside the dialectic in the latter stages of his *Aesthetics*. Much recent work on laughter has maintained that there is a certain consistency in laughter across history, even claiming that there may not be a 'history of laughter' because it is a trait of 'human nature.'⁷ This reduces the radicalism of comedy by making it appear as something natural and constant, allowing its political dimensions to be ignored.

Dickens's use of laughter in *Barnaby Rudge* troubles this idea. Dickens goes further than he had done in *Pickwick Papers*, where as I argued in the previous chapter, laughter is shown to make things appear natural but also undoes the naturalness of things. In *Barnaby Rudge* Dickens shows laughter to be historically contingent, troubling the idea of laughter as evidence for a continuous humanity and destabilizing any sense of laughter as evidence for essential identity. Far from being an expression of essential humanity, laughter is to do with an anxiety connected to the subject, and this anxiety always relates to impermanence and changes that are happening to the subject when it laughs. Laughter changes the subject, which, as we shall see, connects it with anxiety. Ultimately, an encounter with impermanence and change which we experience in a moment of laughter is shown to necessarily be the basis of historical consciousness itself. Laughter can change and even

⁶ See John Bowen's introduction to the novel in the version cited in this thesis, p. xiii.

⁷ See the introduction by Manfred Pfister in Manfred Pfister (ed.), *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p. v.

create a new relationship between past and present, and between the subject's past and present. Here two shibboleths in the history of laughter studies are questioned: both the idea that laughter is historically specific (in the sense that it is always a result of historical conditions) and the idea that laughter transcends history. Rather, laughter is involved in creating histories and chronologies.

Discussions of *Barnaby Rudge* have focussed on the novel as an historical one, since along with the later *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), it is one of only two historical novels that Dickens wrote.⁸ Critics of the historical novel have often dismissed it as unimportant or have accused Dickens of lacking historical knowledge.⁹ Some critics, such as Ackroyd, have made the point that the novel, despite being historical, is 'actually concerned with its own time.'¹⁰ Ackroyd means that his representation of the events of the past symbolically refers to Dickens' anxious present, but the larger point here which is made by the novel is that *all* historiography 'is actually concerned with its own time' as well as with the time being studied. The question is rather to what extent, and in what ways, the novel registers an awareness of that double referentiality, and whether it avoids surrendering to the historicist myth of capturing the truth of the past 'in itself.' It is argued here that *Barnaby Rudge* brings out the often concealed truth about historiography that Ackroyd may be unaware of, namely that the concern with the past is a concern with the origins of the writer's and of the reader's past as well. Writing history is a moment where past and present are established in new terms. In this way laughter too is a moment which changes history, neither entirely dependent on nor entirely free of history, but creating history in that it produces a past and a present in new terms.

Dickens criticism has occasionally touched upon the relationship between laughter and anxiety in his novels. Richard Barickman comments that 'the comic and villainous characters [in Dickens] develop brilliant defensive strategies that allow them to gratify

⁸ See Peter Widdowson, 'Barnaby Rudge: A Historical Novel?,' in *Literature and History*, 2 (October, 1975), pp. 2-44; Patrick Brantlinger, *The Fiction of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832-1867* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 85; John Bowen, *Other Dickens*, pp. 157-183.

⁹ See Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1969) pp. 290-2; G. K. Chesterton, *Chesterton on Dickens* (London: Dent, 1992), p. 70; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Vintage, 1996)

¹⁰ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Minerva, 1991), p. 345; Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 134.

egotistical desires, shore up their emotions, and avoid anxiety and a troubled conscience.’¹¹ Northrop Frye too sees Dickens’s comedy as a safety mechanism for dealing with anxiety (see page 143). Although his arguments about laughter in *Barnaby Rudge* are very different from those made here, James Kincaid is among those to have noticed that the novel should be read as one dealing directly with anxiety and the threat of erupting chaos.¹² These arguments have tended to see Dickens as searching for a safe domestic space away from the anxieties of society, also connecting the search for paternity with anxiety, another major way in which the novel has been read.¹³ All these readings see laughter as a way to ‘deal with’ anxiety, connecting it with safety.

Jeremy Tambling has suggested that this may have a historical basis, arguing that while Paris had lived through revolutions in 1789 and 1830 and would go on to live through two more in 1848 and 1871, London had always resisted revolution.¹⁴ In these terms, if the novel is seen as one about the Gordon Riots, or allegorically about Chartism or the French Revolution, it is one in which revolution or the anxiety of revolution is ‘dealt with,’ in which it is contained and prevented from erupting.¹⁵ The writing of history can be thought of as a way of dealing with anxiety. Laughter’s writing of history, then, holds a key to explaining the way that it too appears to be something that deals with anxiety. In Freud, who is discussed in detail below, anxiety is converted into fear, when novelistic narration (which we could apply to the function of tabloid papers for instance) ‘gives it an object.’ Both history and laughter create narratives, giving meaning to and making sense of unplaced

¹¹ Richard Barickman, ‘The Comedy of Survival in Dickens’ Novels’ in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 11, n. 2 (Winter, 1978), pp. 128-143 (p. 128).

¹² James Kincaid, p. 105.

¹³ See the argument made in Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840-1880* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 74.

¹⁴ Tambling, *Going Astray*, p. 96-7. See also Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*, pp. 132-141.

¹⁵ For historical discussions of the Gordon Riots see John Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1832* (London: Longmans, 1992) and Nicholas Rogers, ‘Crowd and People in the Gordon Riots,’ in Eckhart Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 39-55. On the novel as one dealing with Chartism see Humphrey House, *The Dickens World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 180; Edmund Wilson, ‘Dickens: The Two Scrooges’ in *The Wound and the Bow*; Thomas J Rice, ‘The Politics of *Barnaby Rudge*’ in *The Changing World of Charles Dickens*, ed. Robert Giddings (London: Vision, 1986), pp. 51-74; Chesterton, *Chesterton on Dickens*, pp. 71-3. Another connection is through Thomas Carlyle’s *Chartism*, which Dickens had a copy of by 1840. See William Oddie, *Dickens and Carlyle: The Question of Influence* (London: Centenary Press, 1972), p. 2n. More recently see Denis Paz, *Dickens and Barnaby Rudge: Anti-Catholicism and Chartism* (Merlin Press, 2007). John Lucas has argued that Chartism was less important to the novel in *The Melancholy Man: A Study of Dickens’s Novels* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 103.

anxieties. Whilst in the previous chapter it was argued that *Pickwick Papers* shows laughter creating nature, here it is argued that laughter creates history. Laughter though can also show history coming into being, undermining the idea of capturing the past accurately and showing us an ever-changing (or eventual) relationship between past and present. The chapter will first go into a necessary digression on the subject of anxiety and will then show how indispensable the word 'anxiety' is to *Barnaby Rudge*.

Reading Anxiety

Perhaps the central figure for discussions of anxiety is Freud, who first treated the subject of anxiety in 1895 in a paper on neurosis. There he summarised his argument by writing that 'the mechanism of anxiety is to be looked for in a deflection of somatic sexual excitation from the physical sphere, and in a consequent abnormal employment of that excitation' (SE 3:108). The suggestion here, as James Strachey has elucidated, is that anxiety is a response to a more primary process which finds its way out of the unconscious in the transformed shape of anxiety. Freud followed this initial sense of anxiety for some time, remarking in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that 'anxiety is a libidinal impulse which has its origin in the unconscious and is inhibited by the preconscious' (SE 4: 337-8). Likewise, in 1920 Freud wrote in the *Three Essays on Sexuality* that 'anxiety arises out of the libido, that it is a transformation of it' (SE 7, 224). The argument maintains the primacy of the sexual or of desire, and places anxiety in the category of a response or symptom; anxiety is the result of other more primal processes.

Such a reading makes anxiety a point at which Freud may be open to criticism; if anxiety is seen as a transformation of the sexual, then it can be explained by an essentializing or totalizing view which puts the sexual drive at the centre. A similar point has been made about laughter over the last two chapters of this thesis; that seeing laughter as an instinctive response *to* or effect *of* something can naturalize either that which it appears to respond to, or the subject as that which responds. Indeed, Strachey notes that at this stage Freud was treating anxiety as purely physical, without any psychological determinants.¹⁶ However, as

¹⁶ For details of this see James Strachey's introduction to 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety' in SE 20: 78-9.

so often with Freud, the initial explanation is problematized within his own work. In a letter to Fliess as early as 1897 Freud had written that he had 'decided henceforth to regard as separate factors what causes libido and what causes anxiety,' suggesting that he already considered the view of anxiety as response to be problematic.¹⁷ In the 1926 essay *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, the initial argument about anxiety is not just problematized but is turned on its head; rather than seeing anxiety as a response to other factors, anxiety itself takes up a position as primal.

In the essay Freud demonstrates that anxiety cannot be seen as an anxiety *of* something, opposing anxiety to fear or phobia. A phobia, Freud says, is formed as a response to an undirected and unexplainable anxiety. The phobia has two effects. Firstly, it 'avoids conflict due to ambivalence' by centring unplaced anxiety around an object (SE 20: 125). Through this process 'an internal, instinctual danger' (that of unplaced anxiety) is replaced by an 'external, perceptual one' (that of fear directed at a particular object) (SE 20: 126). The second effect of the phobia is that 'it enables the ego to cease generating anxiety' (SE 20: 125). So, unlike fear, anxiety pre-exists: the ego is constantly generating anxiety until some action is taken to stop it; anxiety is seen here as the cause of repression rather than its result. Rather than being a transformed or repressed version of something more primary, anxiety comes first, and is controlled and repressed by the transformation into fear. In other words, fear is anxiety after it has been given an object. The argument made here is that laughter is involved in this process; laughter gives anxiety an 'object.'

In his seminar on anxiety (1962-3) Lacan picks up specifically on the Freud of *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. He describes anxiety as an affect, and qualifies this by specifying that an 'affect is not repressed, and this is something that Freud says just like me.' The affect, for Lacan, is 'unmoored,' it 'goes with the drift' 'displaced, mad, inverted, but not repressed.' Freud prefers the term 'affect' to 'emotion,' since emotions pre-suppose an essential subject whose feelings exist internally to be 'emoted' externally, whilst affects are at the boundaries between the subject and the outside world.¹⁸ Whilst emotions already presuppose the control of the subject and are directed, anxiety as affect is beyond this subject; it affects the

¹⁷ See Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (ed.), *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986).

¹⁸ On this see Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 2006), pp. 13-4.

subject and operates in its construction. The subject experiences anxiety as something which takes it over, which is not held in check by forces of repression. What is repressed, Lacan continues 'are the signifiers that moor it;' when anxiety begins to be dealt with, directed and ordered, repression is in play (S10, 11). As it is for the Freud of *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, for Lacan the affect of anxiety is in some way primal, or originary to the subject, rather than the result of something impeding its development. In what follows the same will be argued about laughter.

In another turn of the screw, Lacan reverses Freud's theory of anxiety to state that in fact we are always afraid 'of' something, that anxiety 'is not without an object' (S10, 77). However, the subject 'does not know what object is involved' (S10, 77). This 'something' that the subject is afraid of is not an articulable object, it is not in the realm of the symbolic, it is 'an object which is outside any possible definition of objectivity' (S10, 75). Alenka Zupančič, in her book *Ethics of the Real*, uses a joke to develop this Lacanian idea:

A patient comes to [his analyst] complaining that a crocodile is hiding under his bed. During several sessions the analyst tries to persuade the patient that this is all in his imagination. A month later the analyst meets a friend, who is also a friend of his ex-patient, and asks him how the latter is. The friend answers: 'Do you mean the one who was eaten by a crocodile?' The lesson of this story is profoundly Lacanian; if we start from the idea that anxiety does not have an object, what are we then to call this thing which killed, which 'ate' the subject? What is the subject telling the analyst in this joke? Nothing other than: 'I have the *objet petit a* under my bed; I came too close to it.'¹⁹

The introduction of the *objet petit a* allows an understanding of anxiety which holds that it both does not and does have an object. The object of anxiety is the *objet petit a*. This is one of the most complex ideas in Lacanian psychoanalysis. To begin with, it can be thought of as the inaccessible or the object beyond the subject. In Lacan's work, from the seminar on anxiety onwards, the *objet a* comes to denote the object which can never be attained, which is

¹⁹ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 145.

the cause of desire rather than that towards which desire tends.²⁰ In this sense it is to be seen as an 'objective' as well as an 'object'; it is that which the subject desires, and that which the subject desires to be, both the object of desire, and the object-cause of desire, that which sets desire on its course.

Explaining the *objet a* in greater detail Lacan relates the concept to the foundational one of the mirror stage. In the early mirror stage essay, Lacan establishes the formation of the subject as the taking on of the 'armour of an alienating identity' (*Ecrits*, 78). Here, the subject (mis)recognises itself as a whole in the mirror, and simultaneously perceives its own inadequacy in relation to this supposed unified image which it perceives, thereby constituting the subject by lack; its first sense of itself as subject is in relation to its failure to live up to its image. Its image, or its identity, becomes its armour, but it is also that which alienates the subject since the subject appears to be lacking a completeness which the image possesses. This lack is the cause of anxiety, but it is also the object-cause of desire, since it appears as the object which would complete the subject, the *objet petit a*. In Seminar 11 Lacan explains that 'the *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as the symbol of lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking' (*S11*, 103). Any particular object which the subject later organizes its desire around is a false appearance of desire, which deals with the more originary anxiety by anchoring this lack to an object that the subject does not possess. Lacan remarks that 'objects prior to the status of the common object are [...] what is involved in the *objet a*' (*S10*, 80). The unknown object around which the subject structures itself then determines 'communicable' objects; actual objects, objects of everyday life. Anxiety, considered as a desire (before those directed desires), is both anticipation and prevention, longing and dread. Interestingly OED confirms this, retaining both 'desire' and 'uneasiness' as meanings. Common talk also reflects this doubleness; anxiety is a desire for something and a desire to avoid something, as with the phrase 'I am anxious to meet him' / 'I am anxious not to meet him'. Perhaps we might suggest that anxiety is a desire for an object whose actual appearance in consciousness would abolish the paradoxical balance between desire and fear.

²⁰ For the development of the term in Lacan see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Terms* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 125.

Discussions of psychoanalysis have given attention to the close boundary between attraction and repulsion, and indeed it has been discussed as specifically relevant to Dickens since Forster's famous comment that Dickens enjoyed an 'attraction of repulsion' to St. Giles's, which, as Phillip Collins has demonstrated, was a favourite phrase of Dickens's (*Life*, 1:11).²¹ This may be an attraction towards abandonment of the middle class identity that Dickens has been brought up into. The argument here is that anxiety is the key to thinking about this relationship; desire *for* and fear *of* are both directed processes with an 'object,' whereas anxiety precedes this mooring onto a communicable object, and plays a role in the constitution of this mooring. There is a deep anxiety constructing Dickens here and a sense that if attraction and repulsion can get confused with each other then the texts are not far away from the anxiety from which they came. *Barnaby Rudge* is a text that is anxious and always searching for objects for its anxiety. From the point of view of anxiety, fear and desire are undifferentiated, they have not been 'determined.' Fear *of* and desire *for* are closely connected because both are produced as a response to anxiety, which operates as a kind of turning point in the subject's development. As we shall see, laughter is a process which *gives anxiety an object*; it can be thought of as the movement which takes the subject from anxiety to fear. Yet, it also contains a 'signal' of the anxiety from which it came.

Derrida comments on Freudian anxiety, and is closer to Lacan than he usually is on the point. In *The Postcard* he too shows how this process is key in the development of the subject:

In order to define the trauma, one must then distinguish between *fear* (*Fucht*) and *anxiety*. The first is provoked by the *presence* of a *known* and *determined* object; the second is related to an *unknown, indeterminate* danger; as a preparation for danger, anxiety is more a protection against trauma; linked to repression, it appears at first to be an effect, but later, in *Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety* Freud will say, *à propos* of Little Hans, that anxiety produces repression.²²

²¹ Phillip Collins, *Dickens and Crime* (London: MacMillan, 1965), p. 248; Phillip Collins 'Dickens and London' in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, eds., H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2 vols) vol. 2, p. 537. See also Michael Hollington's discussion of the phrase in *Dickens and the Grotesque*, p. 24.

²² Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 297.

The emphasis in this case is on anxiety as a protection against trauma, as a measure against the subject's destruction. In my reading of Lacan so far I have seen anxiety as disorder, which is moored or controlled by language. Here anxiety is cause as well as effect, but what Derrida's comments add is the suggestion that anxiety itself provides a kind of order or 'protection' from the initial incompleteness of the subject. As such anxiety is both cause and effect, it seems to pull two ways, both responding to something by holding off trauma, and also bringing something on, causing directed fear. Anxiety cannot simply be seen as originary as it may be at times in Lacan. It is rather a moment of change or an 'event,' a kind of middle space which creates a past and a future in the subject's development. If as Derrida says here, 'anxiety produces repression' by causing the subject to transform it into fear that has an object, then laughter is an example of this process happening.

The idea of anxiety as both cause and effect is established by two major studies of anxiety that have hitherto not been mentioned: Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, both of which are significant influences on Lacan.²³ Also discussing the distinction between fear and anxiety, Kierkegaard remarks that:

[Anxiety] is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite, where anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility.²⁴

Where fear tricks you into feeling that you are scared of something definite, anxiety forces you to recognize indeterminacy. It establishes 'the possibility of possibility;' not the possibility of something but possibility which is unplaced, outside existing possibilities of thought. Heidegger shares the sense in which fear hides the truth of anxiety or is anxiety repressed, commenting that 'fear is anxiety [...] hidden from itself.'²⁵ Heidegger also develops this connection between anxiety and temporality. Anxiety has both cause and effect, and it is both cause and effect. Anxiety is not part of a chain of events but the event which creates the chain; anxiety is the producer of its own cause and effect; it is that which establishes linearity and the cause and effect structure that comes with temporality. If

²³ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980). Lacan references Kierkegaard directly in Seminar X, p. 15.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, p. 42.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 234.

laughter is that which gives anxiety an object, it establishes a linear temporality in which that object appears to be the cause of laughter. Thus, laughter somehow deals with anxiety by establishing the appearance of temporality. After laughter, like in a state of fear, there is cause and effect, whereas from the point of view of anxiety there is no such chronology.

However, laughter does more than this. As the moment that makes this movement of providing an object which then seems to be its cause, laughter shows us this process happening. Such an argument is in line with those made about laughter in this thesis overall, that laughter is 'sense sensing itself coming into being.' Laughter can show us a change or shift in historical consciousness, a moment at which new temporalities are established.

Lacan introduces laughter into the discussion of anxiety. In seminar 10 he remarks on the subject's desire of the other who we imagine will provide fulfilment. He comments that the

demand to make love (l'amour), if you wish to make "l'amourir", it is to die (mourir), it is even to die laughing (de rire). It is not for nothing that I underline that which in love participates in what I call the comic feeling. In any case it is indeed here that there ought to reside post-orgasmic relaxation. If what is satisfied is this demand, well then God knows, it is to be really satisfied, one gets out of it! (*S10*, 243)²⁶

Here, the desire of the loved-object is a way out of anxiety through repression; language displaces anxiety by channelling it into desire which can be anchored onto a given object. Through this process the subject can experience a 'little death', a phrase used by Lacan to describe a loss of symbolic presence. But Anxiety is not 'dealt with'; rather, it is translated into laughter, 'we die laughing'; or it becomes what Lacan calls 'the comic feeling' (*S10*, 11). This cannot be simply explained with a term like satisfaction. The demand is not satisfied as such, but rather 'one gets out of it.' Laughter can be thought of as an orgasmic moment if it is a kind of relinquishing of subjectivity. It therefore gets out of the anxious structure that is the ego. Yet, something has changed; the 'comic feeling' has replaced a sense of anxiety which one has somehow 'got out of'. Laughter seems to have something of a double valency, both freeing the subject from anxiety and as we have seen, giving it an object.

²⁶ For a discussion of this section in seminar X see Roberto Harari, *Lacan's Seminar on Anxiety: An Introduction* (New York: Other Press, 2001), p. 224.

Laughter can be part of producing apparently rational 'fear' with a determined cause because it creates an 'object' which can then operate as something to organize anxiety around. However, laughter also signals the anxiety that has preceded this organized relationship to the object.

Psychoanalyst Charles Mauron links laughter to anxiety in his 1969 book *La Psychocritique du Genre Comique*, one of the few sustained studies of psychoanalysis and comedy.²⁷ Mauron remarks that comedy is 'la renversement des situations d'angoisse,' [the reversal of the situation of anxiety].²⁸ Mauron's argument develops to see comedy as a safety mechanism for dealing with anxiety. He argues that comedy provides a release from psychic blockage, so that it deals with and solves psychic problems. There is a parallel between Mauron and Northrop Frye's comments on comedy. Frye remarks that 'psychologically [comedy] is like the removal of a neurosis or blocking point and the restoration of an unbroken current of energy.'²⁹ Mauron belongs with those psychoanalysts who place the ego at the centre, as discussed in the introduction. In this reading comedy is a successful process that deals with anxiety, removing it; but as Lacan suggests, there is no successful satisfaction of anxiety, and yet one 'gets out of it'; anxiety becomes laughter, but it does not disappear.

That Mauron should describe the process of moving from anxiety to comedy as 'renversement' is suggestive. Renversement implies inverting or reverting one thing into something else, and OED retains a sense that renversement has been historically used as a synonym for metamorphosis. Renversement does not imply progress or development and this connects it to the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*, which happens when thesis and antithesis meet. A traditional reading of Hegel might read this in terms of a progress narrative, making *Aufhebung* a triumph of the new over the old that needs overcoming.

Mauron reads theorist of laughter Thomas Hobbes against the grain, arguing that there is an inward dialectical movement in the subject, overturning earlier commentators who see Hobbes's thesis as evidence of the static and ahistorical ideology of hierarchical superiority and/or moral censure (see discussions of laughter as 'superiority' in this thesis from page 28). Mauron works with the notion of the self's illusory superiority, which is only

²⁷ For the key recent study see Alenka Zupančič *The Odd One In* (London: MIT Press, 2008)

²⁸ Charles Mauron, *Psychocritique du Genre Comique* (Paris : Librairie Jose Corti, 1964), p. 72.

²⁹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p.171.

momentarily sustained against the perception of its own weakness and inferiority. Thus, if the *Aufhebung* can be read in these terms it is not the totalizing motion of one thing dealing with another but a kind of trick where something new is produced which appears to have a history behind it.³⁰ This challenges the chronological sense that the *Aufhebung* produces because in showing that structure coming into being it indicates that it cannot have been there to govern that process, making it a kind of self-deception, something that has to hide where it comes from.

These discussions of anxiety have provided two hypotheses. The first is that laughter and anxiety share a number of characteristics, and that laughter is in a certain sense borne out of anxiety. In this role *laughter functions to give anxiety an object*. Secondly, it has been argued that laughter does not eradicate anxiety but always contains the signal of the anxiety from which it comes. The implications of this can be thought through in terms of a relationship of *Aufhebung*. The moment of laughter is a moment of *Aufhebung*, an 'event' which changes and shifts the structure of the subject. As was said of anxiety, laughter establishes history, mooring unplaced anxiety into a structure of cause and effect.

This laughter establishes a *new* history. What needs to be emphasised here is the creativity of laughter, or even the destructive creativity, for which even the smallest joke provides evidence. The moment of laughter is one in which cause and effect are established, but laughter shows us this – indicating that what is constructed as rational sense is not anchored or secured anywhere, and thus returning the subject not to the very anxiety from which it came but to new anxieties. Something has been changed, so that laughter shows us that history is not always the same history but something constantly changing. If laughter produces a history, a cause and effect structure, then it also shows that history, like nature in the previous chapter, is not stable but a constantly changing thing, always anxious for its own stability. It is this that *Barnaby Rudge*, as a novel dealing with laughter and history, demonstrates.

³⁰ Michael Billig similarly sees Hobbes as a writer concerned with self-deception, see *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: SAGE, 2005), p. 55.

Barnaby Rudge

Barnaby Rudge is full of laughter. It is also, perhaps along with *Great Expectations*, the novel most concerned with anxiety. The fact that the novel has not been considered 'comic' is telling, and is part of this thesis's concern with laughter rather than comedy. It may be that laughter in this novel does not seem comic on account of its anxiety. The novel, perhaps more than any other in Dickens' oeuvre, is full of diabolical characters and devils, which have been discussed as uncanny and grotesque, and in terms of marginality.³¹ Such discussions have often made reference to these characters' laughter, though the only sustained discussion of the role of laughter in the novel is that of James Kincaid.³² He argues that Dickens directs the reader's laughter so as to bring them round to his particular worldview. For Kincaid, when we laugh at John Willet we have been supporting tyranny, and by laughing at Sim Tappertit we have been dismissing its significance; laughter means agreement with a particular view. 'We have' writes Kincaid, 'created with our laughter an assumed world of safety and comfort' which Dickens then blows apart.³³ Laughter is aligned with safety; it provides a sense or appearance of 'freedom and comfort.'³⁴ John Carey argues that Dickens transforms violent images and situations into comedy in order to re-order a frightening and hostile world.³⁵ The arguments share a sense of what comedy does, making it aligned with safety rather than anxiety, but see the novel's relationship to this in opposing ways; one seeing comedy ruined by violence and the other seeing violence controlled and dealt with by comedy. This chapter argues that laughter is not safe but the violent force, that it creates and imposes ways of thinking by producing histories that violently impose on its subjects.

³¹ See Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque*, pp. 99 – 122; Michael Hollington 'Monstrous Faces: Physiognomy in *Barnaby Rudge*,' *Dickens Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1991), pp. 6-14; Natalie McKnight, pp. 81-94.

³² James Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 105-131.

³³ Kincaid, p. 108.

³⁴ Kincaid, p. 110.

³⁵ Carey, p. 74.

It is significant that the novel has no one single character around whom anxiety is centred, such as Quilp, and no single standout comic figure, such as Weller or Mr Jingle. There is no one object of anxiety, and no one comic object. Rather, there is a long list of such characters, including Maypole Hugh, Ned Dennis the Hangman, Barnaby's raven Grip and Barnaby himself, who trouble the text, or who exist as points of anxiety within it. This multiplicity suggests the novel's own anxiety and search for an object for it. All these characters are also associated with laughter. In accordance with this thesis, which is focussed on the relationship between subjectivity and laughter, the chapter will treat a number of these identities and the mechanisms involved in their experiences of laughter.

In terms of the novel's plot trajectory, Hugh's proximity to Barnaby and his mother from the start of the novel, and his sexual threatening of Dolly Varden, make him the first disruptive figure (*BR*, 176). That Hugh is associated with laughter is immediately apparent. His laughter at first appears excessive and self-destructive: 'Hugh laughed again, and with such thorough abandonment to his mad humour, that his limbs seemed dislocated, and his whole frame in danger of tumbling to pieces' (*BR*, 325). Hugh's laughter does not erupt from within but overtakes him as if from outside, from Hugh's 'thorough abandonment' to another force. The laughter is described as a 'mad humour' which produces dislocation, and the threat of 'his whole frame [...] tumbling to pieces;' it appears that laughter is on the side of destruction.

However, the key here is that laughter is not the process of tumbling to pieces but 'the *danger* of tumbling to pieces' [my emphasis]. This 'danger of tumbling to pieces' invokes Lacan's *corps morcelé* (body in pieces), the anxiety that *both* constitutes and besieges the would-be fully integrated ego. This moment is the turning point at which the subject moves away from unplaced anxiety and attempts to moor it somewhere, exactly what Hugh's laughter does here. Hugh is not represented as a figure inwardly torn by anxiety but as one who has always already prevented it by projecting it as aggression, in laughter as in his other acts. In his laughter, the thing which enacts the search for an object (here Sim Tappertit is the object of laughter) we also face the signal of the anxiety we attempt to deal with, threatening the subject's order in the moment that order is imposed. Thus, laughter here is not destructive but formational; the 'danger' that it signals is part of the subject's

construction. Laughter is an ordering force, but equally radically, it contains the signal of anxiety, so that the order it imposes is based upon nothing and is in the process of changing. In other words, laughter enacts the subject coming into being.

If Lacan can remark that 'anxiety is a signal' insofar as it indicates to the subject his possible collapse, then laughter too is a signal (*S10*, 134). Laughter does not collapse the subject but it signals to the subject that its order is something *imposed* in response to anxiety or as a way of dealing with anxiety. It shows that the subject's stable appearance is not a natural state but something achieved through the kind of self-deception Maeron finds in Hobbes: the laughter creates hierarchy and tricks the subject into thinking that hierarchy was already there to be reflected. Hugh laughs at another person, establishing an object of laughter, but because this changes his relationship to the other, his own subjectivity changes and is therefore shown to be unsecure, contingent and unstable.

If laughter is formational of subjectivity, this is not to say that the subject is in control of the process. Hugh's laughter controls him:

In fact, a sense of something whimsical in their companionship seemed to have taken entire possession of his rude brain. The bare fact of being patronised by a great man whom he could have crushed with one hand, appeared in his eyes so eccentric and humourous, that a kind of ferocious merriment gained the mastery over him, and quite subdued his brutal nature (*BR*, 325).

Hugh's laughter takes 'possession' of him and gains 'mastery' over him. His 'nature' is subdued by the laughter, so that laughter is not on the side of pre-existing, 'natural' identity but appears to be something which operates on the subject. His laughter bears unexpected resemblance to the opening paragraph of Foucault's *The Order of Things*, where laughter likewise assumes control of and masters the subject:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, the thought the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion

of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.³⁶

Both laughs come from outside, taking over the subject, and Foucault remarks that 'this passage from Borges kept me laughing for a long time, though not without a certain uneasiness that I found hard to shake off.'³⁷ In Hugh's laughter 'his limbs seemed dislocated, and his whole frame in danger of tumbling to pieces' (*BR*, 325). This idea returns in *Edwin Drood* where Jasper's 'drowsy laughter' constructs him as a subject: 'the man whose scattered consciousness has thus fantastically pieced itself together' (*ED*, 7). In Foucault's laughter the 'ordered surfaces [...] with which we [...] tame the wild profusion of existing things' are likewise threatened. In both cases it is the distinction between the same and the other that is challenged. Laughter shows that the subject is not in control of its own constitution. In her discussion of the passage from Foucault in her book *Laughter*, Anca Parvulescu writes that laughter announces that 'Foucault is disappropriated; his thought is not his property'.³⁸ The subject is not self-contained as Jasper is not; its very thoughts, desires and affects are constructed from outside. The reason that laughter is connected to anxiety is not that it is destructive but that it is constitutive, on the side of the subject's development, but that as it is an *Aufhebung* moment, it is also the signal that *there is nothing there to guide and control this process*. There is no subject to begin with; laughter, like anxiety, functions to form it. The danger of Hugh's character is this willingness to surrender himself to this whimsical engagement with the force of laughter. It makes him not destructive of ideology but completely willing to be the subject of ideology. Whereas for Jingle in *Pickwick Papers* laughter must be seen as coming from within, Hugh accepts that it comes from without. Through Hugh, Dickens shows us the real danger of laughter, not that it can destroy what we believe in but that it can form and impose a way of thinking onto its subjects.

On the other hand this is also the way in which laughter can threaten ideology: it shows that the structures that are imposed have no basis in the natural, meaning that they cannot embed themselves as permanent. In his essay 'On the Destructive Character' Walter

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xviii.

³⁷ Foucault, p. xix.

³⁸ Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (London: MIT Press, 2010), p. 13.

Benjamin writes, 'the destructive character sees nothing permanent. But for this reason he sees ways everywhere [...] No moment can know what the next will bring'.³⁹ This seems an apt definition of Hugh who does not care what he becomes, in what direction he goes; 'Make anything you like of me!' he says to Tappertit (*BR*, 325). For Benjamin 'the destructive character has no interest in being understood' which may be true of Barnaby, certainly of Hugh, whose decisions have 'something whimsical' about them, and who never explains the course he takes.

Like Hugh, Barnaby appears to be more free than those who have to remain consistent subjects:

'Ha ha! Why, how much better to be silly, than as wise as you! You don't see shadowy people there, like those that live in sleep—not you. Nor eyes in the knotted panes of glass, nor swift ghosts when it blows hard, nor do you hear voices in the air, nor see men stalking in the sky—not you! I lead a merrier life than you, with all your cleverness. You're the dull men. We're the bright ones. Ha! ha! I'll not change with you, clever as you are,—not I!' (*BR*, 94)

John Bowen writes that 'through their adolescence, illegitimacy, illiteracy and idiocy' these characters represent that which 'exceeds or goes beyond the laws and conventions of political community in the novel.'⁴⁰ These points are important, since they highlight the investment of something celebratory in these destructive characters, just as Benjamin is on the side of the destructive character in his writing. In Chapter Four I discussed Adorno's idea that Quilp is pre-bourgeois and this may be a much better way of thinking about both Hugh and Barnaby and much else in the novel too.

Barnaby and Hugh, then, are not so much characters celebrated as figures of liberation, of desires allowed to express themselves outside of bourgeois restrictions (compare the then contemporary anxieties about Chartism), but are figures who do not see their subjectivity in a bourgeois way. As we have seen in Hugh's laughter, always issued at these moments at

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'On the Destructive Character' in *Selected Writings*, vol 2, 1927-1934, ed., Michael W Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans., Rodney Livingstone (London: Belknap Press, 1999), pp. 541-542 (p. 542).

⁴⁰ Bowen, p. 178.

which he seems to escape restraint and control, the laughter is not an expression of the individual over society but a moment where the individual is constructed and changed by social forces. As McKnight argues, in moments such as these 'the rational approach [...] to reality is shown [...] to be limiting,' but the rational approach would need to include the idea of the subject as single and autonomous, since what is being shown here is not the possibility of liberating the individual from social or political constraints but the individual as a social and political creation.⁴¹ If there is a freedom in the comic figure, as there seems to be, it is the freedom that is provided by the *Aufhebung*, not a freedom to be oneself against a prohibitive society but an openness for radical change of oneself, a willingness to surrender to other forces. The comic figure knows that that if the subject is constituted by moments of *Aufhebung* or 'events' that bring it into being, then there are no natural laws there to govern what the subject can become. Comic figures are not those liberated from social forces but those who see themselves as created by social forces and therefore free and open to be changed and transformed as subjects.

Another diabolical/comic figure in the novel who matches this definition is Barnaby's pet raven Grip, described as 'the embodied spirit of evil biding his time of mischief' who repeatedly utters the phrase 'I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a devil' (*BR*, 212, 216). Grip is linked to both Barnaby and to Hugh, since Barnaby sees the three of them as a group; as when he receives a reward and states that it is 'for Grip, and me, and Hugh, to share among us' (*BR*, 96). Discussing their relationship to animality, Iain Crawford makes the link between the three apparent, commenting that Hugh, like Barnaby, 'lives on the margins of society and is far more at ease with animals and birds than with human beings.'⁴² Like Hugh, who cares little what his identity becomes ('make anything you like of me!') and Barnaby, who does not want to be brought within reason ('how much better to be silly, than as wise as you'), Grip too is destructive in his unpredictability, in that he sees ways everywhere, caring little which path he takes: 'brave Grip, who cares for nothing, and when the wind rolls him over in the dust, turns manfully to bite it' (*BR*, 147). Grip, like Hugh, cannot controlled by others:

⁴¹ McKnight, p. 38.

⁴² Iain Crawford, 'Dickens, Classical Myth and the Representation of Social Order in *Barnaby Rudge*' in *Dickensian* 93.3 [443] (Winter 1997), pp. 185-97 (p. 189).

'Call him!' echoed Barnaby, sitting upright upon the floor, and staring vacantly at Gabriel, as he thrust his hair back from his face. 'But who can make him come! He calls me, and makes me go where he will. He goes on before, and I follow. He's the master, and I'm the man. Is that the truth, Grip?'

[...] 'I make HIM come?' [...] 'I make HIM come! Ha ha ha!' (BR, 61)

Barnaby calls Grip his 'master' and laughs, just as laughter has 'mastery' over Hugh, remarking that 'he goes on before, and I follow' and that he 'makes me go where he will.' There is also the question whether Grip is real, since he speaks, and since at one point he seems to be invisible to other characters (BR, 51). He is a kind of embodiment of laughter itself; it is commented that 'the bird has all the wit' and every time he speaks he laughs, and makes Barnaby laugh; "'I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a devil,'" and flapped his wings against his sides as if he were bursting with laughter. Barnaby clapped his hands, and fairly rolled upon the ground in an ecstasy of delight' (BR, 61). Barnaby is in the 'grip' of Grip, just as Hugh is in the 'grip' of his laughter. When Grip makes Barnaby laugh it is not liberating. Barnaby laughs here at the idea of freedom and of being in control; 'I make HIM come? Ha!' Thus his laughter, like Hugh's, is not on the side of the human, against the oppressions and restrictions of society, but rather it is against the idea of the human as an autonomous subject, it is a submission to the forces of ideology. Comic characters relinquish the dream of unique autonomy, allowing themselves to become what society makes them.

This becomes apparent in the reactions of others to these characters. When Barnaby laughs, Mr Willet remarks that 'he wants imagination,' and that he has 'tried to instil it into him, many and many's the time; but he an't made for it; that's the fact' (BR, 94). On meeting Hugh, Mr Willet similarly remarks, 'that chap, I was a saying, though he has all his faculties about him, somewheres or another, bottled up and corked down, has no more imagination than Barnaby has. And why hasn't he?' (BR, 99-100). Barnaby and Hugh are figures of laughter, and they are figures of destruction, and they are both described as having no imagination. This is especially strange since we know that Barnaby 'imagines things' in the traditional sense; 'shadowy people, [...] eyes in the knotted panes of glass, swift ghosts, [...] voices in the air [and] men stalking in the sky' (BR, 94). In the novel, having no imagination is dangerous or mad, since when Mr Hardale comments that Hugh has 'an evil eye,' Willet

responds, 'there's no imagination in his eye, certainly' (BR, 285). Something of a discussion of imagination is demanded here. The demand for imagination, as in the familiar command 'use your imagination,' insists that the subject 'be itself,' away from cultural contamination. In this context imagination would be the subject's own identity, a sense of internality in which the subject can be anchored and made to be consistent. In short, imagination is not spontaneous but something which fixes the subject. Mr Willet and Hardale, who don't laugh, insist upon subjectivity from within, a consistent and natural stable subject. Hugh, Barnaby and Grip, the novel's comic characters, reject this, letting themselves be formed and reformed as subjects by the forces around them, claiming no 'imagination' of their own.

Kincaid calls laughter in *Barnaby Rudge* a 'disguise for aggression.'⁴³ He discusses, for example, one of the funniest moments in the novel, where Sim Tappertit decides to take the afternoon off work:

'I'll do nothing to-day,' said Mr Tappertit, dashing it down again, 'but grind. I'll grind up all the tools. Grinding will suit my present humour well. Joe!'

Whirr-r-r-r. The grindstone was soon in motion; the sparks were flying off in showers. This was the occupation for his heated spirit.

Whirr-r-r-r-r-r-r.

'Something will come of this!' said Mr Tappertit, pausing as if in triumph, and wiping his heated face upon his sleeve. 'Something will come of this. I hope it mayn't be human gore.'

Whirr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r. (BR, 49)

The moment is the perfect illustration of laughter's double movement to assert and undermine the subject. It both forms the subject and threatens that formation by signalling the subject's construction and basis in nothing stable. Discussing the passage, Kincaid argues that the laughter here is evasive, and that the purpose of laughter is to divert from the underlying tyranny. It is tempting to make an alternative argument; that the comic here makes fun of or ridicules the tyranny that characterizes the novel, mocking it. However, this

⁴³ Kincaid, p. 110.

is not the counter argument that I want to make here. Glossing Lacan, Slavoj Žižek writes that comedy can 'openly display the madness' that is 'already present' in the state.⁴⁴ The argument suggests what I have been arguing in this thesis, that comedy rehearses a process of something that is already present, but it draws attention to itself as such a process. Sim Tappertit's actions repeat a social injunction to tyrannize. Žižek writes that 'to enjoy is not a matter of following one's spontaneous tendencies; it is rather something we do as a kind of weird and twisted ethical duty.'⁴⁵ Tappertit shows in a way much more like the discussion of Quilp in Chapter Four, how laughter can establish and justify dangerous subjectivities. As with Barnaby and Hugh, the comedy comes from an 'anything can happen' attitude as Sim says 'something will come of this!'. Žižek's comment seems to fit perfectly: Sim follows social injunctions out of a kind of twisted duty, 'openly displaying' to us the madness and violence present in the state.

Sim says, 'grinding will suit my present humour,' just as elsewhere we saw that Quilp justifies cruelty in these terms: 'How could I be so cruel! [...] Because I was in the humour' (OSC, 375). However, this gesture is not at all funny in itself, indeed it is cruel, since it asserts the violent nature of himself as something damaging to others. Laughter here is shown to be part of 'giving anxiety an object' in that it attempts to assert the internal subjectivity which justifies and explains the actions that are played out. Tappertit turns himself into the object of fear. But the comic turn only happens when this process shows itself to be a replica of the processes that operate elsewhere; the moment becomes comic when it is 'openly displaying the madness' that is 'already present' in the state, showing how the state turns anxiety into fear.

The joke, like other narratives, gives anxiety an object by establishing a cause for the laughter which then appears to be only a response. Tappertit's subjectivity is produced as an explanation for his actions. Because laughter appears to be a response it seems to be evidence of the pre-existence of what it responds to. In fact it also changes that which it responds to, creating it in new ways, creating a new subjectivity for Tappertit for example, as an object of fear. Again this makes laughter productive of history in that it produces the causes it pretends to discover, but it is also the thing that reveals this process to us, showing

⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 342.

⁴⁵ Žižek, p. 343.

us that history is something produced and never accessed, responded to or represented 'in itself.' In other words, laughter shows us that causes are always conditioned by effects and responses. Like the writing of history, laughter creates what it responds to, and it is also destructive because it shows that what it creates is unstable and subject to changes effected by the response and future responses.

Laughter, then, destabilizes in the act of establishing chronology or history. Chester, in an attempt to maintain stable identity, never laughs:

his nearest approach to a laugh in which he ever indulged (and that but seldom and only on extreme occasions), never even curled his lip or effected the smallest change in—no, not so much as a slight wagging of—his great, fat, double chin, which at these times, as at all others, remained a perfect desert in the broad map of his face; one changeless, dull, tremendous blank. (*BR*, 242-3)

Laughter shows the subject to be in a state of movement and production and Chester, who wants to keep things as they are, can never laugh. He is the opposite to the comic figures discussed above, who all submit to laughter and with it to their ever-changing subjectivities. Laughter is an event and Chester wants to stop events happening in order to maintain an order at which he sits at the top. Chester must have been inspired by the eighteenth century figure Phillip Stanhope, the fourth Earl of Chesterfield, who famously wrote to his son in a letter:

I would heartily wish that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live. Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill-manners; it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry. In my mind there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter. I am neither of a melancholy nor a cynical disposition, and am as willing and as apt to be pleased as anybody; but I am sure that since I have had the full use of my reason nobody has ever heard me laugh.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Phillip Dormer Stanhope, *Letters Written by the Earl of Chesterfield to His Son* (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1897), p. 149.

Stanhope of *Chesterfield* is the embodiment of an aspect of the eighteenth century, and a regimented politeness which continues into the nineteenth century but which Dickens and his modernity want to break from. Similarly in *Barnaby Rudge*, the message about laughter is double. It is both a warning of the dangers of its constructive power, a warning about what subjects laughter can produce and what results it can have, and simultaneously an awareness of its freedom, a possibility of escaping the orders that are imposed and of forming new communities and new ways of thinking. Whilst laughter can be the most dangerous thing, creating dangerous rationalities, when there is laughter there is always anxiety, and with it there is always movement and change. Laughter and anxiety keep things moving. In the novel the possibility of losing laughter is raised, not only through Chester but through the other characters too:

I'm glad Miss Dolly can laugh,' cried Miggs with a feeble titter. 'I like to see folks a-laughing—so do you, mim, don't you? [...] Though there an't such a great deal to laugh at now. (BR, 671)

In the context of the various roles laughter plays in the novel this is not a mere statement that it is 'good to laugh.' Rather, it posits the lack of laughter as the world of stability, the world without potential for change, just as Chester wants it to be. Though even in his tone there is a resistance to this; his dominant discourse is, for all its cynicism, actually quite amusing and fascinating. Chester dominates all the other characters through his impressive control over his language, and he does the same to the reader, through a certain witty deflation of the power of honest emotions and morality. There is a history behind *Chesterfield*'s denigration of laughter. Quentin Skinner for example points to a significant shift in Hobbes' laughter when he demonstrates a contempt for the one who laughs.⁴⁷ The old Aristotelian hierarchy of laughter at the lower 'risible' and inherently ugly objects of laughter was giving way by the early seventeenth century to the view that laughter was itself a lower activity, and a degrading threat to those who gave way to it. The novel gives us not only a reflection of this change but a reason for it. For the aristocratic Chester, laughter is a demeaning surrender to the lower natural impulses of the body. This completely opposes Chester to Dickens's 'attraction of repulsion' which involves acute

⁴⁷ Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 390-5.

identification with the abject both in the body and in society. Chester wants to maintain a particular history and a particular past, the history of the uncivilized man that he is above. The older view of laughter, laughing down at the low, creates the idea of laughter as superiority. But, because of the fact that laughter not only reflects but creates these structures, as this thesis has argued, this view of laughter must be done away with because it shows that superiority is based on nothing but processes like laughter. Laughter creates and changes history, so it must be expelled for a particular history to be retained. The history of laughter here may be that whereas aristocrats found it objectionable to laugh in the eighteenth century, after 1832, so do the bourgeois (except in a rational and controlled way.)

The novel documents the age's attempt to suppress laughter, and with it change, and this has succeeded, but laughter still threatens, as Grip's fate shows:

Grip [...] was profoundly silent. [...] For a whole year he never indulged in any other sound than a grave, decorous croak. At the expiration of that term [...] a witness [...] heard him laugh, the bird himself advanced with fantastic steps to the very door of the bar, and there cried, 'I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a devil!' with extraordinary rapture. [...] He has very probably gone on talking to the present time. (BR, 688)

The novel shows that to stop change, to maintain things as they are, one would have to stop laughter. Yet laughter, as we have seen, is involved in constructing this order in the first place. A period of reduced change, of reduced laughter, might temporarily impose itself, but just as Grip recovers his diabolical laughter, so too will anxious movement continue, reforming history and the structures in place.

We can say that laughter moves anxiety on by giving it an object, making rational sense and a linear cause and effect structure where something which appears to have caused laughter is retroactively constructed by that laughter, as in *Nachträglichkeit*. As such laughter in the novel produces rationality, and is successful in doing so, but in producing rationality it shows that rationality to be grounded on nothing. Alenka Zupančič writes that 'we don't laugh because spirit or thought failed to be expressed, or didn't get through correctly, we

laugh because a thought or spirit *did* emerge, materialize “out of nothing” (but words).’⁴⁸ By constructing history, laughter shows that it has nothing essential behind the chronologies we tell ourselves. As such laughter contains the signal of the anxiety from which it came. Just as for Derrida ‘the process of *Aufhebung* also escapes rationality or lies beyond it, in the sense that the reason that it constitutes cannot be there from the beginning to control that process,’ so too does laughter in *Barnaby Rudge* show itself as something which brings the past and present into being in new and therefore always changeable ways.⁴⁹

Laughter is an ‘event’ that produces a past and present in relation to each other. In this way it is a historicizing force. In much the same way that a historicist myth claims that the past can be accurately represented, a myth in theorizations and discussions of laughter claims that laughter is only a response to what it perceives or responds to. However, just as the writing of history imposes on and modifies that which it reads, so too does laughter condition and change that which is ‘responds to’ or that which ‘causes’ it. Laughter, like the writing of history, produces a new relationship between past and present, but it can also show this new relationship between past and present coming into being, showing that histories are always changeable and impermanent.

Dickens’s own return to the past should be set in these terms. *Barnaby Rudge* is an historical novel and it deals with how revolution has been dealt with historically. The novel uses the Gordon Riots as an allegory for the repression of working class pressure that had occurred in the years prior to the novel’s publication. It demonstrates the violence with which revolution was crushed, and it connects this to laughter and comedy. Towards the end of the novel Dennis the Hangman discusses with Hugh how revolutionary violence is responded to. Present in the conversation is Gashford, a crucial character in that he is aspirational and upwardly mobile, a secretary looking to manipulate and benefit himself in class terms. Gashford opposes the working class figure of Hugh as a destructive character. Gashford and Dennis, who switches sides and betrays Hugh, share a joke about containing and responding to violence. Hugh begins:

‘Strike while the iron’s hot; that’s what I say.’

⁴⁸ Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, p. 119.

⁴⁹ Suzanne Gearhart, ‘The Remnants of Philosophy: Psychoanalysis after *Glas*’ in *Hegel After Derrida*, ed. Stuart Barnett (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 147-170 (p. 156).

‘Ah!’ retorted Dennis, shaking his head, with a kind of pity for his friend’s ingenuous youth: ‘but suppose the iron an’t hot, brother? You must get people’s blood up afore you strike, and have ‘em in the humour. There wasn’t quite enough to provoke ‘em today, I tell you. If you’d had your way, you’d have spoilt the fun to come, and ruined us.’

‘Dennis is quite right,’ said Gashford, smoothly. ‘He is perfectly correct. Dennis has great knowledge of the world.’

‘I ought to have, Muster Gashford, seeing what a many people I’ve helped out of it, eh?’ grinned the hangman, whispering the words behind his hand.

The secretary laughed at this jest as much as Dennis could desire, and when he had done, said, turning to Hugh:

‘Dennis’s policy was mine, as you may have observed. You saw, for instance, how I fell when I was set upon. I made no resistance. I did nothing to provoke an outbreak. Oh dear no!’

‘No, by the Lord Harry!’ cried Dennis with a noisy laugh, ‘you went down very quiet, Muster Gashford – and very flat besides. [...] I never see a man lay flatter nor more still – with the life in him – than you did today. [...]

The secretary’s face, as Dennis roared with laughter, and turned his wrinkled eyes on Hugh who did the like, might have furnished a study for the devil’s picture.’ (*BR*, 369)

Here, Hugh is fooled in a way that Weller would not be, as bourgeois logic enters into the spirit of revolution. Gashford, a manipulating and hypocritical figure throughout, has manipulated Hugh not only into thinking his reaction to being beaten by the mob was deliberate but into a bourgeois logic of responding to revolt. Gashford says ‘I made no resistance. I did nothing to provoke an outbreak. Oh dear no!’ justifying a forthcoming act of revenge on the grounds that the attack against him was unprovoked. He claims this despite his logic (which he has already instilled in Dennis) that one must ‘get people’s blood up afore you strike,’ pointing to the fact that this has been the plan from the start, to incite

violence in order to justify violent retaliation against this revolutionary spirit. It shows us the novel's central concern with incredibly violent reaction against revolution.

These jokes are all about death and the threat of the gallows, which have been threatening Hugh since Chester 'binds him to the gallows' early on, just as *Oliver Twist* has the threat of the gallows hanging over him for the duration of that novel (BR, 199). The laughter here is knowing, it is 'in on the joke,' recognizing that these revolutionary figures are walking into a trap which will lead to their being 'justifiably' hanged, as both Hugh and Dennis will go on to be at the end of the novel. Gashford, framed as 'the devil' here, is a very different kind of devil to Hugh as a destructive character discussed above. This is a bourgeois devil whose laughter is a trickery directed at the unfortunate figures outside of the knowledge of the joke. Laughter has changed here, and we are far from the comedy of Weller at the trial in *Pickwick Papers* where it is the bourgeois figures who are blind to the jokes. Here instead, an 'in joke' tricks revolutionary spirit into getting itself hanged. The logic of the joke then is like that of Dennis, who has 'helped' a 'great many people' out of life. If bourgeois figures laugh then it is in this controlled and self-serving way. Most importantly, the laughter provides an 'object for anxiety' in the terms established in the first half of this chapter and this object of anxiety is the working class. The object of laughter is the party fooled by this reactionary trick, here the working class revolutionary whose 'blood is up' and who can be crushed by seemingly legitimate reaction because they have been incited into violence by the tricks of men like Gashford. The role of laughter has been to give anxiety this object, creating an image of the working class to which Gashford and those like him can attach their anxieties. Laughter, then, establishes the appearance of chronology in which it appears that the working class exists first in order to cause directed 'fear,' whereas in fact it comes into being as an object by processes like this laughter which organize unplaced 'anxiety' around an object. Laughter can transform the object of laughter into a concrete object that can be 'feared,' making it into an 'other' than can then be attacked. For his own contemporary readers, Dickens comments on the repression of a revolution in his own moment which creates a new history of the Gordon Riots in relation to the repression of revolution in the 1830s. By showing that the containment of revolution has historically involved creating an object of fear and enacting reactionary violence against it Dickens shows that this process is happening once more in the 1830s as a way that the bourgeois class deals with its anxieties.

All laughter then is history coming into being in that it creates a new chronology and a new relationship between past and present. The joke establishes a new relationship between A and B, or between subject and object, and it may make this relationship appear to have pre-existed. However, it also has the capacity to show this new relation coming into being. Whilst under one set of conditions a joke may re-enforce the ideology it appears to 'represent' and may even naturalize that ideology, in another set of conditions it can show that ideology for what it is, something produced by processes like joking. Whether the subjects in question notice it or not, the joke always contains anxiety because it is a moment of change, showing that the relationships between those involved is never stable.

Chapter Seven: *Great Expectations* and Comic Plots

‘The cruel joke is just as original as harmless mirth’

Walter Benjamin¹

This final chapter of the thesis brings together the previous two, which have argued that laughter can create origins and natures, and that laughter can create histories and chronologies. This chapter extends these discussions to the concept of plotting, an idea obviously central to Dickens, who is well known for complex and unusual plot structures. Laughter has often been thought of as something which we might say is against the plot. Whilst plots make coherent sense, laughter shatters sense, or whilst plots involve moving from A to B, laughter involves subverting this movement. This thesis however, has focussed on how laughter can produce order and sense, revealing its constructive capacity to produce origins and chronologies. This makes laughter a plotting force. It is argued here that the Dickensian plot is shown to contain the doubleness this thesis has identified in laughter; it both constructs reason and order, and shows that order to be constructed, and therefore unsecured and always subject to change. Dickens’s plots are concerned with showing us events happening and can therefore be thought of as comic.

Here, the implications of the argument that laughter is an event reach their conclusion. I have argued that laughter is *an event which shows itself as an event*. This is exactly how Dickens’s plots operate; they construct reality and order, retroactively creating the appearance of linearity, but they also show themselves doing so, making the reality that they construct something that is *produced* rather than *reflecting* something pre-existing. This reading of Dickens is opposed to those who have seen him as a writer of realism, which is a position that many have taken up in relation to *Great Expectations*.² Rather than being a realist who sees writing as representing reality, Dickens in *Great Expectations* shows reality coming into being. The novel is essentially comic in the terms of this thesis, then, in that it

¹ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 127.

² See Dennis Walder (ed.), *The Realist Novel* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 139-170.

shows us that writing and speaking are events which transform the world around them, not mere representations of that world.

It is useful to make introductory reference to another concept here which helps bring out the implications of seeing laughter as event: Jacques Lacan's idea of the *sinthome*. Lacan introduces the word *sinthome* in Seminar 17 to demarcate something different to his concept of the 'symptom.' The concept has several meanings, but to try to draw some together in a definition we can say that it is the unanalysable, interminable and irreducible symptom which ties our unconscious together; that inner something without which our mental apparatuses could oscillate out of control. Lee Edelman puts it nicely when he describes the *sinthome* as 'the singularity of the subject's existence [...] the particular way in which the subject manages to knot together the orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real.' But as Edelman observes, the *sinthome* is archaic. In short, there is nothing constant or stable about the subjects the *sinthome* produces.³ In other words, it is not an essentialist idea because, whereas we all have *sinthomes*, they are not the same simple thing in all of us, but are little singular meaningless and repetitive bits that link to our own most primitive *enjoyment*; that of life itself.⁴ As discussed, the 'event' is productive of its own past and future (pages 53-71). Likewise, the *sinthome* has to do with the path the subject takes and the way s/he ties their identity together, the creation of the narrative of subjectivity. It is not just the symptom (the way we respond to something) but the way that the response also changes the subject who responds. In this way it is eventual. Laughter, it will be argued here as a culmination of what has been argued in this thesis, operates not as a symptom, a response to something else, but on a *sinthomatic* level; it is a 'response' or symptom that influences the way the subject comes into being, its development, and its plot.

The chapter concludes the argument that Dickens' comic style offers an alternative to discussions which have become entrenched in terms of construction and destruction, showing that laughter always both constructs and destroys. It also argues that there is a comic tradition that exceeds these terms and that Dickens's use of laughter as a plotting

³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 35. Edelman discusses Dickens in relation to the *sinthome*, as I shall here, though with the interest in the function of laughter the focus here is different.

⁴ Following this, Žižek labels them an 'elementary matrix of memes' in *Organs Without Bodies*, see Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 128.

force comes out of his reading of this tradition, most importantly his reading of Shakespeare. First, Shakespeare is the single author with whom Dickens was most engaged in his novels, his journalism and his personal life. Second, Shakespeare has been the most common point of reference for studies of comedy, allowing those arguments to be discussed in relation to his work. Third, Shakespeare offers an unusual form of comedy taken on in new ways by Dickens that is vital to the argument made here. Dickens and Shakespeare's comedy have drawn completely ambivalent responses from critics arguing over which category their laughter should be placed in. This has almost always been in the terms discussed in the opening section of this thesis, of whether laughter is radical or conservative, or liberating or constructive. The laughter found in the work of both writers clearly exceeds these terms, and asks to be read in a new way. For both, laughter constructs but also shows itself constructing. Dickens's reading of Shakespeare brings this tradition of reading and using comedy into the nineteenth century. What we see is that an element of comedy apparent in the seventeenth century remains in the nineteenth century despite increasing attempts to contain it.

That Dickens's comedy has the whole history of the English stage behind it is something that has been considered true since R. C. Churchill made the suggestion in *Scrutiny*.⁵ Valerie Gager notes that this stage history should include not just mainstream theatre but more unusual and popular forms, stating that 'Dickens saw Shakespeare interpreted not only by the leading actors of the day but also by cross-gender performers, 'infant phenomena', specialists in one-man shows, amateurs, clowns and horses in the hippodrama at Astley's circus.'⁶ Further, the English stage is not all that was behind Dickens' reading of theatre, since he engaged with Italian street and professional theatre while in Italy, regularly attended theatrical performances in France (Molière appears in *Martin Chuzzlewit*) and visited several theatres in America during his time there (*AN*, 70, 106). More work on the connections between Dickens and European traditions of performance has been done

⁵ R. C. Churchill, 'Dickens, Drama and Tradition' in *Scrutiny* 10 (1942), pp. 358-75.

⁶ Gager, p. 166.

recently, by Michael Hollington, Francesca Orestano and others.⁷ These alternative traditions no doubt affected Dickens's reading of Shakespeare and his comedy.

When thought of in relationship to Dickens, Shakespearean comedy has largely been read as characterized by a hidden organic unity between the characters, making everything come to its rightful resolution at the conclusion of each play. Comedy is therefore a departure from norms, which either subverts them or acts as a kind of safety-valve which allows normative society to continue unharmed. Northrop Frye makes this point in relation to Dickens, remarking that whilst Shakespeare's green world may be interested in revitalizing society without altering its structure, Dickens's world does not have this conserving force.⁸ Andrew Sanders has made the opposite argument, claiming that 'Dickens, like Chaucer and Shakespeare before him, remains non-subversively on the side of the "official" culture and the law takes its course divinely and humanely.'⁹ Jeremy Tambling's article on Dickens and Jonson follows Frye's side of the argument, stating that 'one difference between Shakespearean and Jonsonian comedy is that the former relies upon a hidden organic unity existing between the characters, making everything grow together towards a resolution of apparent contradictions [whereas] there is no such unity for people in Jonson.'¹⁰ For Tambling, Dickens is on the Jonsonian side: his comedy rejects natural or organic order as it does for Frye.

Yet, the opposed views of Frye on the one hand and Sanders on the other are not as dissimilar as they seem. Both leave unchallenged a sense of what is meant by natural order, and both assume, as many have, that laughter either destroys or re-enforces already existing norms. On the contrary, I argue here that laughter is a force that creates these norms. Dickens's comedy is not a break from order but a process which draws attention to the construction of order, therefore insisting that what is meant by a natural unified order is itself reconsidered. Laughter produces order as something that appears natural or inevitable, but in showing itself doing this, it de-essentializes what it produces, showing that

⁷ See for example *Dickens and Italy*, ed. Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

⁸ Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 80.

⁹ Andrew Sanders, 'Dickens and the Idea of the Comic Novel' in *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, Victorian Literature (2006), pp. 51-64 (p. 60).

¹⁰ Tambling, 'Dickens and Ben Jonson,' p. 12.

it cannot be natural as it pretends to be. This makes it something which shows us plotting at work. The word 'plot' means both a narrative structure and a scheme or conspiracy (OED). Acknowledging this doubleness of the plot, Dickens presents comedy as a form which draws attention to the plot as both an unavoidable drive towards organizing and narrating experience, and as something which conspires and intrigues, an imposed order which is created rather than a reflection of organic or pre-existing norms and realities.

In his famous reading of narrativity in *Great Expectations*, Peter Brooks discusses the relationship between linear narrative and dominant ideology by applying the model of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle.'¹¹ Brooks reads totalizing plots as simulacra for closure, arguing that linear narrative can be equated with the victory of the pleasure principle over the death-drive; non-narratable existence is simulated into the condition of narratability and the death-drive is deferred until death can be found in the terms dictated by the pleasure principle.¹² But as Brooks says, if plotting is inescapable, the novel may plot with bad conscience and irony to expose the artifices of formal structure and the design of normative discourse that insists on linearity.¹³ This is an argument which has been made about Dickens elsewhere. D.A. Miller, for example, observes of *Bleak House* that 'if the novel must affirm the possibility of closure ... it is driven to admit the *inadequacy* of this closure.'¹⁴ These discussions, though not directly addressing the comic, do help situate certain assumptions about Dickens's comedy. As has been discussed, comedy has largely been seen as something which breaks or shatters attempts at closure or completeness. Comedy, then, is seen as against plotting. Here, the reverse is argued: comedy is the plot plotting, it is its construction rather than its deconstruction. However, comedy plots with bad conscience and irony, showing the plot for what it is. I will demonstrate in what follows that first, there is a tradition of comedy which does this and therefore operates outside the terms of unity and disunity that have characterized discussions of laughter, and second, that Dickens taps into this tradition through Shakespeare and takes it in new directions. I am first going to show that this tradition exists, and then I will show how Dickens uses it.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 1955)

¹² Peter Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplots' in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 90-112.

¹³ Peter Brooks, 'Repetition, Repression and Return' in *Reading for the Plot*, pp. 113-143 (p. 113).

¹⁴ D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, p. 97.

Comic Plotting

Though Dickens's comedy has never been read in this way, seventeenth-century comedy has, just once. Walter Benjamin, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, links comedy to the idea of plotting. Here Benjamin links Shakespeare to an important tradition of theatre, that of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* play.¹⁵ The *Trauerspiel*, or the mourning play, is a hugely influential form of German entertainment throughout the seventeenth century, which has subsequently been critically neglected.¹⁶ Though Dickens did not know any *Trauerspiel* material directly, it is significantly connected to writers who did influence Dickens. Indeed, Benjamin remarks that 'Calderon and Shakespeare created more important *Trauerspiel* than the German writers of the seventeenth century.'¹⁷ For Benjamin the *Trauerspiel* is a form or model rather than an isolated movement, and if we follow this idea, Dickens's comedy is written in the *Trauerspiel* mode, as Shakespeare's was.

Developing the significance of plotting in comedy, Walter Benjamin introduces the concept of 'the intriguer.' Glossing Benjamin, Samuel Weber explains that 'alongside the tyrant and martyr, is the intriguer, schemer, or perhaps better: plotter. For the plotter – *der Intrigant* – is related to the plot (*die Intrige*) not just lexically, but semantically and etymologically, as Benjamin's argument makes clear.'¹⁸ Intrigue derives from the latin *intrigare*, meaning 'confuse' or 'confound,' meaning that the word has a doubleness; the intriguer plots, drawing things together in a narrative (and perhaps this is part of his trickery) but he also confounds and confuses. Benjamin says that the intriguer has a 'demonic' quality even as it draws things together into narrative structure.¹⁹ He links this 'demonic' ability to construct things to comedy, remarking that he is 'in his element as the comic figure.' For Benjamin,

¹⁵ On Dickens and Benjamin see the chapter 'Reading Tambling, Reading Benjamin (Reading etc...)' in Julian Wolfreys, *Dickens's London: Perception, Subjectivity and Phenomenal Urban Multiplicity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) pp. 212-218, and Gillian Piggott, *Dickens and Benjamin: Moments of Revelation, Fragments of Modernity* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012). On Benjamin and *trauerspiel* see Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981); Lloyd Spencer, 'Introduction to Central Park' in *New German Critique*, no. 34 (Winter, 1985), pp. 28-31 and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989).

¹⁶ For the cultural background to seventeenth-century German literature and its critical neglect see Hugh Powell's introduction to Andreas Gryphius, *Carolus Stuardus* ed. Hugh Powell (Leicester: University College Leicester Press, 1955), pp. xi-xxii.

¹⁷ Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 127.

¹⁸ Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –Abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 141-2.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans., John Osbourne (London and New York: Verso, 2009), p. 97.

‘with the intriguer comedy is introduced into the *Trauerspiel*.’²⁰ In laughter, we might say, the subject is forced into a plot. This is its demonic effect; not destroying a plot but creating one and subjecting subjects to its effects.

A surviving *Trauerspiel* play is German dramatist Andreas Gryphius’ (1616-1664) comic re-writing of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* entitled *Absurda Comica, or, Master Peter Squentz*.²¹ The play offers a *Trauerspiel* re-reading of Shakespearean comedy that transforms the idea that Shakespeare is on the side of natural unity. In this reversal, plotting is central. The play mirrors the play-within-a-play structure of *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, but where there the players intend to put on a tragedy but in fact enact a farce, in Gryphius the players set out to perform a comedy. This comedy, as the players introduce from the very beginning, is to be a comforting one:

Krix: But what sort of comforting comedy shall we put on?

Squentz: Of Pryamus and Thisbe

Clod-Gorge: That will be most effective. It should give people fine instruction, solace, and moral lessons. The only trouble is, I don’t know the story. Would it please your Highness to tell us the plot? (AC, 45-51)

Once the plot is explained the players confirm ‘that’s a comfort’ (AC, 64) The epilogue to the performance, given by Peter Squentz, confirms the intention of the comedy, that this has been comedy applied for a purpose; ‘Here ends our pretty comedy / Or you might say, our tragedy, / We’ve tried to comfort, warn, and teach’ (AC, 675-678). When the comedy has a purpose, and appears to be under the control of its authors and actors, its function is ‘comforting.’ In practice the reverse happens, just like in *A Midsummer Nights Dream*; what makes the play funny is that it is not what it intended to be, it is a failure or a ‘tragedy.’ After the play the King asks ‘how many sows did you commit in this tragedy?’, praising the actors for the hilarious mistakes they have accidentally displayed (AC, 743).

²⁰ Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 125.

²¹ For a transcript of the play and a discussion of Gryphius’ engagement with Shakespeare see Ernest Brennecke, *Shakespeare in Germany 1500-1700 With Translations of Five Early Plays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 52-104. Herein referenced by line number.

As the play has produced comedy in its 'failure,' the King decides to pay the players 'fifteen guilders for every sow they have committed' (AC, 770). Squentz confirms that there has been no intention behind these mistakes, remarking that 'if we had known this, we would have made more sows' (AC, 772-3). Where in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* tragedy inadvertently becomes comedy, in Gryphius's text comedy inadvertently becomes comedy, so that this comedy is shown to be something that cannot be 'used' and directed, employed for the purpose it was intended. Comedy always has an unintentional dimension. The final lines of the Gryphius play are spoken by King Theodorus: 'Enough diversion for this evening. Laughing has made us more weary than the play itself. Let the torches be lighted, and lead us to our chamber' (AC, 783). Comedy does the opposite to what was intended: it set out to 'comfort' and ended by making everyone 'weary.' In this sense, comedy is failure.

This makes it comparable to comedy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is a failure of order followed by a restorative ending where Puck speaks of all being 'mended.' However, a *Trauerspiel* reading of Shakespeare may see a doubleness in Shakespeare's conclusion: it may affirm a unity knowing that it does so only through the trick of plotting. Puck challenges the audience to call him a liar: 'we will make amends ere long /else Puck a liar call' so that all it would take was a lie, intrigue or plotting, which has been Puck's role throughout, for this fabricated unity to be sustained (*MSND*, v.i. 424). However, the comedy in both plays is not entirely on the side of temporary breakdowns and failures. Comedy does not just return things to how they were. Rather, the normality it seems to return to is a new one. The King and the rest of the audience establish new norms by laughing at the performers, just as they do in *A Midsummer Nights Dream*. These norms are based on seeing comedy as something failed, thereby affirming the relative 'success' of what is not comic (see page 176 for this occurring in Dickens). In both plays norms come into being through comedy, so that it produces new relations, but these norms seem to already exist; laughter produces something which seems to have already existed. Laughter, then, is a plotting force, which is 'failure' in the player's attempt to control it but which is successful in imposing a new set of relations between its subjects. Where Puck may succeed in controlling plot, there is no such success for any character in *Master Peter Squentz*.

To support the distinction, whereas Puck is a central figure in *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, looking to involve himself in the action and influence events as much as he can, Gryphius's equivalent plotter Pickleherring wants to distance himself from proceedings. From the play's opening Pickleherring wants to play as small a role as possible; 'has the lion very much to say?' he asks, and when he discovers that it is not a speaking part, 'well, then I want to be the lion.' It is the other characters who force Pickleherring to take a more central role; 'Monsieur Pickleherring must enact a principal character' (AC, 66-71). Pickleherring, forced to play Pyramus, is the source of the 'sows' which ultimately make the performance into comedy, though as discussed they are not intentional mistakes on the part of Pickleherring, so that here unlike with Puck, the intriguer is not constructing events actively and deliberately but does so inadvertently, as if controlled from elsewhere. As if commenting on this facet of the intriguer, Benjamin says that 'the comic figure is a *raisonneur*; in reflection he appears to himself as a marionette.'²² If Pickleherring is the intriguer then he is different to Puck in that whilst Puck is the figure pulling the strings, Pickleherring is pulled by them. In Gryphius's text it appears there is no one in complete control of the plot.

Benjamin retains the French 'raisonneur' which the OED defines as 'a person who annoys by reasoning,' a term which first appears in the comedy of Molière in 1666. Annoying by reasoning seems to combine both senses of the plotter or of the intriguer: it is to rationalize and make sense of, but also to be the cause of trouble or discomfort. Subsequently the term *raisonneur* has taken on the meaning of a character in a play or other work who expresses the author's message, so that the term has been appropriated by a language that upholds the agency of the author. On the contrary, appearing as a marionette is not being in the control of the author but of the plot itself, like Pickleherring rather than Puck. The figure of the intriguer, also associated with the authorial through the word *raisonneur*, acknowledges that he is a puppet, controlled by something outside of himself, so that the intriguer or the plotter plots not in accordance with his own organizatory principles but in the service of some other. Becoming like a puppet in a show that is not controlled by those performing, like the comic characters discussed in the previous chapter, shows the element of chance involved when order is produced. Laughing at this comedy creates new norms, but no-one has controlled this comedy, making the new norms it establishes take the subjects involved

²² Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 127.

in new and unknown directions. This imagined puppeteer is not the author or a stable organizing force but something no-one is in control of. The famous opening of Kafka's *The Trial*, 'Someone was telling lies about Joseph K,' points to exactly this function of the intriguer; the intriguer is not Kafka himself but this 'someone.'²³ The 'someone' is not an individual character determining events (Puck), nor is it a controlled trajectory of events (Kafka as author). Instead it is the plot, the narrative, which makes things happen, which is creative and which controls and dictates experience but which is not ordered from above and has a life of its own.

The idea of a plot coming into being and playing tricks on all its subjects is a central feature of comedy most clearly demonstrated in *Loves Labours Lost*. Costard, the young lover of the play, reveals that he has seen and fallen for the dairymaid Jacquenetta. The conversation is as follows:

COSTARD: The matter is to me sir, as concerning Jaquenetta. The manner of it is, I was taken with the manner.

BEROWNE: In what manner?

COSTARD: In manner and form following, sir – all those three: I was seen with her 'in' the 'manor' house, sitting with her upon the 'form', and taken 'following' her into the park; which, put together, is 'in manner and form following'. Now, sir, for the 'manner' – it is the manner of a man to speak to a woman. For the 'form' – in some form.

Costard has seen the dairymaid Jacquenetta and become 'taken' with her 'manner,' meaning that he has fallen in love with her. Berowne asks him to clarify 'in what manner' he was taken with her 'manner,' a straightforward pun. Costard's answer is remarkable, and truly comic; an exercise in the creation of narrative. In answer to the question he states that he was taken with Jacquenetta 'in manner and form following,' suggesting in line with his previous comment that her manner was the first thing which appealed to him, and following that, he became an admirer of her form. Alternatively, it could mean that he was taken by her 'manner' and that in what follows he intends to describe how he was taken by

²³ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Idris Parry (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 1.

her form, or in what form he was taken by her. Though already several puns are in play, the moment is yet to become properly comic in the definition I want to establish here. Then, perhaps in answer to a raised eyebrow from Berowne (as it is sometimes acted), Costard makes out that 'in manner and form following' was in fact an abbreviated or condensed version of a narrative of events. He was 'in' the 'manor' house whilst she was sitting upon the 'form,' presumably an item of furniture (although the word 'form' could also refer to the act of sitting itself as it does in Ben Jonson's play *The Sad Shepherd*, a meaning retained by the OED). Then he 'follows' her into the park, which 'put together' is what was meant by the initial statement 'in manner and form following.'

Costard's joke shows the creation of narrative sense out of nothing but language – the words come first and then create the events that the language refers to, pointing not to the fact that comedy undermines the attempt of language to be representational but that comedy shows how language succeeds in creating a reality which it immediately appears to be representational of. This moment, then, is not a comic nonsense in which the source of humour is undermining sense but rather a comedy which shows sense coming into being based on nothing. The laughter, like the words, produces a reality which appears to exist behind them. Even the speaker is not in charge of the reality he brings into being, since that reality later comes back to haunt him.

This comically created narrative arising out of nothing but words sets the whole play in motion. Immediately following this comic scene a letter arrives telling those on stage that the braggart Don Armado has been walking in a park where he saw Costard, 'sorting and consorting' (meaning following and then talking to) the dairymaid Jacquenetta (*LLL*, I.i. 230-66). Amazingly, the event he describes is the same one which Costard describes to Berowne in the lines above, which rose apparently nonsensically out of the comment 'in manner and form following.' Thus, what initially appeared to be a joke that Costard plays on Berowne because Berowne might have failed to understand the phrase 'in manner and form following' – turns out to create a reality on which the entire play is structured; the event it tells instigates that entire subplot of the play: Don Armado's quest for Jacquenetta and rivalry with Costard. Costard is a perfect *raisonneur* in that he 'annoys by reasoning,' creating a plot from nothing but then he is subjected to the effects of that plot, as happens in the narrative

of the play: he becomes a marionette. The very figure who set the plot (inadvertently) in motion becomes the party trapped within it. Making a joke, or making laughter, can be seen as a process like this.

Dickens had particular interest in Falstaff and figures of the braggart soldier such as Don Armado. It was a character who fascinated him from his earliest years. Writing for *All The Year Round* in 1860, Dickens tells an imagined story in which he meets a young boy on the road towards Gadshill. 'This is Gadshill we are coming to' says the small boy 'where Falstaff went out to rob those travellers.' 'You know something about Falstaff, eh?' the imaginary adult Dickens asks patronizingly. 'All about him,' replies the small boy, 'I am old (I am nine) and I read all sorts of books' (AYR 50, 7/4/1860). Forster tells us that the boy is a vision of Dickens's former self (*Life*, 1:5). The phrase 'what the dickens' is from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and is used to refer to Falstaff. It is also the first use of the word 'dickens' retained by the OED, used as a euphemism and synonymous with the word 'devil.' The first answer to the question of 'what the dickens?' then, is 'Sir John Falstaff.' Regardless of the young Dickens reading his own name in relation to the character, *The Merry Wives* and *Henry IV* stimulated an intense interest in Falstaff. Falstaff is derived from Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus*, or 'The Braggart Soldier', as is another of Dickens's fascinations, Captain Bobadil of Ben Jonson's *Everyman in his Humour*, whom Dickens played in a production he produced in 1845 (*Letters*, 4: 15/7/1845).²⁴ A recent article by Takao Saijo has begun the very valuable task of charting and compiling Dickens's performances in Amateur Theatricals across his career, and it is *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Every Man In His Humour* which feature the most heavily.²⁵ Falstaff is no doubt an influence on Major Bagstock of *Dombey and Son*, and the subject of the braggart is something worthy of much more attention.

Perhaps the most famous quotation from Falstaff encapsulates what the figure of the braggart brings comedy for Dickens:

²⁴ J.H. Stonehouse (ed.), *Catalogue of the Library of Charles Dickens* (London: Piccadilly Fountain Press, 1935).

²⁵ Takao Saijo, 'Dickens's Amateur Theatricals: Towards A Compilation of the Dramatic Pieces Performed' in *Dickens and Japan: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. Eiichi Hara, Midori Niino, Mitsuharu Matsuoka, Toru Sasaki (Tokyo: Osaka Kyoiku Toshō, 2013), pp. 139-158.

Man, is not able to invent anything that tends to laughter more than I invent or is invented on me: I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in others.

(2*Henry IV*, Iii, 8-12.5)

Dickens twice refers to this quotation from Falstaff in his speeches, first in 1864 when he remarked at the Meeting for the Establishment of the Shakespeare Foundation Schools that the chairman, 'like Falstaff, with a considerable difference, has to be the cause of speaking in others.' The second time Dickens quotes this first use almost verbatim, in 1870, commenting that 'like Falstaff, but with a modification almost as large as himself, I shall try rather to be the cause of speaking in others than to speak myself tonight.'²⁶ The quote, from *Henry IV*, challenges many of the shibboleths that characterize existing theorizations of laughter that have been discussed in this thesis. It does not see laughter as the response of a subject who already exists to a stimulus that already exists. On the contrary, Falstaff indicates that it is perhaps employed more 'on' man than 'by' him, suggesting that laughter may be 'the condition of ideology' in that the moment you feel you are responding naturally and freely is the moment you are most inside ideology, as Mladen Dolar has argued (page 41). Laughter's effects are not consciously deployed, often producing unknown futures and ideologies. Falstaff knows that laughter is not just a response but a cause; it is not only that he is the cause of wit in others (making a laughter response, to Falstaff for example) but the cause 'that wit is,' making laughter something productive and constitutive even though he cannot control its effects. Laughter itself plots, like a conspirator or an intriguer, turning subjects into marionettes, puppets guided from outside.

Plotting Comedy in *Great Expectations*

Dickens's most complex plot is that of *Great Expectations*. F. R. Leavis commented of the novel that 'it was [Dickens'] Shakespearean genius as a creator [that] produced the wonderful plot that is not only exciting to read and faultless in execution but strikingly

²⁶ Richard Herne Shepherd (ed.), *The Speeches of Charles Dickens* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1937) p. 237, p. 325.

classical in its peripeteia.²⁷ The plot makes use of a number of Shakespearean motifs, from Pip's knife dream recalling Macbeth to Hamlet's haunting presence of the father and the play-within-a-play structure of *A Midsummer Nights Dream* and *Hamlet*. The play within *Great Expectations* is *Hamlet*, though as it re-enacts the descent of tragedy into comedy it must also be seen as a reference to *A Midsummer Nights Dream* (and probably to Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* too).²⁸ Chesterton wrote that Dickens like Chaucer loved 'stories within stories' and saw something comic in this.²⁹ Certainly there is more than a little comedy in the appearance of *Hamlet* in the novel. The scene is a re-writing of those found in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* and *Peter Squentz*, a play descending into accidental comedy. It occurs when aspiring actor Mr Wopsle encourages Pip to go and watch him perform:

On our arrival in Denmark, we found the king and queen of that country elevated in two arm-chairs on a kitchen-table, holding a Court. The whole of the Danish nobility were in attendance; consisting of a noble boy in the wash-leather boots of a gigantic ancestor, a venerable Peer with a dirty face who seemed to have risen from the people late in life, and the Danish chivalry with a comb in its hair and a pair of white silk legs, and presenting on the whole a feminine appearance. My gifted townsman stood gloomily apart, with folded arms, and I could have wished that his curls and forehead had been more probable.

Several curious little circumstances transpired as the action proceeded. The late king of the country not only appeared to have been troubled with a cough at the time of his decease, but to have taken it with him to the tomb, and to have brought it back. (*GE*, 253)

The coughing corpse is familiar comic trope, and one which operates on the boundary between comedy and the uncanny. Robert Pfaller hypothesizes that 'the comic is what is

²⁷ F. R. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 374

²⁸ Turning *Hamlet* into comedy has some nineteenth century precedent. The playbill Joe shows Pip notifying him of Wopsle's performance comically gives Wopsle the name 'Roscius,' which probably refers to Dickens's friend William Henry Betty (1791-1874), who was so famous as to be called "Infant Garrick," "Infant Roscius," or "young Roscius." As a provincial actor he played *Hamlet* at Covent Garden Theatre during the season of 1803-4, with Joseph Grimaldi, discussed in Chapter One, as one of the grave diggers. See John Doran, *Their Majesties' Servants* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1865), pp. 387-392; Cecil F. Armstrong, *A Century of Great Actors 1750-1850* (London: Mills and Boon, 1912), pp. 316-326.

²⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Chesterton on Dickens* (London: Dent, 1992), p. 81.

uncanny for others.³⁰ He uses an example given by Octave Mannoni of an actor playing dead on the stage, and suddenly sneezing.³¹ For Pfaller this is evidence of what he calls the 'naive observer;' an imaginary figure involved in many comic exchanges. In order to laugh at the dead man sneezing, one has to know that the man is not really dead but an actor pretending to be dead, and one also has to imagine the possibility of someone else not realizing this, being deceived by the theatre and shocked by the sneeze (and certainly this imaginary subject would not be laughing). Pfaller's argument is not traditional superiority theory, in which we affirm ourselves over this ignorant other, but rather, he argues that we need to create this other to laugh at in order to deal with the trauma of a situation that would otherwise be uncanny. This can be brought directly to bear on Dickens's inclusion of the scene in *Great Expectations*. Pip laughs in response to what could be uncanny, the remarkable doubling of himself and Wopsle-as-Hamlet in the scene. Pip laughs at Wopsle-Hamlet to avoid the realization that his own father figures, the father figures of the narrative he tells, are not dead and buried as he thinks they are (and as the first lines of the novel state) but are alive and coughing, about to return to haunt him. At this very moment Compeyson is sitting behind Pip in the theatre and we later learn that Wopsle has seen him there whilst acting on stage. Just as Wopsle pretends not to see his coughing father behind him to keep the charade of the performance up, Pip is on a real and unconscious level unaware of one of the repressed father figures of his own narrative (a double for Magwitch) likewise coughing a few rows behind him in the theatre. When he discovers that this has happened Pip writes of the 'peculiar terror I felt at Compeyson's having been behind me "like a ghost," and comments that:

If he had ever been out of my thoughts for a few moments together since the hiding had begun, it was in those very moments when he was closest to me. (GE, 253)

The one time when reality seems secure is when you are laughing at the chaos of order breaking down, allowing you to distance yourself from this breakdown. Comedy is what would be uncanny to someone else, or what would be uncanny to you if you didn't turn it

³⁰ Robert Pfaller, 'The Familiar Unknown, the Uncanny, the Comic' in Slavoj Žižek (ed.) *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 198-296.

³¹ For this see Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l'Imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1960), pp. 161-183. On Dickens and Mannoni see Laura Peters, *Dickens and Race*, pp. 83-87.

into comedy. By laughing at disorder, order is created and new norms are established, just as they are in *Herr Peter Squentz*.

Alenka Zupančič develops this point. She comments that Pfaller's argument is not sufficient because in many cases we enjoy the 'play' precisely because we *are* completely fooled and not just pretending to be. For Zupančič it is the complete surrender to the illusion that we need, since it creates 'the guarantee that outside the play there is a reality firmly in its place, a reality to which we can return (after the play, or at any moment if we choose to.)'³² We choose to believe the fiction in order to believe the reality outside of it. The play allows reality to be secured and rationalized outside of it – it allows us to believe in the order outside of the fiction. In this scenario the subject becomes the naïve observer rather than something affirmed against that figure; but the subject still uses the process to structure the ordered system outside of the fiction. In the Wopsle-Hamlet scene the failure of the actors seems to spiral out of control, just as it does in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* and *Herr Peter Squentz*, so that there is little possibility of truly believing in the performance, as for example when Hamlet's ghost is plainly seen to be reading his lines from a script attached to his truncheon:

The royal phantom also carried a ghostly manuscript round its truncheon, to which it had the appearance of occasionally referring, and that too, with an air of anxiety and a tendency to lose the place of reference which were suggestive of a state of mortality. It was this, I conceive, which led to the Shade's being advised by the gallery to "turn over!"—a recommendation which it took extremely ill. (*GE*, 253)

The audience cannot forget that this is a performance, as when Wopsle struggles with Laertes 'on the brink of the orchestra and the grave,' reminding everyone that this is taking place in the theatre and on a stage. Yet in a complex way the audience themselves play a part in the construction of an Other off-stage, who knows the order that has failed to impose itself on stage: 'whenever that undecided Prince had to ask a question or state a doubt, the public helped him out with it.' It appears that the actors themselves occupy the position of naïve observer, while a knowing audience laughs at them, as in the two plays discussed

³² Alenka Zupančič, 'Reversals of Nothing: The Case of the Sneezing Corpse', *Filozofski vestnik*, 26th ser., 2 (2005), pp. 173-186 (p.173).

above where the court of the king laugh at the failed performance of the terrible actors. Pip is in this position here, using laughter to establish a new relation of safety by distancing himself from the naive figures on stage and making it appear that things are secure off it. The laughter, by appearing to be directed at error, unconsciously asserts truth.

However, it is significant that the audience does not agree on the order that that they feel should be imposed: 'some roared yes, and some no, and some inclining to both opinions said "Toss up for it;" and quite a Debating Society arose.' Here the comedy stems from the fact that there isn't a simple structure of superiority, an agreed upon 'right' order to impose. Everyone appears to know that there is a right order, but no one knows what it is. So, Dickens is showing us what Zupančič argues, that this order is in the realm of appearances, and that comedy can construct the appearance that outside temporary chaos is stable order. The more the play departs from reason and reality the more that reality is confirmed and produced. Pip's laughter at Wopsle can be seen as a desperate attempt to emphasize the distinction between the play and reality in order to make reality something ordered when in fact it is deeply insecure. Something more is shown to us too, though, in that the order that is produced here is different for every individual; the audience do not agree with each other in the way that the king and his court do in *Squentz*. Like the *sinthome* discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the narrative and order that is produced is different for everyone. Its trick is that it makes it appear as though this order exists objectively. It is not difficult to suggest that every laugh contains something of this function, establishing new norms for each individual whilst appearing to assert communal and agreed-upon order.

Pip's reflection on the performance shows another element of the comedy here:

We had made some pale efforts in the beginning to applaud Mr. Wopsle; but they were too hopeless to be persisted in. Therefore we had sat, feeling keenly for him, but laughing, nevertheless, from ear to ear. I laughed in spite of myself all the time, the whole thing was so droll; and yet I had a latent impression that there was something decidedly fine in Mr. Wopsle's elocution,—not for old associations' sake, I am afraid, but because it was very slow, very dreary, very up-hill and down-hill, and very unlike any way in which any man in any natural circumstances of life or death ever expressed himself about anything. (GE, 255)

Zupančič's argument touches on something brought out even more brilliantly in Dickens. Here the play has been both completely unbelievable and completely believable, in a way that only comedy can be; it is completely believed in as a departure from reality. Pip must assert that this is completely unrealistic when in fact it has something like Mrs Jarley's wax-works discussed in Chapter Four about it, where the imitation is 'not like life' but life is 'exactly like a wax-work.' Here, Wopsle's performance is unique, but Pip's life will soon be exactly like the representation of Wopsle-Hamlet, just like Costard's representation of meeting Jacquenta produced his path. In short, representation produces new realities and changes the path of those that these are subjected to it. Laughter involves noticing this happening to another, distancing oneself from that realization. The threat of uncanniness is here and as we shall see, when it happens to Pip, he can no longer laugh.

Wopsle's comedy has completely changed from 'the old associations' that Pip refers to here; it has become the opposite of the performance he gives in the Three Jolly Bargemen in Chapter 18, when he imitates every individual in a newspaper story. There, Wopsle 'identified himself with every witness at the Inquest,' convincingly becoming the murderer, the victim, the medical testimony and everyone else. The section refers to Shakespeare too: 'the coroner, in Mr Wopsle's hands, became Timon of Athens; the beadle, Coriolanus.'³³ In these moments characters and reality become one; a figure in Shakespeare is conflated with a contemporary beadle. On the contrary, in Wopsle's depiction of Hamlet Pip finds his performance 'unlike any way in which any man in any natural circumstances of life or death ever expressed himself.' Pip refers to a 'latent impression' which suggests repression. He claims that he laughs 'in spite of' this, though perhaps it is rather because of it, since laughter can be the attempt to deal with unconscious threats. As long as reality and representation maintain themselves as two different fields, representation which, with varying degrees of success, mirrors reality, order can be maintained. However, when representation is shown to produce something which does not already exist in reality then life begins to mirror it, as Pip's life mirrors the Wopsle-Hamlet scene here. Comedy, as I've argued through this thesis, shows representation changing reality.

³³ It also looks forward to another comic character, that of Mr Sloppy in *Our Mutual Friend*, who 'is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices' (*OMF*, 198).

These moments open onto the major theme of the text, one that is certainly not comic. From the novel's opening page to its last, the subject of *Great Expectations* is the way that narratives are produced and construct relationships between people. In the novel's opening page the relationship between Pip's mother and father is produced by Pip's reading of the tombstone which defines the mother as the subservient 'wife of the above,' making Pip think she was pale and sickly, a patriarchal assumption that Magwitch fails to support when he comments 'is that your father alonger your mother?' (GE, 5). From the first page, *Great Expectations* is not a novel which affirms the underlying reality underneath illusion. Instead, it is one about imagined realities coming into being. The words of the novel do not represent reality but, like Costard's, they construct it.

The jail appears as the constant metaphor of the 'hidden underlying reality' coming out, and of illusions being shattered by unacknowledged connections that have been kept hidden coming to light. On the morning before Pip visits Satis House with Pumblechook he recalls thinking it would be 'a fine day to break out of those jails, and bloom' (GE, 53). That the repressed and imprisoned will somehow return and destroy the order of things is his constant fear. At Satis House Pip's construction of things takes on its more definite shape; the chain of events which lead him to see himself as destined for Estella begins. The plot of the novel is born out of a shroud of illusion and imagination, perhaps even a fantasy as a way of constructing an order to deal with impending threat. Pip sees Estella in a 'rank garden' among the 'tangled weeds' though on a path which appears 'as if someone sometimes walked there.' The scene directly recalls *Hamlet* 1.2 in which Hamlet reflects that the world is 'an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely,' making the threat of the returning father apparent at the moment where his imaginary relations to Estella begin (*Hamlet*, I.ii.333). Pip enters a dream world at this point, commenting that Estella 'seemed to be everywhere.' He sees Estella balancing on casks in the brewery yard, and we read 'I saw her pass among the extinguished fires, and ascend some light iron stairs, and go out by the gallery high overhead, as if she were going out into the sky' (GE, 64). The image deliberately suggests dreams through reference to Piranesi's staircase paintings which are also gestured towards in similar language during Jasper's opium dreams in *Edwin Drood*. Estella going out into the sky also connects to her name, Estella, meaning star, and lending a further imaginary significance to her place in

Pip's consciousness. The scene may also recall Costard being 'taken with' Jacquetta as Pip seems to dream up the narrative out of his own words. The important connection is that both narratives are imaginary and serve to construct the reality which they appear to refer to.

The dream state of the scene becomes apparent much later in the novel, in chapter 29, when Pip meets Estella and they reflect on the earlier scene in the same garden while walking in it a second time (there are three meetings in this garden in the course of the novel). The garden is 'too overgrown and rank for walking in' now, and Pip says that he 'showed her to a nicety where I had seen her walking on the casks, that first old day.' The 'first old day,' testifies to the originary nature of that first meeting; it started an illusion or the start of a dream world that has continued until now. Estella then comments 'Did I? I don't remember,' testifying to the illusory nature of this first scene. The moment also shows another function of Pip's defence mechanisms. At the time he has the vision of Estella he also has vision of Miss Havisham, 'a figure hanging from the neck.' He says 'I first ran from it and then ran towards it. And my terror was greatest of all, when I found no figure there' (GE, 64). While at the time, Pip was ready to dismiss the vision of Miss Havisham as outside reality, he completely believes in his vision of Estella, and by admitting the fiction of this vision of Miss Havisham, is able to protect his sense of Estella going out into the sky as real.

As in Zupančič's argument, it is becoming temporarily engrossed in illusion which allows reality to appear as something other than illusion. In fact it seems the vision of Estella was no more real than the vision of Miss Havisham hanging. Pip asks Estella to confirm that she made him cry on that day, and the realization that she remembers neither makes Pip 'cry inwardly,' which he says, 'is the sharpest crying of all.' It means that at this point Pip has cried three times in his narrative: once on the first day where he met Magwitch; then again in the rank garden, which was another start, the 'first old day' which began his imaginary world of thinking of himself in relation to Estella, from whence she was 'everywhere;' and then again now. If laughter creates a reality out of narrative, then these moments of crying are ones where the narrative is shown to be just that, a narrative rather than a representation. For Pip this is not funny because it is his own reality that is shown to be fabrication. He no longer laughs like he did at Wopsle because he can no longer distance

himself from this realization. It supports the idea that what is funny is what is uncanny for others. If the reader too cannot laugh here it is because they have been brought into Pip's illusion and cannot sit in the audience distancing themselves from the realization that there is nothing behind it.

As in the first walk in the 'rank garden,' Pip imagines a switch between Miss Havisham and Estella. He writes, 'What *was* it that was borne in upon my mind when she stood still and looked attentively at me? Anything that I had seen in Miss Havisham? No.' What Pip cannot allow to come to light is the reality of Magwitch's fatherhood of Estella. Hamlet returns here too, not just through the rank garden but through Pip's repeated questioning of 'what *was* it?' followed by 'Instantly the ghost passed once more, and was gone.' The ghost is that of Magwitch or Molly, and it is the memory that Pip doesn't even know he has got, a chain of connections that link Estella with that first day back on the marshes. Pip calls it 'involuntary,' making it like Proust's 'involuntary memory' or a Freudian unconscious one, and he asked how he can 'turn it off' (*GE*, 238).³⁴ This moment repeats itself, two chapters later, when he sees Estella again and sees the same mark in her face. The difference between that meeting and this is that Pip has seen Wopsle's performance of Hamlet in the meantime. Coming out of that visit to the theatre Pip says:

Miserably I went to bed after all, and miserably thought of Estella, and miserably dreamed that my expectations were all cancelled, and that I had to give my hand in marriage to Herbert's Clara, or play Hamlet to Miss Havisham's Ghost, before twenty thousand people, without knowing twenty words of it. (*GE*, 258)

By now it is almost clear that Pip does not fear playing Wopsle-Hamlet to Miss Havisham's Ghost but rather desires to be doing so – wanting that to be the problem ghosting him so that he can avoid realizing what is already so, that he is playing Wopsle to Magwitch's ghost rather than Miss Havisham's. The threat of this being blown continues into the repetitious meeting with Estella which follows:

I wished that Wemmick had not met me, or that I had not yielded to him and gone with him, so that, of all days in the year on this day, I might not have had Newgate

³⁴ On this see John Mace (ed.), *Involuntary Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007)

in my breath and on my clothes. I beat the prison dust off my feet as I sauntered to and fro, and I shook it out of my dress, and I exhaled its air from my lungs. So contaminated did I feel, remembering who was coming, that the coach came quickly after all, and I was not yet free from the soiling consciousness of Mr. Wemmick's conservatory, when I saw her face at the coach window and her hand waving to me.

What was the nameless shadow which again in that one instant had passed? (*GE*, 264)

Now it is plain that the nameless shadow is not Miss Havisham and that Pip's attempt to force her into the role of the ghost has failed. Miss Havisham has provided an object of anxiety for Pip; she allows him to 'fear' her influence and power over him, displacing and organizing more unconscious anxieties that threaten him (see the previous chapter). Following this is the moment of 'realization,' where this unconscious memory appears to rise to the surface. It takes place while Pip and Estella walk past Newgate Prison, returning to the jail metaphor:

I should have been chary of discussing my guardian too freely even with her; but I should have gone on with the subject so far as to describe the dinner in Gerrard Street, if we had not then come into a sudden glare of gas. It seemed, while it lasted, to be all alight and alive with that inexplicable feeling I had had before; and when we were out of it, I was as much dazed for a few moments as if I had been in lightning. (*GE*, 269)

Incredibly, this 'revelation,' so long in coming, only takes place unconsciously, and we read immediately afterwards only 'so we fell into other talk.' The conscious moment of realization, a doubling of this moment, comes only later, and it comes through the mother rather than the father:

He dismissed her, and she glided out of the room. But she remained before me as plainly as if she were still there. I looked at those hands, I looked at those eyes, I looked at that flowing hair; and I compared them with other hands, other eyes, other hair, that I knew of, and with what those might be after twenty years of a brutal husband and a stormy life. I looked again at those hands and eyes of the

housekeeper, and thought of the inexplicable feeling that had come over me when I last walked—not alone—in the ruined garden, and through the deserted brewery. I thought how the same feeling had come back when I saw a face looking at me, and a hand waving to me from a stage-coach window; and how it had come back again and had flashed about me like lightning, when I had passed in a carriage—not alone—through a sudden glare of light in a dark street. I thought how one link of association had helped that identification in the theatre, and how such a link, wanting before, had been riveted for me now, when I had passed by a chance swift from Estella's name to the fingers with their knitting action, and the attentive eyes. And I felt absolutely certain that this woman was Estella's mother. (GE, 390-1).

The unacknowledged relations between people comes into consciousness, and a chain of past events are invested with a significance that they did not have at the time. It is as if, in *Great Expectations*, every moment has become like that caesural one discussed (pages 76-7) in *David Copperfield*, the start of a chapter entitled 'Tempest' as if to nod to Shakespeare; every narrative re-telling transforms the past into something coded by that present in which it is told.

On first meeting Molly Pip had commented: 'I know that I had been to see Macbeth at the theatre, a night or two before, and that her face looked to me as if it were all disturbed by fiery air, like the faces I had seen rise out of the Witches' caldron' and that 'I always saw in her face, a face rising out of the caldron.' It is like the threat of the jail or of Newgate, the secret which needs to remain hidden but threatens to reveal itself like a ghost. The passage refers to the theatre, linking it to the unacknowledged relation of Compeyson sitting behind Pip. The theatre becomes the space of the secret coming out, so that it has replaced the jail in that role. The theatre, as the space of illusion or of the boundary between illusion and reality, is the space where Pip's narrative can be undone. The jail rather is re-framed as a kind of projection space onto which Pip projected anxieties, so that it acts as a way of turning anxiety into fear. The theatre, where Pip is forced to think about illusion, is where he faces the recognition that his whole narrative is illusion, a fabrication constructed to deal with anxiety, a plot or narrative with nothing behind it.

It seems we have come a long way from Costard's fake narrative that humourously becomes a plot and takes possession of his fate and the fate of others, to Pip's constructed plot which is shown to be illusory and unsecure. The parallel is clear and the cross references between the two make the connection a sound one, but whereas witnessing Costard's 'plotting' is no doubt hilarious, the reader will find it hard if not impossible to see anything to laugh at in the realization we are faced with in *Great Expectations*, that Pip's dreams and illusions that structure his narrative, everything that has given meaning to his life, have nothing behind them. The difference is that the reader is too implicated in this case. With Costard the reader is detached, laughing at the delusions of the characters from another position, distancing the reader from the fate of the character just like Pip does at the theatre when he laughs at Wopsle. In these cases one's own reality seems secure, as Pfaller and Zupančič have shown. Further, I have argued that in these moments the order and reality of the laughter is in fact created by this process; new relations of order are constructed in the act of laughing at the illusions and disorder of others. Here on the other hand the reader cannot laugh because the reader sees that not only the narratives of the fooled and confused are constructed in this way but that all narratives, all plots, are tricks involving intrigue and illusion.

The final line of the novel, the third meeting in the rank garden, has been much debated for its ambiguity.

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her. (*GE*, 484 and Appendix 2)

The phrase 'I saw no shadow of another parting from her,' the final of changes to the line Dickens wrote for the end of the novel, can be read in light of the discussions of this chapter as being in a strange way alike to Costard's 'in manner and form following.' Even discussions of ambiguity do not do the phrase justice; it is not that the reader is left to wonder whether Pip and Estella part without shadow, or whether they don't part at all. Rather, the line is purely literary, it means neither nor both, but like Costard's comment, it recognises that it will be 'the cause of speaking in others,' as Dickens said of Falstaff, that it

will produce its own plots and its own intrigues. The final lines are an 'event' in the purest sense. If they confirmed that Pip and Estella would remain together, they would retroactively transform the novel into a love story whose plot was always heading that way. If they definitively insisted that Pip and Estella part then they would likewise change the whole novel into a story heading towards partings and tragedy. Instead, they hover between the two, forcing us to see this reality: that events never stop happening and changing the entire reality around them, so that there is no conclusion. There is no 'last laugh' here because the reader cannot distance themselves from this realization that there is no secure or final order to impose but only ever-changeable reality and representation.

Malcolm Andrews comments that 'Pip the narrator may cause the reader to laugh at his grotesque analogies but he is not laughing himself because he is too emotionally involved.'³⁵ Here the reader feels themselves too emotionally involved to laugh because 'although this might have been a very comical thing to look at from a secure gallery,' to borrow a phrase discussed earlier in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, here the secure gallery is no longer, because they cannot distance themselves from Pip's experience (OCS, 463). There are no subjects laughing here, because it is the spirit of laughter that remains, in which stable subjectivity cannot exist because everything is open to transformation and change. Whereas the end of the last chapter discussed Chester, for whom laughter is rejected to maintain the fixed subject, here there is no laughter because there is only change, no end to the plot but only continual re-plotting and transforming pasts, presents and subjects. There is no laughter because there is no subject to distance and protect themselves from the processes that they are subjected to. This is unsettling and uncanny to us because we cannot distance ourselves from the eventual nature of reality. It may be left to the reader to decide if there is not something strangely funny in this ending apparently devoid of humour.

³⁵ Andrews, p. 153.

Conclusion: Bourgeois Comedy

Long after Bar got made Attorney-General, this was told of him as a master-stroke. Lord Decimus had a reminiscence about a pear-tree formerly growing in a garden near the back of his dame's house at Eton, upon which pear-tree the only joke of his life perennially bloomed. It was a joke of a compact and portable nature, turning on the difference between Eton pears and Parliamentary pairs; but it was a joke, a refined relish of which would seem to have appeared to Lord Decimus impossible to be had without a thorough and intimate acquaintance with the tree. Therefore, the story at first had no idea of such a tree, sir, then gradually found it in winter, carried it through the changing season, saw it bud, saw it blossom, saw it bear fruit, saw the fruit ripen; in short, cultivated the tree in that diligent and minute manner before it got out of the bedroom window to steal the fruit, that many thanks had been offered up by belated listeners for the trees having been planted and grafted prior to Lord Decimus's time. Bar's interest in apples was so overtopped by the wrapt suspense in which he pursued the changes of these pears, from the moment when Lord Decimus solemnly opened with 'Your mentioning pears recalls to my remembrance a pear-tree,' down to the rich conclusion, 'And so we pass, through the various changes of life, from Eton pears to Parliamentary pairs,' that he had to go down-stairs with Lord Decimus, and even then to be seated next to him at table in order that he might hear the anecdote out. (LD, 588-9)

This joke in *Little Dorrit* shows us something that has been suggested by the discussions in this thesis about the changing status of laughter in the nineteenth century. Laughter loses something of its specific radical capacity that this thesis has identified, its 'eventual' power which makes it a transformative force that re-orders and re-organises the world it emerges from. Here the joke is 'of a compact and portable nature,' a straightforward pun extended into an 'anecdote' to be exchanged among bourgeois or even aristocratic figures at dinner. This joke is a 'master-stroke' for these Eton figures, the 'only joke of [Lord Decimus's] life,' which he 'perennially' revels in. Laughter has been reduced to nothing more than a pun aimed at the ignorance of a 'naïve observer' who misses the trick, celebrating the bourgeois

figures laughing. It has become contained, and makes rational sense, supporting the structures in place and doing nothing to destabilize them. This is no isolated incident, but embodies a new approach to laughter increasingly dominant in the nineteenth century. In the same novel we meet Henry Gowan and the 'characteristic balancing of his which reduced everything in the wide world to the same light weight' (*LD*, 330). Laughter has become taking things lightly and has lost its agency for change. As mentioned in the introduction, Gilles Lipovetsky hypothesizes that we are now living in a 'humoristic society' in which everything is treated as if it is *light* and 'easy'.¹ This thesis has focused on the way that laughter is not 'light' and can exercise a much more direct and tangible influence over the subject, how it can radically destroy and re-form subjectivity. Perhaps, though, what we see is the movement from a society in which laughter had this radical capacity to a new one (still with us today) in which laughter is contained and controlled, making everything 'light.' Dickens highlights this change, and even wrote in a letter that 'the world would not take another Pickwick from me now, but we can be cheerful and merry I hope notwithstanding, with a little more purpose in us' (*Letters* 5:527). The humour of *Pickwick Papers*, though itself both conservative and radical, has been replaced by a much more regulated humour with less capacity for change.

In this conclusion I want to make a very brief comment about what has been attempted in this thesis and the directions in which I hope it can take future discussions of both laughter and nineteenth-century literature. I want to develop the suggestion that something changes at this time and that Dickens's texts provide evidence of this development of laughter. Further, I want to show that the relationship between reading laughter and the laughter that we read can be seen as what Walter Benjamin calls a 'constellation,' itself a kind of event that makes it apparent to us that past and present, like laughter and the meanings we attach to it, are always in a dialectical rather than linear relationship.

The thesis has argued that laughter operates much like what Alain Badiou calls an 'event.' In short, the concept of the 'event' has been used to describe a moment which changes the world around it, breaking the existing relationship between past and present and re-constituting the present and the past in a new constellation. Seeing laughter as an event

¹ See Gilles Lipovetsky *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 199.

involves recognising that laughing *at* something has a transformative effect on both those laughing and that which is laughed at. In laughing at something, that something is turned into an object of laughter and the individual laughing is placed in a new subject position in relation to it. Whilst all 'events' have the function of transforming even the things that come before them and which they operate on or because of, laughter is a special type of event: it is *an event that shows itself as an event*. Laughter repeats a mechanism that governs the way we think, the mechanism of the event, and at the same time reveals this mechanism to us, showing us how our way of thinking is put together. The texts of Charles Dickens, I have shown, demonstrate this function of laughter and also the increasing way that the nineteenth century attempted to contain it.

The first question for future discussion may be that of whether the type of laughter that has been discussed here is specific to Dickens, whether it is specific to the nineteenth century, or whether it is something more general about the functioning of laughter which is identified or made more prominent in this period and in these texts. The thesis has provisionally answered this difficult question in the following way: whilst laughter is always a kind of 'event,' laughter's status changes in the nineteenth century and becomes something that was increasingly prevented from troubling existing norms by showing us events happening. In other words, laughter reaches a kind of crisis point in the nineteenth century which makes visible to us both its eventual power and the attempts to contain this.

As this thesis has discussed, this power that laughter has is part of other traditions of comedy that date from before the nineteenth century and continue after it. Chapter Seven, for instance, discussed Shakespeare's relationship to this function of comedy, while Chapter Four looked forward to the comedy of those such as Beckett in the twentieth-century. What we see in the nineteenth century, and what Dickens saw, I think, is evidence of a general trend away from this powerful formational laughter. One thing that becomes apparent to us in Dickens is that laughter is never disconnected from the way in which it is read. In other words, we see that there is no pure laughter divorced from the way that each instance of laughter is responded to and understood by those around it. Laughter in Dickens, as this thesis has shown, can become different things in different hands; it is always created at least in part by its 'effects' and not just by its 'causes.' In the terms of this thesis we can say that

an event occurs between laughter and how it is read and received, or between its causes and its effects. This means that the relationship between laughter and our understanding of it is not linear but is in fact dialectical, as the event is for David Copperfield, for example. As discussed throughout, the effects of laughter read and re-write its causes, transforming it eventually into something new. Therefore, it is not so much that laughter in Dickens is essentially any different to laughter elsewhere, but that Dickens's texts show us the various roles that laughter can play and can be made to play retroactively by its various effects in different contexts. The changing way laughter was read and received in the nineteenth century changed the radicalism of laughter itself.

This gets at the heart of what this thesis wants to say about the nineteenth century. What happens in the nineteenth century is that laughter plays diverse roles which testify to a shift that happens at this time. Laughter retains its eventual capacity and in fact this becomes more apparent as it responds to other social forces trying to close it down. A range of cultural texts, from street theatre and caricature to sustained comic novels such as those of early Dickens, demonstrate an increasing awareness of what laughter can do eventually. It may be that the moment that laughter is closed down and contained is also the moment at which its radical capacity becomes more visible, and this thesis has focussed on drawing this out and showing the eventual power that laughter can have. This makes it increasingly troubling to norms and to existing models which have attempted to ground laughter in a particular explanation and explain its effects and relevance in those terms. The thesis has not been overtly historical, because it has been a thesis about history, and about the continual formation and re-formation of history. However, it is a key point of the argument that a historical shift, or what Foucault called an 'epistemological shift' (see page 59) is something that makes these changes apparent. An event or epistemological shift changes the past as well as the present, making the past as it was inaccessible, as happens with laughter in the nineteenth century. However, these shifts do not come out of nowhere but out of culture, politics and social changes. The political situation in the nineteenth century was part of a reformation of laughter that would confine it to new domains and change the effects it would have.

What I want to extend this to suggest in this conclusion is that laughing at Dickens now also carries with it something of this political function of governing laughter shown to us by the novels themselves. Laughing at a joke in Dickens, as many do, changes Dickens as history and us as present, not testifying to the 'timelessness' of Dickens's comedy but always creating a new laughter which transforms the text it responds to. As Dickens's jokes have new effects, so too are their causes and meanings changed. This process is something that is also carried out by critics of Dickens. Arguments about whether Dickens's laughter is conservative or radical were discussed in a little more depth at other times in this thesis. It is well known that not just as a comedian but as a writer, Dickens has divided critics along these lines. When we laugh at Dickens and when we read this laughter, we re-write Dickens eventually, meaning that a case can easily be made for either side; that his laughter supports norms or destroys them. This is why it has been so easy for critics to be divided on this matter. Neither side is 'wrong' because the laughter in the text is transformed by the reading of the text offered by critics. Since laughter is never separate from that which reads it and can always be changed by new readings, arguments over laughter are on-going and limitless; we will never solve or explain the problem of laughter because it lends itself to becoming something new. Each of these differently 'correct' critical readings is however only half an insight, whereas it is hoped that the perspective taken here that laughter should be seen as the event means that we get both sides at once, recognising the role that reading laughter plays in determining what laughter is. In fact these other readings, claiming to 'explain' how laughter functions in Dickens and ignoring their own influence on what they read, deny the relationship between laughter and the event.

Malcolm Andrews concludes his book on Dickensian laughter by arguing that for Dickens as for Bergson, laughter is a 'social corrective' that 'pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement.'² This thesis has shown that Dickens did not have the pure faith in laughter as something good and worthwhile that Bergson or even Andrews seem to have. Andrews's argument is not wrong but is rather another kind of event, one which transforms Dickens's laughter into what he calls a 'leveller,' an equalizing force that takes down structures and leaves us equal. Again, laughter is never disconnected from the way it is read and received. The focus here has been a different one, as I have argued that Dickens's texts show us the

² Andrews, p. 177.

relationship between laughter and the reading of laughter. In a sense then, the texts anticipate the various responses to the laughter within their pages and the infinite possibilities for arguing over laughter's potential.

These readings of Dickens in the academy today open out to our wider ideas of comedy and of Dickens in contemporary culture. On the bicentenary of Dickens last year, there was an increased attention to Dickens in the media which gives us a sense of our cultural relationship to him now. A large amount of this media attention focussed on Dickens as a writer of comedy. *The Daily Telegraph*, who titled their appraisal of Dickens on his 200th birthday 'Charles Dickens, the Comic Crusader' wrote that 'comedy turns the world upside down; it refuses to accept that there is a proper, a prescribed response to anything in particular.'³ It shared Andrews's view that 'comedy, in its reversals, puts things to rights,' showing how they 'really are.' For these readers, and the position is very common today, comedy rejects the existing response to things, showing the reality behind the illusions that govern our normal ways of thinking. This modern way of seeing comedy is strangely situated in both the traditional camps of comedy studies that have been discussed in this thesis. It holds that laughter is liberating, in the sense that it liberates us from existing illusory ways of seeing things, and it also sees laughter as supporting an existing idea of truth by showing us 'the way things really are.' In fact, as this thesis has argued throughout, laughter creates the way things really are (see page 54). Laughter, as has been argued, is involved in creating 'truths' and realities, eventually transforming the world it operates on.

A look at the character of Mr Pecksniff in Dickens's 1844 novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* embodies this awareness in Dickens of the interdependency of laughter and the way it is read. From the first laugh Pecksniff witnesses, we see his desire to explain and govern what has caused laughter and what that laughter means.

During the whole of this affectionate display she laughed to a most immoderate extent: in which hilarious indulgence even the prudent Cherry joined.

³ Phillip Hensher, 'Charles Dickens: The Comic Crusader' *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 December 2011.

'Tut, tut,' said Mr Pecksniff, pushing his latest-born away and running his fingers through his hair, as he resumed his tranquil face. 'What folly is this! Let us take heed how we laugh without reason lest we cry with it. (MC, 26)

Laughing without reason, or for a reason Pecksniff is not in charge of, is his constant anxiety throughout the novel. Here he advises his daughters, both of whom, and one especially, are prone to bursts of 'immoderate' laughter. Pecksniff makes something of the point that has been aimed at in this thesis. It may be that laughter must have a 'reason' in the Victorian period because this forces it within existing structures of linearity and narrativity. This is an attempt to re-contain laughter within a prudential utilitarian order. Pecksniff warns that if you laugh without reason then you will have a reason to cry, suggesting that laughing without reason involves some kind of risk. The reason there is a risk involved in laughing without reason is because it suggests openness to the event and the eradication of what has gone before that the event brings with it. This trope of attempting to repress laughter which doesn't fit the model of prudent Victorian reason comically continues throughout the text:

The two young ladies exhibited an unusual amount of gaiety; insomuch that they clapped their hands, and laughed, and looked with roguish aspects and a bantering air upon their dear papa. This conduct was so very unaccountable, that Mr Pecksniff (being singularly grave himself) could scarcely choose but ask them what it meant; and took them to task, in his gentle manner, for yielding to such light emotions. (MC, 166)

Pecksniff needs to be in charge of the cause of the laugh, because it is the domination over why it happened that controls its effects. If Pecksniff can work out the reason and account for this 'very unaccountable' laughter that seems 'without reason' then he can exercise domination over its effects, ensure they are not to his detriment, and make the laughter into something new, controlling what appear to be its causes. Pecksniff, then, is like a reader of laughter in Dickens, arguing over its causes and trying understand and account for them, but in doing so creating an eventual relationship between the laugh and the way it is read, transforming what it always was. If he can't control its effects, Pecksniff wants his daughters to stop laughing, 'taking them to task,' and asks them to 'take heed' and not 'yield to such light emotions,' also reducing the significance of laughter by making it 'light.'

Critics and readers of laughter also have this tendency to speak of an 'unaccountable' laughter or a laughter without reason (see the first section), when they are faced with something that doesn't fit existing models or their own ways of explaining laughter. What we see here is that an explanation can be provided for laughter that changes that laugh itself.

Much has been written on the rise of 'respectability' in Victorian England and this has usually been associated with evangelicalism. Francis Thompson, for instance, sees 'middle class evangelicalism' as a way of 'imposing values [...] on the working class.' He also notes that riotous uprisings were contained and responded to in a language that 'derives its philosophy, its vocabulary and its moral force from evangelicalism.' This society tried to shun 'all diversions that were not improving or uplifting,' and we can put eventual laughter into this category.⁴ What we are seeing here through Dickens is the consolidation of a bourgeois society that has its roots in these cultural and religious trends. The language of 'respectability' has come to govern laughter by eventually transforming laughter into something that fits its rational and respectable language, at the same time denying the eventual capacity of laughter. Pecksniff's governance of laughter's causes shows us this control that the critic can have when reading laughter, a role that has embodied a bourgeois approach to laughter since the nineteenth century. Dickens often called people 'Pecksniffian' in his life, and this may be why.

Sometimes, but not often, Pecksniff himself is found laughing. The following bout of Pecksniff's laughter is worth quoting at length:

'Oho! Is the wind in that quarter?' cried Montague. 'Ha, ha, ha!' and here they all laughed—especially Mr Pecksniff.

'No, no!' said that gentleman, clapping his son-in-law playfully upon the shoulder. 'You must not believe all that my young relative says, Mr Montague. You may believe him in official business, and trust him in official business, but you must not attach importance to his flights of fancy.'

⁴ F. M. L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain 1830-1900* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 141, p. 278.

'Upon my life, Mr Pecksniff,' cried Montague, 'I attach the greatest importance to that last observation of his. I trust and hope it's true. Money cannot be turned and turned again quickly enough in the ordinary course, Mr Pecksniff. There is nothing like building our fortune on the weaknesses of mankind.'

'Oh fie! oh fie, for shame!' cried Mr Pecksniff. But they all laughed again—especially Mr Pecksniff.

'I give you my honour that WE do it,' said Montague.

'Oh fie, fie!' cried Mr Pecksniff. 'You are very pleasant. That I am sure you don't! That I am sure you don't! How CAN you, you know?'

Again they all laughed in concert; and again Mr Pecksniff laughed especially.

This was very agreeable indeed. It was confidential, easy, straight-forward; and still left Mr Pecksniff in the position of being in a gentle way the Mentor of the party. (MC, 640)

Here the laughers, in a straight-forward way, are laughing at the misfortune of others and revelling in their own success. Pecksniff's surprising willingness to laugh not just along with the others but 'especially' strikes the reader at first, but of course it stems from the fact that here he is, right from the start, in on the joke and in charge of it. Pecksniff's laughter is utilitarian and self-interested, insisting that laughter is rational and supports bourgeois ideology. Here we see an increasing insistence on the idea of laughter as rational as the nineteenth century develops. This provides a history of the change between early and late Dickens. Early Dickens novels are often thought of as funnier and the later novels more 'dark' or 'serious.' Using Dickens's texts themselves as evidence, it is possible to show that it is the age that allows less laughter rather than Dickens. Dickens's novels show the Victorian era increasingly demanding that there be a reason for laughter and that laughter be contained within the logic of the age.

In this last quotation the parallel between Pecksniff and the critic is apparent, even before we read that the exchange 'still left Mr Pecksniff in the position of being in a gentle way the Mentor of the party.' Pecksniff is the Mentor, a term that was often used in this personified

way in the nineteenth century to indicate someone that is in charge and guides others. The Latin word mentor means teacher, further connecting it to the critic. Pecksniff, like the reader of laughter, exercises a control over laughter's effects by understanding and explaining where it has come from. Discussing laughter in Dickens today, then, is like being something of a Pecksniff, making laughter into something new eventually. This shows another emergent modernity in Dickens, that we are still within a world of explaining and dominating laughter.

Laughing with reason is clearly something mocked in Dickens. In fact, Dickens makes 'comedy studies' into a problematic category, questioning how one can study or explain something which cannot have a reason. In this way, the texts operate as a 'resistance to theory' in the terms of Paul de Man discussed earlier. Further, this points to the possibility that Dickens's work documents a change in the status of laughter, looking back to an age where laughter could be free of reason and could have transformative 'eventual' qualities and also looking forward to an age possibly still with us now that insisted on bringing laughter within reason. Thackeray may notice something of this in his preface to *Pendennis* in which he laments that when compared to the eighteenth century, authors in his own age have to 'give [man] a certain conventional simper.'⁵ A simper is an affected and deliberate smile and is opposed to giving in to laughter. John Carey discusses how Thackeray, after 1848, became more hostile towards the idea of satire and came to dislike even his own earlier work *The Book of Snobs*. Thackeray commented that to be 'comic' suddenly seemed to be low, and that he wanted to be 'of a higher class.'⁶ In a very different way Thackeray's career also betrays this shift in laughter: that it previously had revolutionary capacity, which Thackeray later notices and wants to move away from. Dickens, on the other hand, is on the side of this earlier radicalism of laughter.

The change in the atmosphere of political revolution in this period is one reason for this change in the role of laughter. Speaking of how politics has become increasingly treated with comedy, Karl Marx writes in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* that now we 'have not merely the character of the old Napoleon, but the old Napoleon himself-caricatured as he needs must

⁵ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Pendennis*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1994), p. lvi.

⁶ John Carey, *Thackeray: Prodigal Genius* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 10.

appear in the middle of the nineteenth century.’⁷ Marx’s comment testifies to the fact that a change has occurred, or an event has happened, and the past has changed: Napoleon at the start of the nineteenth century is different to Napoleon in the middle of that century. For Marx this demonstrates a de-politicization and an increasingly controlled politics with less room for change and movement. This is bound up with the discussion of evangelicalism above, and the rise of respectability that happens in the period. The age, increasingly bourgeois and regulated, eventually transformed not only its present but also its past into something different. Laughter and its radical eventual capacity was a huge part of this past that needed transforming and controlling.

The fact that we still laugh at moments in Dickens today points to the fact that we need to recognize an emergent modernity in Dickens’ writing so that it has a future (our present) in it too. However, as I suggested above, it is not about things in Dickens still being funny, or still being relevant, which though it would be a topic for another place, is not the way of speaking about comedy that this thesis would propose. Rather, it is about new events forming in every instance of laughter between the ‘cause’ of laughter and the laughter that issues from us when encountering Dickens. These events demonstrate to us that laughter has of course not been completely closed down and still has the capacity to reform and change things. It also suggests that we are still carrying out this process of re-defining what laughter is, changing Dickens as our own past in relationship to our present.

If we return to a funny moment in Dickens discussed in a different way earlier, and one that has a particularly modern resonance, we can see something of how this process works. The poem read to the *Pickwickians* at the party discussed in Chapter Five was as follows:

Can I view thee panting, lying

On thy stomach, without sighing;

Can I unmoved see thee dying

On a log

⁷ Karl Marx, ‘Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’ in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 300-326 (p. 302).

Expiring frog! (*PP*, 199)

The poem is one of the moments in Dickens that draws modern readers to laughter. The poem's comedy seems to lobby against pretensions of poetic culture, the dinner party appreciation of poetry that may have nothing behind it. In fact, the text does anticipate this humorously, as Mrs Leo Hunter recites this poem at a 'fancy dress *déjeuner*' in the character of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom and sponsor of arts, making it a mockery of attempts of art to appear wise and highbrow. It has a particularly strong relevance today, then, as it appears to anticipate a culture very much with us now. In the text, though, the focus is on the 'ladies magazine' culture to which the poem belongs and where it was published in the novel. The poetic culture in the 1830s was sharply different to today, and the reading of the moment as a criticism of it is at least in some part 'anachronistic.' However, far from invalidating the reading, it shows us something else about what happens when we laugh at Dickens.

In laughter at the past or at something considered 'old,' two moments connect and illuminate each other, producing a new relationship and changing both past and present in the moment of connection. This can be thought of in terms of Walter Benjamin's concept of a 'constellation.' The term is used throughout Benjamin's work to refer to the relationship which emerges when the historian places two apparently unrelated historical events in a significant connection with each other.⁸ At this moment a 'constellation' emerges, which Benjamin describes as a flash of recognition that involves a leap in historical understanding, which sheds light on the meaning of both periods, changing both. Seeing laughter as an event, as I hope to have shown to be possible if not necessary, involves recognising this transformative function that laughter has in its relationship to history and to the past. Dickens's position in the history of laughter is vital here: it shows us that laughter constructs who we are, but it does so in relation to its own history and to our own history.

When we laugh, we change the world around us, moving things into new positions and establishing new relationships between ourselves, others and the things that we laugh at. Laughter therefore changes the path that we are on, constructing who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to the objects of laughter. In this way we can say that in the event

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Arcades* p. 462.

of laughter *a future is diverted*. Laughter takes us in new directions, establishing new relations between our pasts and present. However, the future that it sends us into is no more certain than the one it takes us out of, and is always subject to eventual change and re-writing, like the things that laughter itself re-writes and transforms. The epigraph to this half of the thesis was Julia Kristeva's comment that 'every practice which produces something new is a practice of laughter.' Laughter, in Kristeva's view, is the moment of change itself, the production of something new and the taking of the subject in a new direction. What my thesis has argued is that laughter is the moment that can make change visible to us, it is an event showing itself as an event. Dickens's texts are perfect for demonstrating this to us because they emerge from a moment particularly interested in suppressing this formative and transformative function of laughter. This moment closes down the possibilities of laughter, but Dickens's texts and our continued responses to them show us that laughter continues to make events visible to us, showing us that our present and past is always open to transformation.

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