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"Scarers in Print": Media Literacy and Media Practice from *Our Mutual Friend* to Friend Me On *Facebook*

James Mussell

In Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* the illiterate Golden Dustman, Noddy Boffin, listens to Silas Wegg, a one-legged ballad-seller, read to him from Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Boffin, the retired servant of a recently deceased, rich, miserly dust contractor called Harmon, now has the resources to pay someone to read to him in the evenings; Wegg is happy to oblige, but at twice the proffered rate (40). Boffin wants what he calls an "opening" into print (40, 44), but the revelation of the contents of the book startles him. The narrator tells us:

> Mr Wegg, having read on by rote and attached as few ideas as possible to the text, came out of the encounter fresh; but, Mr Boffin, who had soon laid down his unfinished pipe, and had ever since sat intently staring with his eyes and mind at the confounding enormities of the Romans, was so severely punished that he could hardly wish his literary friend Good-night, and articulate "Tomorrow." (45)

Here, the action of Silas Wegg transforms the book from one thing—a smart set of volumes, "red and gold. Purple ribbon in every wollume, to keep the place where you leave off" (39)—into something quite different. For Boffin, Wegg has performed some sort of arcane rite: by opening the book and articulating its content, Wegg has transformed both the book and his body into supplementary technologies, embodied and distinct from the content he has released.

For Leah Price, this episode usefully illustrates the interplay of book (the object that is read) and text (the iterable content it contains) in the nineteenth century. In her *How to Do Things With Books in Victorian Britain*, Price focuses on the range of things people did with

books other than read them. Such activity was ideologically freighted. "Cover and content, authenticity and appearance," she writes, "the language of insides and outsides makes any consciousness of the book's material qualities signify moral shallowness" (3). The Victorian book was a storage medium whose body and content could activate different networks depending upon how it was used. The circulation of books could link people together, and reading itself could be a shared activity; yet reading was also a practice that subordinated object to text, form to content, body to soul and so, if done correctly, allowed the reader to transcend the here and now and meet the mind of the author. In this paper, I focus on what happens when reading stops and the body (of the book, of the reader) returns.

The book is both repository and medium, able to store up content and make it flow. Its connection with both soul and body situates it firmly in a gothic economy of death and resurrection. The *OED* defines "repository" as a place where bodies are laid to rest, conflating the graveyard, mortuary and archive, with their respective contents and terms of deposit and retrieval. But the *OED* also defines the repository as a temporary resting place for spirits, replacing the interred body with the soul. This shift from form to content acknowledges that the archive might be a tomb, but it is one whose contents can be retrieved, whether these are objects interred or what these objects supposedly contain. There is a well-established link between media and mediumship, but the potential for transitivity— when content flows, linking sender and receiver—depends upon the material and social conditions of use.[1] Yet just as the séance is a carefully controlled situation that relies on the participation of all involved, so too does the performance of more familiar media such as books. The disavowal of the body and its agency that underpins both mediation and mediumship is an effect of use, rather than its precondition. Content is liberated as the mediating body falls away; yet this content nonetheless rests upon the traces of the body it

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[1] See, for instance, Kern; Luckhurst; Miller; Ronnell; Sconce.

displaces. While a book is read, its present is suspended; when reading stops, its body returns.

Boffin is struck by the transformation of object into archive, turning the book into a repository; but he is startled by what he finds there:

> "Commodious", gasped Mr Boffin, staring at the moon, after letting Wegg out at the gate and fastening it: "Commodious fights in that wild-beast-show, seven hundred and thirty-five times, in one character only! As if that wasn't stunning enough, a hundred lions is turned into the same wild-beast-show all at once! As if that wasn't stunning enough, Commodious, in another character, kills 'em all off in a hundred goes! As if that wasn't stunning enough, Vittle-us (and well named too) eats six millions' worth, English money, in seven months! Wegg takes it easy, but upon-my-soul to a old bird like myself these are scarers. And even now that Commodious is strangled, I don't see a way to our bettering ourselves." Mr Boffin added as he turned his pensive steps towards the Bower and shook his head, "I didn't think this morning there was half so many Scarers in Print. But I'm in for it now!" (45)

The scarers are ghosts, conjured from the book by the apparently magical process of reading. Yet the scarers are not latent within the book, waiting to be found: they are produced through overlapping sets of technology put to work in a particular social configuration. This paper explores whether or not there are Scarers *in* Print. To read one must learn how to process the material media that allow text to be in the world so that these media disappear. The industrialization of print in the early nineteenth century led to the proliferation of text upon a wider range of surfaces. The effect was to emphasize the promiscuity of text while lending it presence. The same words appeared in lots of places and appeared in the same fashion, reifying themselves as objects, while occluding more of the material world by bringing it into textual discourse. There had never been so many texts, and they had never been so dispersed.

The result was an unprecedented opportunity for objects to misbehave, to assert their agency in unexpected ways.

The paper is in three parts. The first explores the role of materiality in media more thoroughly and argues that shifts in material presence underpin the practice of reading. Although literacy is usually described as a cognitive process, deciphering signs inscribed in written code, it necessitates interactions with objects of various kinds. Rather than understand these interactions as secondary, I argue that they constitute the conditions for reading. The second turns to *Our Mutual Friend*, offering the novel as an explication of the agency of material. If, as Walter Ong has argued, writing is predicated upon an economy of death and resurrection, then this novel—published in parts, featuring characters who play parts, and, in the case of Wegg, become alienated from their parts— reminds us that this economy is based on material media (33). The concluding part turns to the present, and applies this analysis to the digital objects that enable textuality today. If the nineteenth-century archive betrays a concern about keeping things in line, then the internet, the largest, most ill-disciplined archive we have ever created, permits new material possibilities. Taking *Facebook* as an example, I demonstrate how a different configuration of inscription technologies—a set of networked servers and a carefully designed software architecture—creates different conditions of reading and writing. As *Facebook* forces us to live with alienated ghosts from our pasts, we are reminded of both the central role that material plays in literacy, as well as the potential for objects to exert themselves against their prescribed passivity as media. The explicitly designed nature of digital environments makes clear that literacy encompasses the objects that are "read" as well as what is done with them. It also makes clear that these are reflexive processes. We might discipline the nonhuman world by making it legible, but we too are disciplined through our interactions with media, of whatever kind, as we make meaning.

The Things we Forget

When marketing early iterations of the Kindle, Amazon attempted to temper the novelty of the e-reader by situating it within familiar models of textuality and literacy.[2] It is a "convenient portable reading device" that offers "an exceptional reading experience." Its "electronic paper" makes screen-reading "as sharp and natural as reading ink on paper." It can be located in usual sites of reading: over breakfast, during the commute, on a journey, for the book club ("Kindle: Amazon's Original Wireless Reading Device (First Generation)"). Yet there is an interesting ambiguity here. Kindle might offer a "reading experience," but it is the device that is called the reader, not the user. Open the box and there is a user guide, not a reader guide. That users already know how to read but might not know how to use is a point of anxiety, as it reminds potential customers of the strangeness of technology. If Kindle is like a book, but better, Amazon don't want to remind readers that what makes it better is also what makes it strange.

> When Amazon launched their 6" Kindle in 2009, they marketed it as follows:
>
>> The most elegant feature of a physical book is that it disappears while you're reading. Immersed in the author's world and ideas, you don't notice a book's glue, the stitching, or ink. Our top design objective was to make Kindle disappear—just like a physical book—so you can get lost in your reading, not the technology. ("Kindle: Amazon's 6" Wireless Reading Device (Latest Generation)")

Kindle is marketed on the basis that reading makes books disappear. It has been so well-designed that, like the book, users will not know they are using, only reading. It is only recently, with the launch of Kindle Paperwhite and the Fire range in 2012 that they have

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[2] For an extended discussion of this, see Mussell, *Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age*, 15-19; Price 5.

stopped using this copy.[3] Reading provides access to the "author's world and ideas," magically transforming the constitutive role of both text and technology into passive and dispensable intermediaries. The consistent emphasis on reading over use naturalizes the technical, but in doing so downplays what reading involves. Reading (and, as Ong makes clear, writing) is not natural but must be learned through considerable effort. Amazon's users can already read —they already know how to make a book disappear—so they simply need to transfer their existing literacy to the new "reading device" so that it too can go away.

But what happens to objects when they disappear? When we stop reading, the book returns ("Purple ribbon in every wollume," says Mr Boffin, "to keep the place where you leave off" (39)). Yet the book's insistent materiality is there all the time, offering up marks to be recognized as words, pages to be turned, the weight of the volume to be accommodated by the body. The act of reading is predicated on the form of crafted material objects and the application of learned behavior; the resulting text effects a further transformation, changing the relationships between reader, text, object and environment. These components are reconfigured in the moment of reading but they are always provisional. Not only is the transformation temporary (when we start to read, a time is established when the book will inevitably return), but it is also incomplete. The book is suspended, but, in the meantime, it asserts itself in other ways.

The material resistance of media has given it a reputation for truculence. When delineating the difference between primary orality and literacy, Ong locates the power of writing in its generative inertness (131-32). The dependence upon sound in oral cultures makes language a form of action, situated within the moment as its ephemeral signifiers fade

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[3] The Kindle Paperwhite, which is marketed clearly as a device primarily for reading "books" marks its allegiance to print through its name. The Fire, however, is a tablet computer that can be used as an e-reader. The device offers a platform for a range of possible uses, particularly browsing the web and watching film, so it can afford to sever the connection.

away. The spoken word is driven by power, and Ong believes that this is why oral cultures grant language magical potency. Writing recasts the word as space, inscribing it as an object located on a surface. "Such 'things,'" writes Ong, "are not so readily associated with magic, for they are not actions, but are in a radical sense dead, though subject to dynamic resurrection" (33). In oral cultures the spoken word has physical and cultural force; writing places the word in the object world, alienating it from the lived moment through mediation by things. The dead word is resurrected when it is read, but this metaphysics of presence is not solely produced through language. The latency of the unread word depends upon the integrity of the object upon which it is inscribed.

A vestige of the magical potency of language lingers on in the charm. In M.R. James's ghost stories, the animated objects that literalize the return of the repressed, punishing the too-curious scholars that populate his tales, are usually marked by text. In "Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" (1904) Parkins, a "Professor of Ontography" on vacation and indulging in a little amateur archaeology, finds an old whistle buried amongst the remains of a Templar's preceptory. It is inscribed, but the narrator tells us that "the meaning of it was as obscure to him as the writing on the wall to Belshazzar" (199). This ominous portent of animated inscription is for the reader, not Parkins; he, on the contrary, confesses he is "a little rusty in his Latin," translates part of the message as "Who is this who is coming?" and decides to blow the whistle to find out, with frightening consequences (199-200). "Casting the Runes" (1911) is a tale of supernatural revenge prompted by the comments of an anonymous peer-reviewer (158-79). Karswell, a cranky dabbler in the occult, assassinates his critics by means of a curse bestowed by the red and black writing on a piece of paper. The only way to remove the curse is to pass on the paper, but this paper has a peculiar tendency to destroy itself. The words, it is implied, carry the curse, but its operation depends on the life of the paper.

In neither case is the writing legible except in the crudest sense of it being identified as writing. This is writing as object: it does not bestow agency on the cursed objects by permitting them to enter into language; nor does it record a vestige of the power of the spoken word. Partly this writing operates in a gothic economy, signaling a time forgotten to the present; but more importantly it is simply writing, the inscribed marks of a performance that have left a decipherable, but undeciphered, text. All crafted objects are intentional and so to some extent written; however, the addition of supplementary writing attempts to redefine the object and dictate its use. As Derrida's work demonstrates over and over again, the supplement both affirms the completeness of whatever it supplements while at the same time marking its insufficiency. All labels operate this way, but in the case of the illegible labels in James's ghost stories, the writing can only operate formally, marking this lack while failing to assert anything substantive in its place. Labeling an object creates the opportunity for it to misbehave, the label asserting that it is one thing, but the object behaving as if it was something else. The cursed objects in James's stories perform the familiar plot of the return of the repressed, but their uncanny effect comes from their potency, their ability to assert their radical otherness and be something other than what they have been designed to be.

Something similar underpins the uncanniness of new media technologies. The emergence of such technologies is often marked by myths of uncanny agency, as these technologies enable a telepresence that at once extends human faculties while alienating them from the self.[4] The mediated agency of information technologies appears to grant them autonomy as they take on aspects of the sender: the needle taps and writes; the telephone calls and speaks. Like the found objects that drive the plots of James's ghost stories, these mediating technologies are carrying out their prescribed functions, but it is their potential autonomy that creates the uncanny effect. The innate otherness of the technology, which

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[4] For examples, see note 1 above.

becomes repressed when operating normally, emerges, but only to be disavowed as the responsibility for the signals is attributed to some other, usually supernatural, source rather than the noisiness of material media. However, as Ong argued, such explanations reduce communication to a "a pipeline transfer of units of material called 'information' from one place to another" (176). This way of thinking about mediality has become institutionalized within information theory, with the role of the body conceptualized as noise obscuring the signal in its transmission from origin to destination. Yet these technologies are prosthesis not pipeline: it is they that touch or speak, pick up signals, and translate messages from one form to another. The presence of the signal depends upon the traces made present in the body of its media. Rather than spirit animating matter, it is mediating matter that creates spirit.

Charles Dickens's "The Signal-Man," published in the 1866 Christmas number of *All the Year Round*, reflects upon the respective roles of the sender, medium and receiver. It was written eighteen months after the Staplehurst rail accident that emperilled both Dickens's lover, Ellen Ternan, and number sixteen of *Our Mutual Friend* (only the latter was acknowledged publicly). The eponymous signal man has been twice warned by a ghostly figure of some impending tragedy that has subsequently occurred. When the narrator meets the signal man, the figure has returned for a third time, repeating the first warning and ringing the signal man's electric bell. The signal man is troubled: neither of the previous warnings provided enough information to avert the disasters and, if the purpose of these appearances was to affirm their truth, he wonders why these latest appearances are equally vague ("The Signal-Man," 24). At the conclusion of the story, the signal man is killed in a train accident, the driver of the train signaling for the signal man to get out of the way in the manner of the ghostly warnings.

The ghost's various warnings only make sense in retrospect. As the signal man notes, prior to the accidents, their only meaning is as an annunciation without any content. It might

appear that the ghosts are trying to tell the signal man something, but they can only state the empty forms of their media, whether this is a ringing bell, a shout, or a gesture. The appearance of a ghostly subject, taking advantage of various worldly media, is an effect of telling, of narrative, not of the events themselves. The warnings only become legible as warnings after the accidents take place, and the narrator—who has not directly experienced any of the warnings—can only testify to the signal man's words, including the final warning that precedes his death. This is a story punctuated by anxiety as to the origins of messages and it implies that everyone is at the service of signals from elsewhere. When the signal man gives an account of his haunting, he touches the narrator to maintain the connection between man and man while passing on the messages from the ghost. Yet this haunted narrative, once told, creates a problem for the narrator, who is uncertain to whom the disclosure should subsequently be reported. The death of the signal man pre-empts any further action on behalf of the narrator, but allows him to tell the story to the reader. J. Hillis Miller, writing about media and mediumship in Derrida, Browning, and Freud, claims that a "given medium is not the passive carrier of information. A medium actively changes what can be said and done by its means" (22). Whatever the spectral agency at work in "The Signal-Man," it uses the media at hand and so can only communicate their annunciative effect. The narrator's narrative, on the other hand, places the events in order and so fills both the ghosts and the signal man's signals with content. If one of the purposes of narrative is to store and transmit stories, allowing them to be retold in different ways in subsequent tellings while still remaining a degree of integrity, then narrative too is a form of storage and transmission media. In "The Signal-Man," the presence of the signal, the spirit, is an effect of its mediation and remediation. Its uncanny effect—that there is something out there, trying to warn the signal man—is only realized by a further shift in media. This, too, invokes a ghost,

Dickens himself, who serves as the originary source for the signal. However, this ghost can be dealt with, bounded and known by the institution of authorship.

The materiality of media must become disciplined so they can function in a particular instance as a particular type of object. Mediation is thus a site where the properties of objects become defined as they become socialized. In "Thing Theory," Bill Brown distinguishes between "object" and "thing," where objects become socialized through discourse while things remain obliquely out of view. As Brown notes, "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us" (4). However, if objectness is a product of discourse (and so use), then thingness functions as a repository that can be drawn upon to recast objects from one form to another. In *Writing Machines*, N. Katherine Hayles posits a materiality that is emergent and shifting, linking together representation and the physicality of the object that allows representation to operate. If, as Hayles suggests, "the physical attributes constituting any artefact are potentially infinite," then objects—standing on the threshold of a generative, unknowable, thingness—are repositories of materiality (32). The object world marks the boundary between the socialized properties of things and the vast repository of the unknown that constitutes their thingness. As use is social practice, the form of this threshold constantly changes: objects manifest different properties and, in turn, recast the social relations in which they are embedded. As Brown suggests, the "thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). In a very real way, then, objects are interfaces because they make things happen.

Our Mutual Friend

The title of *Our Mutual Friend* invites us to consider the novel as an exploration of intersubjectivity. Many have done so, identifying the various economies in the book, whether of people or goods, capital or dust, or bodies or parts, as a critique of the way that everything

is put to the service of exchange.[5] With its resurrected bodies and mounds of dust, *Our Mutual Friend* attends to the role of supplementary material, refusing to ignore refuse and instead recognizing it as a social agent. In its discussion of materiality, *Our Mutual Friend* constitutes what N. Katherine Hayles calls a "technotext," a literary work "that interrogates the inscription technology that produces it" (25). By including waste within its broader economy, *Our Mutual Friend* examines the processes through which material is made meaningful, as well as the status of whatever is left over.

In a famous passage, Dickens considers the waste paper blowing around the streets:

> That mysterious paper currency which circulates in London when the wind blows, gyrated here and there and everywhere. Whence can it come, whither can it go? It hangs on every bush, flutters in every tree, is caught flying by the electric wires, haunts every enclosure, drinks at every pump, cowers at every grating, shudders on every plot of grass, seeks rest in vain behind the legions of iron rails. (144)

Andrew Stauffer has noted that this paper is not just blown about the streets, but actually comes alive (23). Freud dismissed the uncanniness of animated objects as a vestige of primitivism, a primary narcissism now forgotten (141). Yet the fetish that marks the animated object also describes the response to the emergence of its thingness as it slips between discourses. Stauffer reads the paper as a confrontation with blankness: this is paper that does not signify, only operates in a dead economy, accumulating, as Stauffer writes, "in prevalent mockery of its former purposes" (23). This waste paper is haunted by what it once was, its former utility only present as an absence as it takes on new forms and performs new functions. Yet, as Stauffer notes, this paper has become animated as pigeon, rat and waif, but also as ghost. This is rubbish, but was not always and it is this shift between states that provides a glimpse of its unknowable materiality and so marks it as uncanny.

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[5] For contrasting treatments of this theme, see Gallagher, Kucich, Poovey, Scoggin, Tilley.

This exhausted media, circulating around London, mimics the circulation of print (particularly printed paper money), but also stands for material that has been left behind. In *Our Mutual Friend*, anything—corpses, body parts, dust—can be subjected to the logic of capitalism, fetishized as commodity and so put to the market. Dickens offers a model of resurrection as site of resistance to this totalizing logic, through which characters can perform a beneficial haunting (Harmon / Rokesmith; Boffin) or redeem themselves through a form of self-abnegation (Wrayburn). It is not resurrection in itself that offers resistance—characters such as Veneering, Lammle or Riderhood also attempt to profit from a form of resurrection —but rather what they permit to happen to what is left behind. As Peter Brooks has argued, narrative provides a way of enclosing an ending, reconstituting the beginning and middle so that they retrospectively anticipate the conclusion. For Brooks, following Walter Benjamin, "only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality" (22). Narrative thus allows the reader to experience something impossible in his or her own life: the "*anticipation of retrospection*" (22). For the characters in *Our Mutual Friend*, their deaths offer a way of objectifying their lives and so rendering them up for use and reuse. Through his plot, Dickens valorizes those who renounce their agency as narrators, allowing others to take possession of their characters (in both senses of the word), while condemning those who engage in a form of purposeful self-fashioning. Whereas characters such as Veneering and Lammle obscure their past lives in order to speculate in the impersonal world of trade and Riderhood seeks to profit from his drowning, Harmon / Rokesmith, Boffin, and Wrayburn all forsake their prior lives to see what will be done with them (Scoggin 108, 111). All the characters plot, but the ones whose plots are endorsed by the author's master plot are those who offer their own lives as material media to others.

Just as the narrator's narrative makes sense of the uncanny media that run through "The Signal-Man," providing the signal that makes meaningful the empty forms of the

ghostly warnings, so the various resurrections that punctuate *Our Mutual Friend* enable characters to view their own lives as narratable and so latent media for meaning. In both texts, narrative acts as a technology for repeated telling, allowing content to become distinct from form and so iterable. As a number of historians have noted, the modern concept of information as disembodied and essentialized, able to be transmitted without deformation, was consolidated in the nineteenth century.[6] This form of information was a product of industrial print culture, but was understood as independent of the material in which it was recorded and distributed. The repetitive logic of print enforced the distinction between form and content, with the former being associated with what remained the same (the text; the typeface) and the latter with what varied.[7] Of all print media, the newspaper, with its recurring forms and changing content, most readily reveals the imbrication of information within industrial print culture. As Richard Terdiman has noted, the newspaper:

> almost seems to have been devised to represent the pattern of variation without change, the repetitiveness, autonomization, and commodification which, since the twin revolutions of the nineteenth century, have marked fundamental patterns of our social existence. (120)

It was these same attributes—variation without change, repetitiveness, autonomization and commodification—that served as the material condition for information more generally. Apparently without a body, information was nonetheless connected with certain classes of objects whose behavior was carefully regulated. In the nineteenth century, computers were people, who processed information by doing things with paper.

The production, processing, and archiving of information was prompted by industrial organization and was organized on an industrial basis. One of the strange things about Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* is that Thornton's mill apparently runs without

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[6] For instance, see Headrick; Nunberg; Weller; and Gleick.
[7] See Mussell, "Elemental Forms."

paperwork; but when Trooper George, in Dickens's *Bleak House*, visits his estranged brother in his factory in the North, he notices the account books, and "some sheets of paper blotted with hosts of figures and drawings of cunning shapes" (*Bleak House* 520). State innovations such as the census (especially after 1841), the 1836 Registration Act, the reintroduction of income tax in 1842, the 1848 Public Health Act, the 1852 Patent Act, all required methods of collecting, sorting and storing information. The archive served the informational economy by ordering objects—usually written documents of various kinds—so that their content could be produced on demand and in a way that could be repeated and verified in the future. The archive was a site of resurrection, producing information from the bodies in the repository in such a way that it retained its integrity, even as it was remediated through the other bodies of nineteenth-century culture.

The British Museum stood at the centre of a circulatory network that was, at the same time, the end of circulation. Libraries and archives ingest material and place it in spatialized order; but they do so that it might be accessed into the future and made the basis for the new, usually written, objects produced by their users. The artefacts that were carefully preserved in the British Museum, whether books in the Reading Room or the various artefacts appropriated from around the world, represent a fraction of those that existed, but their persistence sustained the fantasy that the past, nonetheless, could be recovered. The archive, according to Carolyn Steedman, is the place "where ink on parchment can be made to *speak*," where historians bring "to life those who do not for the main part exist, not even between the lines of state papers and legal documents" (69). Yet the historian does not deal in speech but writing and the stories that are told are not the past but a reconstruction based on what survives. History, writes Steedman, is "one of the great narrative modes that are our legacy from the nineteenth century" (73). The archive puts things into place, but history effects a

second transformation, inscribing its narratives into new objects that might be archived themselves.

As Stauffer makes clear, *Our Mutual Friend* engages with the library as part of its discourse on paper. Dickens situates the main driver of the plot, the misidentification of John Harmon's body, amongst alternative versions of the library. When Charley Hexam first informs Mortimer Lightwood that Gaffer Hexam has found the body, he does so by passing on a note in a library. Lightwood is having dinner at the Veneerings, a family of surfaces, as Dickens, with little subtlety, makes clear. The narrator describes Charley as follows:

> There was a curious mixture in the boy, of uncompleted savagery, and uncompleted civilization. His voice was hoarse and coarse, and his face was coarse, and his stunted figure was coarse; but he was cleaner than other boys of his type; and his writing, though large and round, was good; and he glanced at the backs of the books, with an awakened curiosity that went below the binding. No one who can read, ever looks at a book, even unopened on a shelf, like one who cannot. (18)

Reading and writing, here, reconfigure the body. An inverted Veneering, Charley's alienated writing testifies to the presence of character while the presence of his body can only testify to its absence. Charley's father, Gaffer Hexam, lives amongst print but cannot read. Notices advertising the bodies that he has found plaster his wall, but it is their location, not the inscribed marks upon them, that allows him to know their contents. For Stauffer, these notices are "a sort of catalogue raisoneé of Gaffer's work, and it amounts to a collection of the dead" (26). Gaffer cannot read, but he has disciplined the notices to make them legible on the basis of their position in the room and their differences to one another. To literate eyes, however, they become a different sort of object, able to signify with reference to other graphemes across the whole world of print. The contrast makes clear the magic of reading and writing, but also its reciprocity. Gaffer's limited literacy keeps print flat; but Charley's

gaze, ranging over the books in the Veneerings' library, recognizes that books, any books, can become containers if used correctly. This works both ways: unlike his father, whose literacy only extends to his walls, Charley's literacy creates volume, turning both book and boy into something to be filled.

Stauffer argues that the library served the Victorian imagination as "the perfect setting for nightmares of excess and entropy; overproduction and decay" (17). The library is a space for reading and writing, where objects become disciplined so that they can be recalled correctly. But the library is haunted: these complex objects, which themselves spatialize language, resist the order to which they are subjected. Or rather, in doing things with these objects, we provide the opportunity for them to assert their thingness. In *Our Mutual Friend*, reading and writing are never separated from inscribable forms of various kinds. The nightmare economy of circulation at its heart leaves behind its material residue, the waste paper and other forms of detritus that find their way into Harmon's mounds. The mounds are certainly haunted—when Wegg first visits Boffin he sees him initially as a ghostly white figure —and they stand for a particularly disordered archive, whose contents are unknown and conditions of recall uncertain. They are subjected to a degree of control: Rokesmith manages Boffin's affairs, dealing with his paperwork; while Boffin is, in his own words, a "pretty fair scholar in dust" and so takes care of the Mounds (140). Over the course of the novel they are used to draw out Wegg, enabling Boffin to carry out his elaborate pretence of being a miser. If narrative is about putting things in their proper place, then *Our Mutual Friend* works through and orders its material carefully. Wegg is enticed by the promise of revelation, of something emerging from the endless potential of the material, as is the reader, making his or her way through the narrative in anticipation of its end. Reading and writing are fantasies of mastery, of asserting agency over the world, but as practices they are predicated on material transformations that necessarily produce its otherness. The mounds are

not exhausted, just displaced from the narrative; close the book and it becomes something else.

Friend Me On *Facebook*

With over a billion users and by far the largest archive of images ever assembled, *Facebook* is both a major cultural institution and a remarkable archive of social life ("Key Facts"). Its success is due to the way it markets mutuality, exploiting the connections between people to both acquire content and the means of organizing it. The desire of users to share the minutiae of their life is surpassed by *Facebook*'s desire to remember it, and this has produced a vast archive of outsourced, perfect memory. However, although *Facebook* may be able to remember everything, it has demonstrated that it cannot keep these memories to itself. Since it opened up to everybody over 13 in 2006, the press has periodically documented scare stories about job applicants being tripped up by their *Facebook* profiles and they continue to appear today.[8] Whether such stories are true or not, their recurrence indicates a broader cultural anxiety about the persistence of the past. *Facebook*'s value lies in the difference between the way it permits its users to manipulate content—uploading, downloading, writing, and sharing—and the way that it manipulates this material for its own ends. This disjunction means that tensions flare up periodically around privacy, but are really prompted by *Facebook*'s need to rewrite users' content for commercial purposes. Whereas it appears to be one type of writing space, where users can write things for select, delimited groups controlling (with some difficulty) who reads what, the boundaries between this network and the rest of *Facebook* have proven permeable, as have those between *Facebook* and the rest of the web. Sometimes, this is because the reading and writing machines on which *Facebook* depends reinscribe material from one context to another without the users' consent; but

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[8] For instance, Noonan.

usually it is because these acts of reinscription have been carried out, intentionally or not, by other users.

Facebook is a multi-modal publishing platform, but it remains an archive whose relation to memory depends upon writing. Language socializes experience, increasing its chances of preservation and recall; when written, it becomes objectified and so can be preserved outside the minds of a given community (Ong 98). The twentieth century saw the costs of recording and storage media fall dramatically; and the digital revolution has prompted a further drop in cost while promising perfect reproduction and distribution (Mayer-Schönberger 16-49). For users, the appeal of Facebook lies in the way that it satisfies the desire for gossip, repackaging user-supplied content so that it can be consumed by others. This objectification and commodification of gossip places Facebook in a history that stretches back to sectors of the nineteenth-century press and beyond. In 1982, Walter Ong suggested that electronic media were cultivating a secondary orality (186), but printed gossip, long a staple of the press, was already remediated in this way, identifying its origins in orality and recapitulating them through written discourse. The replacement of the wall— one of the oldest features of Facebook —with timelines seems to indicate a move away from the stasis of writing towards informational flow. Yet users post to timelines and these interventions, punctuating the flow, both perform as writing and are couched in the language of paper. The word "post" combines movement (sending or receiving through the mail) with fixity (sticking something to a wall). For Facebook, users are both people who send objects to one another represented as letters (of code); but they are also what gets posted, turned into an object, displayed, and commodified.

The grammar of Facebook—like, comment, share—remains grounded in a form of textuality. A "like" is an inscribed quantifiable bit; a comment is a text string; and sharing shifts objects, by relabeling them, from one network to another. Facebook is an archive that

orders and spatializes its contents, both on its servers, in its data architecture, and as represented onscreen. Like most social media free at the point of use, its interface encourages behavior that it tracks and records for its own purposes. The various tools and features that have been added over the years—chat, email, the news feed—encourage users to populate the database in exchange for publication in delimited (although often hard to control) channels. For users, it offers partial access to an undisclosed database, with the promise of revelation, of finding out about someone, coming at the cost of revealing things about oneself. *Facebook*'s capacity to startle, to resurrect material from the past, lies in the fact that underneath this network are inscribable spaces.

What *Facebook* demonstrates are the limits of what Matthew Kirschenbaum has described as the medial ideology (36-45). One of the foundational myths of the digital age is that it is defined by information. Early fantasies of cyberspace offered the virtual as an alternative to a materialized real; knowledge work was privileged over other forms of labor and information itself was increasingly taken to stand for both commodities and capital. These myths persist: in Oxford University Press's recent *Information: A Very Short Introduction*, Luciano Floridi claims that we have modified "our everyday perspective on the ultimate nature of reality, that is, our metaphysics, from a materialist one, in which physical objects and processes play a key role, to an informational one" (12). Floridi then details how objects and processes have become seen as "support-independent"; are "typified" (i.e., any instance of a type is as good as any other); "perfectly clonable"; and, because less emphasis is placed on physical ownership, "the right of usage is perceived to be at least as important as the right to ownership" (12). Yet this model mistakes the materiality of digital objects with how they behave on screen. For Kirschenbaum, this emphasis on what he calls "formal materiality" elides the forensic materiality of inscribed traces on storage devices (10-11). Yet if materiality is emergent, such a model also underpins the way that form and content are

produced through contingent moments of use. For Floridi, to "be is to be interactable, even if interaction is only indirect" (12). However, this interaction is based on an impoverished ontology. Floridi distinguishes between the modern world's digital interactions and the vestiges of the past, those "'dead' cars, buildings, furniture, clothes, which are non-interactive, irresponsive, and incapable of communicating, learning or memorizing" (17). In *Our Mutual Friend*, Charley Hexam's gaze reconfigures books as containers, but by showing he could read he, too, is attributed depth. The reading or writing subject is not just a subject but also an object, and so the practices of reading and writing also reread or rewrite the body. Whether conceived as intentional product of design or unexpected property, bug or feature, malfunction or truculence, objects push back against those that would master them. As Dickens knew, interaction is not enough: to be is to be mediated.

Reading and writing necessitate doing things with objects. Literacy is more than deciphering written code and this is why competencies from one form of media cannot be simply applied to another. To understand textuality in the age of print, it is necessary to attend to the objects that bear inscribed traces and the practices that allow them to become signs. The same is true for the digital world: reading and writing still occur, and they still necessitate configurations of human and nonhuman actors, but the nature of these processes is different because the objects are different. The computer is a universal machine and is capable of sophisticated simulation. Yet focusing simply on what occurs onscreen—what Nick Montfort has called "screen essentialism"—reproduces the logocentricism developed over the course of our long exposure to print and too often mistaken for literacy (Kirschenbaum 31). A digital literacy that encompasses the production of materiality furnishes the knowledge to understand the objects that are created and the environments into which they are placed. Just as a denaturalized print literacy is necessary for studying the nineteenth century through the objects that survive, digital literacy is necessary to understand

how these objects are remediated in digital form. Without digital literacy, we cannot reckon with *Facebook* and all those other aggregators of digital content churning out ghosts.

The reduction of literacy to the production of verbal text makes it a cognitive process rather than an embodied social practice, allowing real differences between the times and spaces of reading, as well as the way reading alters whatever is being read, to be ignored or overcome. This model of literacy is predicated on repression and so creates the conditions for uncanny return, for objects to assert and reassert their identity as things. Derrida has established that writing is predicated on absence, but writing never occurs without its material supplement: a repository of materiality that is always in excess of its instantiation in the moment. Even binary code, that basic system of differences, depends on inscribed traces on durable material. Reading and writing are embodied practices. The possibility of literacy depends on the mute insistence of the unthinkable material world.

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